Philosophy Senior Thesis

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Life Lessons From Zhuangzi’s Butcher Ting:
Crossing the Divide Between Aristotle’s Phronesis and Techne to
Discover a More Inclusive Way of Living Well

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Abstract

In my paper, I argue that the Chinese Taoist philosopher, Zhuang Zi (369 –286 BC) can help us see that Aristotle’s distinction between two of his intellectual virtues – *phronesis* (practical wisdom) and *techne* (craftsmanship) – is not that clear after all. I will first introduce Aristotle’s intellectual virtues in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. In particular, I will distinguish between *techne* and *phronesis*. Next, I will show how the two are related, especially how someone who has mastered a particular technical know-how can help him/her gain practical wisdom in living his/her life. Following which, I will bring in Zhuang Zi’s parable of Butcher Ting cutting the ox to show how one can cultivate his/her character and state of psychology and therefore live an excellent life by being immersed and excelling in his/her *techne*. I will then address possible objections from Aristotle, primarily that it is possible for one to excel in his/her *techne* but nonetheless lack the wisdom to live well in the daily context. Following my counter-response with Zhuang Zi’s distinction between ‘small’ and ‘big’ understanding, I will then argue that it is sufficient rather than necessary to possess *techne* in order to live well. Finally, I will conclude by saying that blurring the divide between *techne* and *phronesis* provides an alternative route for people to acquire the knowledge of living well despite a lack of education or literacy.

Keywords: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Zhuang Zi, Zhuangzi, Butcher Ting, *phronesis*, *techne*, living well
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Bibliography
Notes on the essay

- Butcher Ting (bao ding 厝丁) is also known as Cook Ding or Cook Ting, depending on the translation. In this paper, I will only use Butcher Ting for consistency and to emphasize his primary craft of cutting oxen.
- In this paper, Zhuang Zi (庄子), also known as Chuang-tzu or Zhuang Zhou refers to the philosopher while Zhuangzi refers to the work that was attributed to him.
- Daoism (dao jiao 道教) is also known as Taoism.
- All in-text citations related to Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, e.g. 1102a 15, are drawn from Sir David Ross’ translation unless otherwise stated.
- All in-text citations related to Zhuang Zi in *Zhuangzi*, e.g. 5:1, are drawn from Brook Ziporyn’s translation unless otherwise stated.
Biographical notes on the author

Rodney M. Chai (1990 –), previously known as Ming-Fui Chai is an American who was born in Houghton, MI and raised in Singapore, a society steeped in Confucian values given its predominantly Chinese diaspora. Having spent 18 years in Singapore and gone through the entire K-12 public school education system, Chai has had first-hand experience of growing up in a Confucian society. He is bilingual in both English and Chinese (Mandarin).
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Prologue: Wall Street banker’s encounter with a fisherman

There is a story of how a Wall Street banker went on his annual two-week vacation in a remote Mexican village and met a fisherman returning from his morning catch. The banker is intrigued by how easily satisfied the fisherman is with his meager haul. Touting his Master of Business Administration (MBA) from the Harvard Business School, he tried to convince the fisherman that if he were to fish more and grow his business strategically, he could end up like himself as one of the richest persons in the world in 30 years’ time. Yet each time the banker portrays an increasingly luxurious scenario, the fisherman asks “so what?” Eventually the banker says that the fisherman could spend two weeks each year like him relaxing in a remote fishing village.

Introduction

In the prologue, the banker tries to use his financial and educational credentials to overpower the fisherman but ends up humbled. The fisherman may be poor, but he appears to be rich in the wisdom of living a good life. Ironically, the banker has worked hard all his life to get two weeks of the kind of life that the fisherman is living everyday. What can a poor and illiterate fisherman teach us about living well? If he can teach us about the good life, what is the nature of the knowledge of living well? The aim of this paper is to articulate a more inclusive account of living well such that it includes people like the fisherman who may be poor and uneducated but is satisfied with his life. That is a lot better than many of us who are highly educated but live in a fast-paced society full of junk food and superficial relationships.

1 This story originally appeared on page 158-161 in The Rhythm of Life by Matthew Kelly (2005).
In this paper, I proceed from the basis that living well requires some sort of knowledge of living well. Aristotle (384 – 322 BC) is among the most prominent philosophers whose discussion on knowledge is so intricately related to his discussion on living well. Ethics according to Aristotle is about finding the highest human good, that is, happiness. It is the final aim because it is sought for its own sake and is self-sufficient. Happiness is an activity of the soul in accordance with the perfect virtue (1102a 5). “By human virtue we mean not that of the body but that of the soul; and happiness also we call an activity of the soul” (1102a 15-17). There are two elements in the soul – one that is rational or with reason and the other irrational (1102a 27-29). There are two kinds of virtues – moral and intellectual (1103a 5). In particular, we will focus on the intellectual virtues. This is because “as virtues, they are needed for the best life: to be happy one must employ these virtues in thinking and reasoning” (Aristotle 2009: xv).

Yet from the prologue, an account of happiness that has financial stability as prerequisites and enabling conditions is at the risk of being too exclusive, especially given that 2.2 billion people – almost a third of the world population – live for under $2 a day². Knowledge is also interpreted too narrowly, in a way that excludes people with little or no education. A recent study concludes that while life satisfaction is substantially higher in wealthy nations than in poor nations, meaning in life is higher in poor nations than in wealthy nations³. I hope to articulate a more inclusive account of living well, since happiness is everyone’s highest good.

² The World Bank defines extreme poverty as people living with less than $1.25 a day (Purchasing Power Parity or PPP) and moderate poverty as less than $2 a day (PPP). See: http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/overview
In my paper, I will argue that the Chinese Taoist philosopher, Zhuang Zi (369 – 286 BC) can help us see that Aristotle’s distinction between two of his intellectual virtues – phronesis (practical wisdom) and techne (craftsmanship) is not that clear after all. I will first introduce Aristotle’s intellectual virtues in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. In particular, I will explain his distinction between techne and phronesis. While Aristotle holds that the two are excellence of different domains, I will show how they are related, especially how someone who has mastered a particular technical know-how can help him/her gain practical wisdom in living his/her life. Zhuang Zi, a philosopher living around the same time as Aristotle but in a different part of the world can help illuminate the relation. In his parable of cutting an ox, Zhuang Zi shows how one can cultivate his/her character and state of psychology and therefore live an excellent life by being immersed and excelling in his/her techne. I will then speculate possible objections from Aristotle, primarily that it is possible for one to excel in his/her techne but nonetheless lack the wisdom to live well in the daily context. Bringing in Zhuang Zi’s distinction between ‘small’ and ‘big’ understanding would help us address the possible objections. Finally, I will conclude that blurring the divide between techne and phronesis provides an alternative route for people to acquire the knowledge of living well despite a lack of education or literacy.
Part 1: Aristotle’s practical wisdom in *Nicomachean Ethics*

1.1 Living well requires some sort of knowledge of living well

Aristotle says that the knowledge of living well can help us to live well. For instance, knowledge of living well can help us deal with difficulties in life better. One can bear repeated misfortunes calmly if he or she is a person of nobility and greatness of soul (1096a 1). A happy man with knowledge of living well will never become miserable because he will never do what is hateful and vile (1100b 35). He has knowledge of what is complete without qualification, i.e. what “is always desirable in itself and never because of something else” (1096a 34-35). It seems that one never chooses happiness because of something else, but rather because of itself. Indeed, having knowledge of living well means that one is more satisfied with life, and is unlikely to get emotional over particular trivial issues. This is also the nature of happiness, “something final and self-sufficient” (1097b 20). Next we will look at Aristotle’s five virtues of thought, otherwise known as his intellectual virtues.

1.2 Aristotle’s five intellectual virtues

In *Nicomachean Ethics* Book VI, Aristotle distinguishes between five intellectual virtues: *techne* (art, craftsmanship, technical know-how), *episteme* (scientific knowledge), *phronesis* (practical wisdom), *sophia* (philosophic wisdom), and *nous* (intuitive reason or common sense) (1139b 15).

*Episteme*, or scientific knowledge is the knowledge of what is necessary and eternal. In other words, it is not capable of being otherwise. Scientific knowledge involves demonstration, which starts from first principles that are already known (1140b 32-33). These fundamental principles of knowledge can refer to definitions (1142a 26) or self-
evident truths. *Sophia*, which means philosophic wisdom or wisdom, is the combination of scientific knowledge and intuitive reason (1142a 16-20). While scientific knowledge or *episteme* is derived through demonstration from first principles, intuitive reason or *nous* grasps the first principles from which science proceeds (1142a 25). According to Aristotle, the activity of philosophic wisdom is “admittedly the pleasantest of virtuous activities” (1177a 23-24). Because it is regarded as the most superior form of knowledge, it is knowledge of things that are highest by nature (1141b 4). However, philosophic wisdom by itself is not practical because it does not inquire into human goods (1141b 8). We would inquire into the highest human good later in the essay.

*Phronesis* refers to practical wisdom and is oriented towards action (1141b 16). It is context-dependent and involves knowing how to act in particular situations. Therefore, *phronesis* consists in knowledge of contingent facts that are useful in living well. It is “concerned with human affairs, namely with what we can deliberate about” (1141b 8). Richard Mulgan sums it up well, “The man of practical wisdom... combines intellectual ability with the character and experience necessary to make wise and sensible decisions in particular human situations (1987: 10). More than just contemplation alone, one also needs experience that can only be attained through time to act well (1103a 15). As such, a person of practical wisdom deliberates well concerning that which contributes to the good life in general. *Techne*, which means art or craftsmanship, is the reasoned state of capacity to produce or make things (1140a20). It is concerned with making rather than action. While the latter consists in its own activity as an end, the former consists only in the product that one is making. On the other hand, an action consists only in its own end of acting well (1140b 5-8).
In summary, based on Aristotle’s account, *episteme* provides us with knowledge of the invariable world; *Nous* provides knowledge of the first principles from which we understand scientific knowledge; *Sophia* is the combination of *episteme* and *nous*; *phronesis* is practical wisdom that relates to making decisions that helps us to live well in an ever-changing world; Lastly, *techne* is the knowledge of making things.

1.3 Aristotle’s distinction between *techne* and *phronesis*

*Phronesis* is the excellence in action (*praxis*) whereas *techne* is excellence in making (*poiesis*) (Salem 2010: 102). While *techne* is directed at the product that one is making (1140a 1-5), *phronesis* consists in action whose end is included in the activity itself. In other words, Aristotle thinks that a craftsman’s skill is restricted to its limited instrumental purpose, as opposed to the “capacity to act with regards to human goods” (1140b 20-23). Such a view is probably what many people would share; we judge a butcher by how well and quickly he cuts the meat. An experienced butcher would cut the meat cleanly and effortlessly as opposed to an amateur who expends a lot of energy at hacking the meat into ugly irregular chunks. Most of us would probably not consider the butcher to demonstrate practical wisdom even if he were to be extremely skilled at cutting oxen. On the other hand, an experienced judge who is able to deliberate difficult, open-ended cases by leveraging on her experience of past cases and making connections on how they might bear on her current case is said to have practical wisdom. Also, practical wisdom is oriented towards living a good life. A *phronimos*\(^{4}\) would demonstrate the ability to reflect upon and determine good ends consistent with the aim of living well. So while blue-collar\(^{5}\) people like a butcher may be very competent at their technical skills, they would unlikely be

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\(^{4}\) *Phronimos* is a person who deliberates well.

\(^{5}\) By blue-collar, I refer to working-class people who make a living by performing manual labor.
thought as someone intellectual and who can make good decisions in particular situations that contribute to living an excellent life.

1.4 How the craftsman may come to resemble the *phronimos*

For Aristotle, both *techne* and *phronesis* are types of excellence but in very different domains. However, this does not mean that there are no overlaps between the two. Firstly, time is needed to acquire *techne* and *phronesis*. It is thought that “a young man of practical wisdom cannot be found” because one takes time to gain experience, especially in particular knowledge that can only be acquired in unique situations (1142a 12-15). The more experience that one has, the more likely that s/he is able to deliberate well and make an informed decision regarding the intricacies of acting in specific situations. Similarly, one can only get better at his/her craft with consistent practice and perseverance.

And it is through the process of making a product that the craftsman develops an affinity or relationship with his/her product. It becomes the source of his pride, and even part of his life especially for crafts that require months, if not years to finish. Most artists do speak proudly and excitedly about their work and how they overcome difficulties along the way. Indeed, the process of making one’s craft demands such virtues as patience, passion and attention – values that are also highly valued in many other aspects of life and society. The craftsman’s state of psychology changes over time as s/he cultivates habits that s/he brings to bear in his/her interaction with others in the daily life. The completion of a craft may involve a triumphant sense of joy and fulfillment, but the process of craft-making more often involves a great deal of struggles and frustration. But it is through overcoming challenges along the way that molds the craftsman’s character. A butcher may learn over time that the key to cutting an ox is not to hack through the tough meat with all
his/her force, but rather find a way to slice through the softer parts\(^6\). S/He learns to be focused, calm and patient as s/he slowly acquires the mastery of ox cutting. These are virtues of habit that one acquires gradually over time. While there are many ways to build one’s character, there are certain unique aspects to craftsmanship that does that particularly well. Firstly, the process of making means that one needs to engage with the art physically. There is an instant physical connection between the craftsman and his/her craft, like how a mother holds her baby. Because the craft comes out directly from one’s hands, it is the most direct form of interaction with no intermediary. As the craftsman comes to own the craft, s/he also comes to own his/her habits that are associated with his/her increasing success and deepening engagement with the craft. By now, we have come a long way from merely understanding *techne* in its narrow instrumental and technical sense. The end of *techne* for the craftsman no longer merely consists in his/her product but the activity itself. It has become part of his/her life and also helped shape his/her character, habits and state of psychology.

1.5 The public utility and ‘global’ nature of *techne*

Moreover, by assembling disparate parts into a complete whole, the skilled craftsman also comes to resemble the *phronimos*, since his excellence consists not only in “what is good… in some particular respect, but about what sort of things conduct to the good life in general” (1140a 26-28). Excelling in one’s craft that involves assembling seemingly disparate parts can help him/her to see the bigger picture better and how things relate to each other. Also, a piece of art or craft is created for a certain purpose. It could be in response to an instrumental need for the craft, such as a cobbler helping someone to

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\(^6\) We will return to the activity of ox cutting in much greater depth later in the essay.
mend his/her shoes – in this case it will be seen as an expertise – or simply for the craftsman’s pleasure as a hobby. Sometimes, a craft may even be useful to the greater community and help people live better lives. For example, a bricklayer lays the foundation for houses that not only provide shelters for people but also serve as a potential gathering place for public discussion. While the former serves one’s basic physiological needs, the latter has a more significant contribution to one’s political freedom in the form of a mutually shared space for action and speech. Likewise, a good piece of painting can help to cultivate people’s appreciation for the arts and help them become better citizens who see beyond pleasure as their primary form of enjoyment. Indeed, it would be rather shortsighted to see a craft merely in terms of its limited, instrumental purpose.

We often play a myriad of roles in our lives and have different episodes of ourselves. John can be a sportsperson, student, artist, son, father, volunteer, etc. Each of these roles requires certain qualities and therefore different aspects of one’s character or abilities. For example, being a sportsperson engages one’s physical ability more than intellectual activity. One judges how good John is as an athlete by how fast he runs or how high he jumps. On the other hand, John being a student in the classroom would be judged based on his intellectual aptitude and the ability to contribute constructively to a rigorous class discussion. In other words, we tend to engage different parts of our faculties for our respective roles in society. An average butcher might only engage his brute force when cutting an ox. But when one becomes masterful in his/her craft, the distinction between the craftsman in his/her “craft-making mode” and his/her “non-craft-making mode” gradually

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7 In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt calls this the “space of appearance”, which is the space “where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things, but to make their appearance explicitly... in the manner of speech and action” (Arendt 1998: 198-9)
breaks down. Cutting an ox is a challenging task. If one could become patient and focused enough to cut an ox, it is not beyond the realm of imagination for him/her to also exude similar patience and focus in his/her daily interaction with others in the community. And since humans are social beings, an important aspect of living well thus involves positive interaction with other people. As such, someone who is masterful in his/her craft would have cultivated the habits and states of psychology to live well. Since the craftsman’s excellence and end now shifts from the product – in its limited, instrumental sense – to the activity itself, the craftsman acquires *phronesis* through mastering his/her *techne*. The distinction between *techne* and *phronesis* thus appears to dissolve. Not only can *techne* be more than a technical know-how, but it can also be an avenue to acquiring *phronesis*. A philosopher who can help us how craft can help us to live a good life is Zhuang Zi, who lived in the same period as Aristotle but in a totally different world.
Part 2: Bringing in Zhuang Zi

2.1 Zhuang Zi’s ‘wandering’ against Confucian intellectual tradition

The Chinese society, which has been heavily influenced by the Confucian tradition, emphasizes personal cultivation, moral values and rituals even till the present. In China and countries worldwide that have a large Chinese diaspora such as Singapore, a strong allegiance to family, ancestor worship, and education reflect the continuing influence of Confucianism today. Daoism or Taoism, the tradition that Zhuang Zi belongs to, is a response against Confucianism. “Much of the thrust of Daoism, as we have seen, naturally motivates a reaction against the moralistic and elitist inclinations of Confucianism” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). The Confucian tradition emphasizes the central role of rituals (li) in cultivating one’s mannerisms and social etiquettes. For a gentlemanly scholar, this entails four essential aspects that he needs to master, namely music (qin), chess (qi), writing (shu) and painting (hua). In particular, Confucius mentioned the chess game of wei qi in Section 17 of his Analects. Such a systematic and carefully choreographed form of education contrasts sharply with Zhuang Zi’s model of a life of “wandering” (you). It is not surprising that the title of the first inner chapter in Zhuangzi is “Wandering Far and Unfettered (xiao yao you)” (Ziporyn 2009: 3). In particular, the word “unfettered” means free and
without restraint (Merriam Webster). “The Way of nature is to let everything be itself in its own development and transformation (zi hua 自化)” (Shang 2006: 47) such that “the self becomes attuned to the complexity of the world and can thus navigate various domains of relationality with extraordinary grace, ease, and efficacy” (Tao 2011: 483). We will now turn to Zhuang Zi’s parable of Butcher Ting, who is totally transformed through the mastery of his craft or techne.

2.2 Butcher Ting’s cutting of the ox

“[Butcher Ting’s] seeing comes to a complete halt. [His] activity slows, and the blade moves ever so slightly. Then all at once, [he] finds the ox already dismembered at [his] feet like clumps of soil scattered on the ground” (3:5). From the excerpt, it is clear that Butcher Ting is a master of cutting oxen. His moves seem almost unreal; everything happens in a blink of the eyes. One’s first reaction upon hearing the butcher’s tale would be, what happened in between? One would perhaps expect the butcher to cut the ox in a sequence of steps and take some time to do it, especially it is such a big and tough animal. Instead of exerting a lot of energy cutting through the animal’s stubborn joints and muscles, Butcher Ting demonstrates great technique by slowing down and moving his blade “ever so slightly” (3:5). The Butcher knows very well that brute force cannot take down the animal, as he himself acknowledges that “Whenever I come to a clustered tangle, [I do realize] that it is difficult to do anything about it” (3:4). Ziporyn italicizes the word “do” in his translation of Zhuang Zi. Indeed, he wants to draw our attention to Butcher Ting’s simple admission that not only is it hard to untie the complicated knot, but it is also very possible that one can get frustrated, panic and make the knot even worse.
2.3 Emptying one’s thoughts and finding the Course

Besides, it seems to defy logic and physics that Butcher Ting’s blade still “remains as sharp as the day it came off the whetstone [after 19 years of cutting oxen]” (3:4). Most butchers would probably change their blades once every few months, if not every few weeks! Wear and tear is inevitable as friction between the knife’s blade and the ox causes the blade to get dull and less effective over time. To understand why Butcher Ting is able to defy Nature, we need to understand what he means when he says, “what has no thickness enters into an empty space” (3:4). If one were to insert what has no thickness into an empty space, there is plenty of room for him to play with the blade without getting into contact with the ox’s flesh and therefore allows the blade to remain sharp and brand new. When Butcher Ting encounters the ox with the spirit, he sees a vast and open space that allows him to “strike the larger gaps [and follow] along the broader hollows” (3:4). What Butcher Ting perceives after 19 years of experience is “not a mass of bones and flesh but a perfect structure manifesting Heavenly patterns (tian li 天理)” (Machek 2011: 513). It takes a high level of mastery to visualize an empty space or a lack of matter when one is faced with a humungous lump of matter like an ox. The master butcher has been trained to see the lack of an ox in front of him. Indeed, “the ultimate skill of acting is to forget thinking of it, simply act spontaneously in accord with nature, after years of practice” (Shang 2006: 36).

In Butcher Ting’s words to the king, “What I love is the Course, something that advances beyond mere skill” (3:3). Here, the “Course” refers to the Dao or the way. Dao (道) stands for “the path, road, or way by which people can walk” (Shang 2006: 11). It resembles a channel or passageway, such as a flowing river. While a flowing river is one
brimming with life, a dammed up, stagnant river is devoid of life. The former is like people with “big” understanding who are able to transcend the tangles that their material lives pose whereas the latter resembles people with “small” understanding that have a lot of tangled weeds clogging up their minds (1:13)\(^{11}\). “To be doing [something] without knowing it, and not because [one] has defined it as right, is called ‘the Course’” (2:22). The Course is “what gathers in emptiness” (4:9). According to physical laws, fluids – such as water or gas – flow from an area of higher pressure to an area of lower pressure\(^{12}\). This means an area of higher concentration of molecules, which resembles a filled container to an area of lower concentration, which resembles an empty container. Likewise, someone who thinks that s/he has learned everything under the Sun will not be able to pick up new knowledge or perspectives because his/her vessel is full and nothing can flow into it. One will likely not learn when his/her attitude and mentality are against learning. It is this emptiness that is the fasting of the mind” (4:9). Also, the Chinese term for knowing is zhi dao (知道), which literally translates to having knowledge (zhi 知) of the Course (dao 道). One has to figure out and accept the Heavenly or natural pattern (tian li 天理) and have it guide one in his/her craft or action. The Butcher was able to cut an ox so precisely and effortlessly because he perceives the ox with the spirit. This allows him to appreciate the Heavenly pattern of the ox, which helps guide his knife through the hollows and gaps in the animal.

\(^{11}\) We will return to a more detailed discussion between Zhuang Zi’s distinction between “big” and “small” understanding later in the essay.

\(^{12}\) Hydromechanics is “the branch of physics that deals with forces acting upon and within fluids (liquids and gases)”. A liquid or gas flows from regions of high pressure to regions of low pressure. See: http://science.howstuffworks.com/hydromechanics-info.htm
2.4 Overcoming distinctions and ‘fasting of the mind’

In the fifth chapter “Virtue Adequate and Conformable\textsuperscript{13} (德充府), Zhuang Zi uses the example of a one-footed ex-con named Wang Tai, who “offers no instruction... [and] gives no opinions” and yet his followers “go to him empty and return filled” (5:1). This sounds counterintuitive to our common perception of instruction, where the teacher or master imparts knowledge or skill via speech or writing. It is hard to imagine a class where the teacher comes in and remains silent for the entire duration. But for Zhuang Zi, his path (\textit{dao} 道) consists in the lack of one. Rather than articulating a mystical doctrine, Zhuang Zi seeks to challenge our notion of a preconceived and clearly defined passageway.

In a similar vein, most of us are like Chang Ji who finds it incredulous that the ugly, disabled Wang Tai can be someone full of knowledge. But it is precisely because Wang Tai lost his leg that he can live his life without being attached to it. When one regards his/her leg and other parts of the body as “mere semblances” (5:10), s/he can become “free of all preconceptions about which particular objects might suit the eyes and ears” (5:5). Losing his leg and being ugly turn out to be a blessing in disguise for Wang Tai as he has learned to be less attached to his body than others. Since no one initially pays too much attention to him given his rather unattractive appearance and disability, he is able to live his way of life with minimal public scrutiny and expectations of conforming to social norms and customs.

Zhuang Zi would suggest that our conception of what knowledge is and how we learn knowledge is flawed. It is not a vessel that is waiting to be filled. “You have learned how to fly with wings, but not yet how to fly without wings. You have learned the wisdom
of being wise, but not yet the wisdom of being free of wisdom” (4:9). This suggests that learning to fly without wings is even more difficult than flying with wings. We study the mechanism of birds’ wings that allow them to fly and apply it to building airplanes\textsuperscript{14}. But it would indeed be a wonder if one can learn how to fly without the very thing that enable birds and planes to take to the air – wings. Returning to the discussion on knowledge, Zhuang Zi thinks that the one who truly knows is one who understands the wisdom of being free of wisdom. Rather than being indolent and not interested in learning at all, a truly wise person is able to detach him/herself from unqualified and categorical knowledge. “It is by establishing definitions of what is ‘this’, what is ‘right’, that boundaries are made” (2:33)\textsuperscript{15}.

This involves being able to unlearn what one thinks s/he already knows and see the world in a whole new perspective. Zhuang Zi refers to this as the “fasting of the mind”, when one “merge[s] all [his/her] intentions into a singularity...[and comes] to hear with the mind rather than with the ears... [And subsequently] with the vital energy (\textit{qi}) rather than with the mind” (4:8). This is because we have our own biases and preconceptions that may actually become obstacles to our quest for learning and understanding. An individual can be resistant to change especially when s/he experiences success in life (March and Olsen 1975). We become arrogant and unable to accept alternative viewpoints that are inconsistent with our beliefs. As such, one needs to overcome the resistance to change and ingrained mindset to learn (Meyer 1982). “Learning requires experimentation, unlearning

\textsuperscript{14} In 1903, Wilbur and Orville Wright achieved the first powered, sustained and controlled airplane flight. When figuring out how to design wings for flight, “they observed that birds angled their wings for balance and control, and tried to emulate this... [and eventually found] the magic formula on Dec 17, 1903”. See: http://www.history.com/topics/inventions/wright-brothers

\textsuperscript{15} “These distinctions are: there is left, there is right, there is hierarchy, there is righteousness, there is discrimination, there is debate, there is competition, there is struggle. These are eight consequences of distinctions” (2:33).
of past methods [in an environment of] multiple perspectives and debate” (Fiol and Lyles 1985: 811; Nystrom and Starbuck, 1984). This is because situations are often unique, ambiguous and can be subjected to various interpretations. The aim of learning consists in developing the skills to react properly to any scenario that one may be involved in (Cook 1997: 523). For instance, The master butcher’s non-confrontational and relaxed approach to cutting oxen can serve as “a model of communication used to resolve conflict in society at large” (De Reu 2010: 52). Craft molds “our creative ability to calmly and efficaciously adapt to circumstances” (Fraser 2014: 561).

2.5 Zhuang Zi is not a mystic

Some might interpret Zhuang Zi’s doctrine as mysticism by talking about such things as “Heavenly spirit”. This implies that Zhuang Zi does not follow reason or logic and is even superstitious. This cannot be further from the truth. Zhuang Zi takes the world as given, and we need to “unmake even the fundamental distinctions... if we are to return to the Way” (Graham 1997: 195). He wants us to refrain from taking distinctions as they are and thinking in an uncritical fashion. The values or morals that people created are not absolute or universal. Instead of encouraging an escape from the current world, unfettered wandering (xiao yao you 道遥游) is about unconditionally and non-dependently affirming life in this world, taking things as they are – as natural (zi ran 自然) (Shang 2006: 55).

Being too caught up with the exigencies and insignificant things in life means that we often lose sight of the bigger environment that we live in and are part of. Even scientific knowledge can hardly be considered as absolute as what is regarded as true and seemingly unchangeable today may be unproven in 100 years’ time. A classic example is how human beings think that the Earth is at the center of the universe until Copernicus came out with
the helio-centric view. Also, 100 years might seem to be a long time – most of us would not even live till a century, but is less than a second on the Earth’s geological time scale (GTS\textsuperscript{16}) developed by the International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS\textsuperscript{17}). We are like the people who try to match Pengzu for longevity without realizing that there are trees that live for thousands of years (1:5). So the definitions between small and big, short and long are really relative. While a Centenarian has lived a long life compared to the average person who lives to 70\textsuperscript{18}, it is very short compared to the Pando or Quaking Aspens, whose root systems at an estimated 80,000 years old, is among the oldest known living organisms in the world\textsuperscript{19}. This leads us to the discussion between Zhuang Zi’s small and big understanding.

2.6 Zhuang Zi’s distinction between Small vs. Big understanding

In the parable of the cicada and fledgling dove, Zhuang Zi introduces the distinction between “small” and “big” understanding. In the parable, the cicada and the fledgling dove laugh at the big bird Peng, whose wings “are like clouds draped across the heavens” (1:1). They say, “We scurry up into the air, leaping from the elm to the sandalwood tree, and when we don’t quite make it we just plummet to the ground. What’s all this about ascending ninety thousand miles and heading south?” (1:5). In other words,

\textsuperscript{16} The GTS relates stratigraphy to time, and is used by geologists, paleontologists, and other Earth scientists to describe the timing and relationships between events that have occurred throughout Earth’s history.

\textsuperscript{17} The primary objective of the ICS is to “precisely define global units (systems, series, and stages) of the International Chronostratigraphic Chart that, in turn, are the basis for the units (periods, epochs, and age) of the International Geologic Time Scale; thus setting global standards for the fundamental scale for expressing the history of the Earth.” See: http://www.stratigraphy.org/

\textsuperscript{18} According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the average world life expectancy at birth is 70 years old today.

\textsuperscript{19} The Pando can be found in Bryce Canyon National Park in Utah, U.S. See: http://www.nps.gov/brc/learn/nature/quakingaspen.htm
the cicada and fledgling dove do not see the point of the big bird Peng making the arduous thousand-mile journey to find food when they can do it easily in their immediate vicinity.

For the cicada and the fledgling dove, life is carefree and they live by the day. But little do they know how big the world is since their perception is extremely limited. It is like someone with very little knowledge of the world not realizing how ignorant they are. Also, the two creatures will never understand that one needs to save up provisions for three months before undertaking the journey (1:5). Moreover, Peng is wise enough to know to “put ninety thousand miles of air beneath him [so he] can ride the wind, bearing the blue of heaven on his back and unobstructed on all sides” when making his way south (1:4). However, while Peng may have the ability to fly thousands of miles by flapping its wings, but it is only able to do that with “an enormous amount of air, wind and food to support its distant journey” (Shang 2006: 127). He understands principles that the cicada and fledging will never understand. This is analogous to the parable of Butcher Ting. Most of us who are amateurs at cutting meat would think that cutting an ox is a difficult task given how hard its meat and how big the animal is. But Butcher Ting understands the Heavenly patterns (tian li 天理), which allow him to strike in the big hollows, guide the knife through the big openings, and follow things as they are (3:4). As opposed to the limited, specific instrumental function of a technical know-how, Butcher Ting is harmonized with the ox by means of the big understanding or “a beginning that crosses a division” (2:45).

Like the cicada and fledgling dove, the bricklayer who specializes in the techne of bricklaying does not see how his techne also benefits the society. He does not realize his role or position in the greater network of relationship with other people in the community. In this case, the house that is only made possible because of the techne of the bricklayer
helps provide shelter for others in the community. Only when one is able to see beyond his own immediate material utility that he can be considered to have a “big” understanding. Butcher Ting certainly exemplifies the “principles of a master craft... [that] can also be seen as exemplifications of elementary principles of good conduct in general” (Machek 2011: 509).

While small understanding means being blind to other perspectives, big understanding sees things in a wider and more complex network of relationship. We are like Huizi who complained to Zhuang Zi about how useless his humungous great gourd and Stink Tree are. This is an example of someone with small understanding. Huizi fails to see beyond his immediate needs and complain about the relatively small inconvenience of not being able to move the great gourd around because it is too heavy or not being able to cut down the Stink Tree because its trunk is too swollen and twisted (1:13). Like the carpenter who would not even give the Stink Tree a glance because he does not think he can cut the wood and sell them for money, we lose sight of other ways that the tree can be used. For example, the tree can be grown out in the wilderness, safe in the knowledge that no one would bother to cut it down because it is so huge and oddly shaped. In Zhuang Zi’s words, we can “[do] lots of nothing there at its side” (1:13). Indeed, the Stink Tree, despite its awkward appearance living up to its unglamorous name, can serve a place for relaxation far from the hustle and bustle of the city. So the big understanding involves going beyond the fixed, narrow definitions and distinctions of how an entity’s instrumental function to the multiplicity of how everything is related to something else.
Part 3: Discussion

3.1 One’s mastery of techne allows him/her to cultivate the habits to live well

One may object that it is entirely possible that someone who excels in techne but does not know how to live well. Someone who is very patient with his/her craft may be a bad-tempered person who snaps at the slightest irritation in life outside of practicing the craft. However, this might mean that the person may not have properly mastered and internalized his craft. One might get lucky and cut open a particular ox with relative ease. Butcher Ting’s mastery is nothing short of extraordinary. He has been able to cut the ox without blunting his knife for 19 years. And since each ox is different, his mastery certainly has to be versatile, transferable and general in nature in order to help him navigate through the different scenarios and exigencies. To be able to internalize a skill means that it becomes second nature such that one does not have to stop and think about it.

Whether the craftsman knows of it, s/he is gradually changed in the process of making the art. Craft making requires certain skills that are key to its completion. If one does not already have those skills, s/he would have to cultivate them along the way for him/her to succeed in completing the craft. Indeed, the process of making one’s craft demands such virtues as patience, passion and attention – values that are also highly valued in many other aspects of life and society.

3.2 Revisiting Big vs. Small understanding

In this respect, Butcher Ting certainly possesses ‘big’ understanding, as opposed to ‘small’ understanding. He understands how the habits emanating from his interaction with the “clustered tangles” of the ox is integrated to his interactions with other people and overcoming difficult challenges in the bigger community that he lives in. The
transferability does not only apply in a spatial sense, but also a temporal sense. The butcher may be cutting the ox at present, but his activity is related to the future actions of himself and the community. Part of what makes someone skillful in an activity is that s/he can replicate the action at a later time under similar conditions. In this case, because the butcher has acquired the habit of being patient through his cutting of the ox, he will not only be patient to others in the present but also in the future. Since he has truly internalized the skill and the habit has become part of him, he will act in the same way to people regardless of the scenario and therefore exhibit the wisdom to deliberate and act well that is consistent with living well.

3.3 Dissolving the distinction between techne and phronesis

When mastering one’s techne becomes an avenue for someone to acquire practical wisdom, the highly skilled butcher and carpenter will be considered to have a lot of phronesis. So who are we to judge people who actually have more practical wisdom than us? The higher amount of techne that the butcher has, the more phronesis he actually has. How does this make sense? Let us return to the term “practical wisdom”. Practical is understood to be concerned with the actual doing or use of something as opposed to theory and ideas. A craftsman engages in his activity involving skills that make things by hand. Butcher Ting has achieved such high level of his expertise that he is able to make the process of ox-cutting look so effortless and like a beautiful, rhythmic dance.

The butcher demonstrates a different kind of understanding, perhaps a more nuanced kind of understanding. Butcher Ting knows that brute force cannot take down the ox, as he himself acknowledges that “Whenever I come to a clustered tangle, [I do realize] that it is difficult to do anything about it” (3:4). This not only involves a very high level
mastery of the ox, but also reflects the way he approaches life. He solves problems in life not by using brute force and being frustrated when things are not going his way, but by taking a step back and let the Heavenly way or vital energy (qi 氣) guide him in a rhythmic motion. There is a Chinese adage that nicely captures Butcher Ting’s cutting of the ox, “退一步，海阔天空 (tui yi bu, hai kuo tian kong)”. The literal translation is “Take one step back, and the sky will open up.” Instead of mindlessly hacking at the ox, instead of seeing the ox as a great lump of mass, Butcher Ting looks for the spaces and voids to cut. He knows from his experience that he cannot scrutinize the ox too closely and intently, but rather let the big understanding guide his movement.

What we can learn from the butcher is his approach to life, as exemplified by the way he cuts the ox. When we encounter a problem that we cannot solve, instead of panicking and stubbornly pushing against an unmovable wall, we take a step back, take a deep breath and try to look at the issue from another angle. If we become too uptight and inflexible in solving a problem, it is like a damned up or stagnant river that is devoid of life. On the other hand, if we let ourselves relax and approach the tangle in a calm and composed manner, the likelihood is that we can have greater success in tackling the issue without unnecessarily expending lots of effort and draining our energy. This is why the King exclaims, “From hearing the [butcher’s] word I have learned how to nourish life!” (3:6) Nourishing life means being able to live life better, or more specifically have a better approach to living one’s life.

One may ask, how is this different from Aristotle’s definition of phronesis, that is, the ability to deliberate well? To this, I have a two-pronged response. Firstly, while there are some similarities between phronesis and Butcher Ting’s Dao or the Way, a Greek
gentleman or Aristocrat and the Chinese Butcher acquire their "practical wisdom" or "big understanding" respectively in very different ways. For Aristotle, it is not possible for someone without education and/or financial ability to have practical wisdom, the kind of knowledge that one needs to deliberate well and live a good life. On the other hand, the butcher is illiterate and very poor, with barely enough money to get by daily. But this does not preclude him from having the kind of wisdom that even the King acknowledges would help him to not only live better, but also help him to empower his people live better lives. Moreover, the practical aspect of phronesis emphasizes the need to acquire it by actually doing something instead of just thinking theories or ideas. Granted, one could learn adages in school and by reading manuals, but s/he will not be able to appreciate the importance of taking a step back unless one actually encounters a difficult problem and gets frustrated with all the exhausting, futile attempts to deal with it head-on. It is only then s/he will begin to appreciate that s/he needs another way to deal with the problem, and his/her experience alludes to using a softer approach. One does not learn how to solve teething practical problems by just having an intellectual discussion involving abstract thoughts, but actually facing the problem in the real world context, struggling with it and often stumbling numerous times, before finally appreciating the wisdom of looking at the problem from another angle and using a softer approach to untie the clustered tangle. There is no coincidence that the skilled butchers are mostly, if not all of a more advanced age.

The truly extraordinary butchers such as Butcher Ting are so masterful at their craft that even the King is curious to see it for himself. They are the ones who have internalized their craft to such a degree that they literally breathe and eat the craft, that the mastery of their craft is reflected in their every action, word and movement. Their wisdom
of overcoming the tough joints and meat in the ox is translated to their everyday life, where they skillfully glide through difficult problems and untie the numerous clustered tangles, be it with their family, friends or community. Indeed, “[The fully virtuous person’s] will be fully internalized. His feeling and emotions will be fully in harmony with his judgments as to what is worth pursuing and what is not... to the fully virtuous person it is obvious what the right thing to do is” (Annas 1993: 90). So the highly-skilled craftsman’s well-regarded and laudable approach to living stems from the practice of their own craft. And it does not entail a deliberate effort – indeed, Butcher Ting does not deliberate when he cuts the ox. Likewise, one will not expect him to deliberate when it comes to untying clustered tangles in real life when he is not practicing his craft. His craft has become an inseparable part of him – in the same way that there is no longer any more distinction between him, the knife and the ox during the cutting process. There is no more distinction between the time when he is practicing his craft and when he is not, i.e. dealing with problems in real life scenario. His approach to cutting the ox will be the same as that to deal with people, relationships and the community. This leads us to the second point of my two-pronged response to Aristotle, that the distinction between phronesis and techne has disintegrated.

3.4 No more distinction between phronesis and techne

Aristotle’s ethical theory has been built upon numerous distinctions in Nicomachean Ethics Book VI, but arguably none so more than that between phronesis and techne. “While for Aristotle excellence in craft does not imply any wisdom concerning general principles, for Zhuang Zi only a sage can be a perfect craftsman, and every perfect craftsman becomes, by virtue of his excellence qua craftsman, a sage” (Machek 2011: 508). While Aristotle contends that both phronesis and techne are forms of excellence, only
the former can be oriented towards contributing to living a good life. But as we have seen, the lines blur for someone who is very skilled in his/her techne. When one internalizes his/her technical know-how, it becomes an inseparable part of his/her life and that cultivation shines through in all actions and words. So by insisting on the distinction that phronesis and techne are different things, we are overlooking the valuable practical wisdom that craftsmen can bring to the table for living well. These blue-collar individuals can have a lot to teach us despite their illiteracy and lowly social status, as evidenced by how the King learned to nourish life from observing the cutting of the ox. Admittedly, phronesis is not exactly the same as techne because while the former involves deliberation, the latter does not.

Pressing the argument further, is the phronesis shone through the craftsman's techne even better than the Greek aristocrat's phronesis gained through education and by being in a socially and economically more advanced position? And if Butcher Ting does not need to deliberate when cutting the ox, does it mean that we can do away with deliberation? This is certainly not the case. That Butcher Ting does not deliberate is not that he lacks the ability to do so, but rather he does not need to do so. Using the butcher example, an amateur butcher would need to deliberate on where to start cutting the ox, how to cut it, etc. The ox cutting is done in a methodological fashion, using deliberate effort to get the knife through the big animal's body. Over time, the cutting process becomes more natural for the butcher, and he needs to stop and think about how to cut the animal less frequently. This is not merely going through the motion and becoming good at it because one has done the same thing so many times. The build of each ox is different, and the butcher has to find the best way to cut each ox every time. But while a gentleman that
Aristotle talks about would determine the best way to cut through deliberation, Butcher Ting does not deliberate but rather follow the Heavenly spirit and engages the vital energy or *qi*. The wisdom as exemplified by Butcher Ting is extremely versatile; he encounters different kinds of ox and clustered tangles yet he is able to so effortlessly untie them. Therefore, while being able to deliberate well is certainly a good quality to have, being able to do something that typically requires a great deal of deliberation without having to deliberate, luck aside, is all the more impressive. Therefore, not only does the craftsman have something to teach us about living well, his phronesis is arguably more superior than the one Aristotle defined since the former does not involve deliberation. Deliberation implies that there is still some degree of uncertainty. In contrast, the Heavenly spirit always guides one in the right direction, once s/he is able to tap into it. The challenge is reaching the level of *techne* that allows one to manifest the internalized technical know-how as part of everyday actions and words.

3.5 How my work contributes to a more inclusive account of living well

In summary, we have shown that Aristotle’s distinction between *phronesis* and *techne* is not that straightforward as there are a lot of overlaps between the two. Also, craft making offers a whole new dimension that going to school and engaging in intellectual discussion cannot – the practical aspect of the practical wisdom that Aristotle says is important for living well. The ability to deliberate well is important in helping us make good judgment and decisions to doing good and living well. But we have shown in our analysis above that the ability to deliberate is not only the only way, but also not necessarily the best way to live well. By continuing to insist on a clear distinction between *phronesis* and *techne* would mean we miss out on very important perspectives of living well, and
therefore limits our ability to live the best possible life. People like Butcher Ting might be very good practical philosophers we have when it comes to living well!

What is important about Butcher Ting’s example is that “blue-collared” workers who often have to engage in physical labor to earn a living are usually less educated and even illiterate. A person like Butcher Ting would probably not have the luxury of attending college, much less a good liberal arts college that emphasizes on the cultivation of one’s mind and character. So the technical know-how of ox cutting provides the butcher with another way to acquire phronesis other than going to school. Butcher Ting’s example therefore shows that there is more than one way of getting practical wisdom, which makes the account of living well more inclusive. So apart from acquiring habits of mind in their general forms – such as philosophizing about the virtues of patience in an academic setting, we can also acquire these habits through mastery of craft knowledge. In other words, practicing a craft offers an alternative route for people to acquire the knowledge to live well despite a lack of education or literacy.
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