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Chapter One

Feeding the Body/Feeding the Soul: The Symbolic Divide

"To feed" is the most basic verb, the most fundamental, the most rooted. It expresses the primordial activity, the primary, basic function, the act "I" engage in even before I am born or begin breathing. Because of it I belong to the earth, forever. Like the smallest animal crawling in the dirt, like the smallest plant, I began by feeding myself. It was through feeding that activity began in me, and it is that activity — which we cannot dream of shedding, which guides us with its rough hand, with the iron hand of hunger, where fate begins — that defines the most general class to which we belong: "we" living things. At the same time, the verb "to feed" lends itself to a variety of transpositions, insinuating itself — and leading us — into the most elaborate parts of the lexicon: I nurse a desire, a dream, or an ambition (in French: *je nourris*, from *nourrir*, to feed); reading feeds the mind; my mind feeds on fantasy; my style is undernourished; and so on. On the one hand, "to feed" is a verb that imposes its own meaning: blunt, raw, stark, and irrefutable, the factual in its unadulterated state, allowing no room for guesswork or ambiguity, no notion of variation or softening, no possibility even of imagining that the word lacks a perfect counterpart in every tongue. It is eternally the same and endlessly repeated, much as the very act of feeding indefatigably repeats itself in our lives: if

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I do not feed myself, I die. On the other hand, "to feed" introduces the most distinctive and perhaps even ideal requirements. It reveals and promotes other levels and other resources, which emerge as vocations or even destinations: the divine is what helps to feed the winged apparatus of the soul, Plato tells us. For while the soul soars in pursuit of the gods, grazing in the pastures of truth, the contemplation of true realities is its "nourishing food." Or, the soul "feeds" on music, *en mousikē hē trophē*.

We know how the philosophy of language reined in this nascent disorder at its inception. Or, to put it another way, we know how easily this proliferating usage was brought back under control: it was enough to distinguish between the literal and the figurative senses. Just as I feed my body, said Plato, I feed my soul: the relationship is analogic. I posit two planes or segments, and at the same time I assume some "kinship" (*sungeneia*) between them. Thus the meaning of "feed" was bifurcated as the great codification opposing body and soul, or material and spiritual, required. It straddled the great divide between the visible and the invisible, the latter conceived as the intelligible. But such a classification is premature, is it not? And is it quite as self-evident as it seems? Does it not threaten to obscure the full experience of feeding? Or does it not, at any rate, threaten to obscure "experience" insofar as it remains complete, in the sense of being both fundamental and comprehensive, or "vital," that is, the experience of survival, development, and refinement? Because "feeding" also serves to express the ideal. As fundamental as it is, why should it not retain something of the unitary? In other words, why should it not establish within itself a relation other than one of analogy? Why must we plunge ourselves immediately into this alternative: to feed the body *or* (metaphorically) to feed the mind (feeling, spirit, aspiration)?

This split is fundamental. Hence we must begin by examining it anew so that the presuppositions of our thinking can be ques-

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tioned. For nowadays everyone knows, or at least intuits, that this division marks an important fork in the road, the place where the fate of the so-called "Western" mind was historically decided. Indeed, Western religious tradition merely sanctioned a decision already inscribed in language: the true "hunger" is for the word of God; its mysteries are "food"; and the Lord has gathered for us the "bread" of Scripture. Christ gave us the bread of life. "Carnal" nourishment is rejected in favor of "heavenly" nourishment. And so on. Thus patristic discourse, comfortably adapting itself to this distinction between the material and the celestial, two worlds it was unembarrassed to treat always in parallel, speaks of the "milk" that feeds novices in the faith, the "vegetables" used to treat those still sick with doubt, and the more solid and substantial nourishment reserved for the elect in the form of "the flesh of the Lamb." Manna already symbolized this future nourishment, because, as Origen tells us, in order to have manna one must not "remain seated" but must "go out of the camp," that is, the body in which the soul is imprisoned.[1] Thus to react by seeking, as André Gide did, to return to the "fruits of the earth" (*les nourritures terrestres*), fails to escape the symmetrical alternative of concrete *or* symbolic in which we are trapped.[2] Although we have ceased to believe, and although we go on trying to secularize our thinking, we have not unlearned the implicit division to which our language hews so closely, for its convenience is undeniable.

In Chinese, however, we learn the common, everyday expression *yang sheng,*[a] "to feed one's life," and it unsettles the supposedly unshakable division described above. Its pertinence begins (discreetly, to be sure) to be less self-evident. For the meaning of "to feed one's life" cannot be narrowly concrete and material, but neither does it veer off into the spiritual, for the life in question here is not "eternal life." Though no longer reductively terrestrial, the meaning also resists tilting toward the celestial. "My

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life," comprehended globally, is my vital potential. These were the terms in which the first "naturalist" thinkers in ancient China, reacting against any subordination of human conduct to any transcendent order whatsoever, be it religious or ritual, defined human nature: "Human nature is life," nothing more.[3] To feed one's life is the same as to feed one's nature. My entire vocation and sole responsibility lie in the care I take to maintain and develop the life potential invested in me, or — as another common expression puts it, elaborating on the same theme — in the care I take to nourish its essence or, rather, its "quintessence," its "flower," its "energy,"[b] by preserving its "cutting edge."[c] In other words, not only must we replenish our strength even as we expend it but we must also perfect our abilities by cleansing our physical existence of impurities, we must hone our edge while also maintaining "our form" (though the "form" in question refers to more than just the shape of our bodies). Another common expression, which might be translated literally as "feeding calm,"[d] can hardly be understood literally; to do so would yield too narrow an interpretation, made rigid by the projection of our grammar and thereby cutting off understanding. More loosely interpreted (and making good use of that looseness), the expression means to "nurture" and restore our strength by availing ourselves of peace and quiet, that is, to take our rest, to recover our serenity, to "re-create" ourselves, by withdrawing from the world's everyday cares and concerns. It is neither physical nor psychological — or, if one still wants to insist on these rubrics, it is both at once. This indissoluble unity is invaluable: it will, *provisionally*, guide our inquiry. To take another example, "to study life," *xue sheng*,[e] means in this context not to study what life is (as it would be if defined from the point of view of knowledge) or how to live (as it would be if defined from the point of view of morality) but to learn to deploy, preserve, and develop the capacity for life with which we are all endowed.[4]

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Thus the ground shifts, undermining philosophy even before it *is* philosophy, by which I mean before philosophy conceives what it conceives (before it conceives *of* conceiving), prior to whatever choices and questions are within its power to make explicit. In his nomenclature of the living, Aristotle distinguishes and names three types of souls: the nutritive, the sensitive, and the thinking. The nutritive soul (*threptikē*), which subsumes animals and plants along with man, is primary; it is the basis of the other two. Yet at the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle explicitly excludes life that feeds and grows but is also subject to corruption from his consideration of human life: "Life seems to be common even to plants, but we are seeking what is peculiar to man. Let us exclude, therefore, the life of nutrition and growth."[5] It is easy to see that the specificity of man's development will be sought in the realm of thought and knowledge, of *nous* and *logos*, at the (distinct) level of the "theoretical." To divert attention from the generic functions of nutrition and growth and thus to dissociate intellectual activity from organic life in an effort to conceive of man's "essence" and his development is, of course, fraught with consequences. Note, however, that ancient Chinese thought went in exactly the opposite direction: it deliberately turned away from the activity of knowing, which is endless and thus hemorrhagic in terms of energy and vitality, in order to concentrate on man's ability to use and preserve the vital potential vested in him. Take, for example, one of the most profound ancient Chinese thinkers, Zhuangzi, a contemporary of Aristotle's, whose thought I shall be exploring in this book. Consider the opening sentences of his chapter "On the Principle of Vital Nourishment": "Your life has a limit, but knowledge has none. If you use what is limited to pursue what has no limit, you will be in danger [of exhaustion]. If you understand this and still strive for knowledge, you will be in danger [of exhaustion] for certain."[6]

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Both philosophers thus begin with renunciation, but the two renunciations are diametrically opposed. Where does renunciation take us, however, if it is no longer toward mind — the *nous* of the Greeks? Zhuangzi explains this in a crucial passage, which cannot be translated without a gloss, since it draws explicitly on Chinese medical art. If one no longer follows the endless and aimless path of knowledge, one must return to the source of our physical being, to a very different organ, namely the *principal artery* (du)[f], which traverses the back from the base of the spine to the base of the neck and conveys the subtle breath of life that allows this vessel to regulate our energy. The *influx* of energy passes through the empty interior of this artery, from its base to its summit, without deviating from its designated path. This is the "line" of life, the rule and norm of conduct to which we must cleave. This shift in focus is fundamentally important: it stops the dissipation of thought in knowledge and removes us to the vital median axis where organic regulation is maintained moment by moment. Only in this way, Zhuangzi concludes, can we "preserve our person," "complete our vitality," and "live out all our years to the end."

In order to appreciate the significance of this reorientation toward organic vitality and away from the temptation of knowledge (a temptation the Chinese clearly also felt), we must first recognize that the ancient Chinese had no conception of immortality. Since their world, unlike that of the Plato's *Phaedo*, had no *otherworld* to which escape was possible, the only conceivable duration of existence was the embodied life of individual beings. Life as such did not persist in the souls that ascended to mingle with the winds of yang, nor in those that returned to the earth to merge with the energies of yin. Henri Maspero — though still unduly influenced, in my view, by European terminology — summed this up by saying that for Daoists, the "eternal life" of "salvation"

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meant "long life,"[g] understood "as a form of material immortality of the body itself."[7] The ground suddenly opens beneath our feet: can a body hope for such longevity when the process of achieving it must be seamlessly integrated with the phenomenal world?

Zhuangzi thus allows for a different type of dream, or, more notionally, for a different "ideal." If it is not of this world, at least it is *of this life*, insofar as this life must be "fed." Although he posits no paradise (not without evasiveness, at any rate), he is pleased to describe beings who — like the genies of distant Mount Gushi, who fed on wind and dew, and the Old Woman — have skin "as bright as snow" and retain "the delicacy and freshness of virgins," or "the complexion of infants." "After a thousand years," they tire of this world and ride the clouds back to the empyrean, following a "way," *dao*, which is precisely what wisdom claims to teach and which Zhuangzi characterizes by the verb *shou*:[h] to know how "to keep" by purifying.[8]

The Old Woman, when asked about her childlike complexion, uses expressions that will at first seem enigmatic (to be patiently elucidated, avoiding all haste). By clarifying and decanting day after day (exactly what is being clarified is not discussed here, because only through gradual renunciation does "it" become perceptible), I come little by little to treat the "whole world," "things," and even "life" itself as "external" and therefore no longer a burden on my vitality. I then gain access to the "transparency of morning," thereby making visible a form of "independence" that is the only "absolute." There, "past and present abolish each other," and even in the midst of this "tumult" nothing stands in the way of "placidity."[9] Once attained, this placidity preserves longevity and "feeds" life. Elsewhere in this corpus, Zhuangzi writes that if the troubles of the outside world are shut out so that they are neither seen nor heard, the last screens disappear, leaving us face-to-face with "clear tranquillity," and "we no longer exhaust our physical

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being," no longer "rattle" or shake our "quintessence" (about this key term, which we have already encountered, I shall have more to say later on).[10] At that point we *hold on to* "all the vitality of our physical being" and enjoy "long life."

I will not interpret this gradual, methodical access to the "transparency of morning," in which one "sees [the] alone [independent, emancipated, unique]," as a mystical experience because all of this is the Old Woman's response to a specific question, which is entirely concerned with being-in-life: "You are well on in years, yet you have the complexion of a young child. How do you do it?" Questioned as to her dao, the Old Woman describes how she unburdens herself of every vestige of a cumbersome, energy-sapping "exterior" so as to focus exclusively on her *inner* or *vital capacity*. This capacity after gradually purifying itself, at last communicates directly ("transparently") with the pure (full) regime of natural "processivity," with the "taoic" ("unique"), which consequently remains continually present. This is the key point. Although the youthful glow in question may require loftiness and transcendence in order to attain it, it is not to be interpreted figuratively, for it pertains to the non-aging of the physical being. By methodically abandoning all my external and particular investments and concentrations that consume and dissipate vitality (including those pertinent to my own life), I become one with its common source. At that stage, the youthful Old Woman tells us, I will be completely unencumbered and therefore know how to "remain in contact" with vitality's perpetual renewal, so that I will stop growing old.

But how is it that we ordinarily allow our attention to flow outward instead of concentrating on what lies within—the *vital* equivalent of a Pascalian diversion? The following anecdote provides a counterexample: while strolling idly in a chestnut grove at Diaoling, Zhuangzi sees a "strange magpie" that swoops down

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and grazes him in passing. Zhuangzi is astonished that despite the size of its wings the bird cannot fly well, and that despite its gigantic eyes it does not see him. Clearly the bird found itself suddenly unable to use its natural capacities. But why? Zhuangzi hikes up his robe and hastens off in pursuit of the bird, crossbow in hand. At this point he sees a cicada that has just found a nice cool place and "forgotten itself." Nearby, a praying mantis hides behind a leaf and, just as "heedless of its safety" as its prey, prepares to catch the cicada. The magpie, of course, has been following the two insects, thinking only of when it might grab them both; it was the lure of this advantage that caused the bird to also "forget its true nature." But has not Zhuangzi, in chasing the bird, made the same mistake? This thought continues to trouble him for days.[11] In pursuing an external profit, or at any rate seeking to satisfy his curiosity, which drew his attention to the coarse outside world, he neglected not his conscience (or moral being or ideal aspiration or anything of that sort) but his "own person," his individual "ego," which becomes "authentic" when divested of all external distraction. He too endangers his vital being by forgetting to maintain it. Zhuangzi speaks of "forgetfulness," expenditure, and therefore danger but not of error, much less of sin: in this world without final judgment or the hope of resurrection, the imperative is not to "save one's soul" but to *safeguard* one's vitality.

Why have I chosen to delve into the *Zhuangzi* and trace the development of a philosophy of the "vital" and its "nourishment"? The reason is not just that I see here a significant and, indeed, in many respects exemplary fork in the road away from the implicit choices inherited from Greek philosophy and responsible for its rich harvest. This path, of course, gives us an opportunity to adopt an "external" point of view, itself highly elaborate and self-conscious, from which to reconsider the theoretical prejudice (that of *theorein*)

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that shaped our mind (where "our" here refers to the Western "we," which grew out of the search for truth and freedom). I confess, though, that I am more interested in the very conditions of my own particular thought and, to that end, in how (that is, by what strategy) I can gain some perspective within my own mind. For this, the externality of Chinese thought, its deconstructive effect, is useful to me. I prefer this course to taking theatrically an overt position and proposing a "thesis," an exercise in which philosophy all too often indulges to demonstrate its prowess. This time, something else is at stake as well. Or, rather, the question of "feeding one's life" raises a new issue, which I saw emerging earlier but which here takes on a new dimension and obliges me to commit myself more openly. For clearly the attention ancient Chinese thinkers paid to feeding life, which is undoubtedly still among the most significant, influential, and durable traits of contemporary Chinese mores, ressonates with a major and growing concern among Westerners today, a concern that is in a sense *converting* many of them. In a dechristianizing world that no longer defers happiness to the hereafter, and which is by the same token less and less inclined to sacrifice in the name of a higher cause (be it revolution, fatherland, or what have you), we are in fact left, once we have rid ourselves of all these projections and associated hopes, with nothing other than the need to manage and maintain "that" which, if nothing else, at least cannot be suspected of being an illusion: namely, the *life capital* that is imparted to each individual being and that, stripped of all ideological guises, is said to be the only indubitable and therefore authentic "self."

As proof of this, I cite the extensive (sub)literature (on well-being, health, vitality, and so on) that flourishes today in magazines, on the fringes of the medical as well as the psychological without drawing much substance from either. This literature often makes reference to China, as if China were some sort of

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safety valve capable of liberating us from the powerful dualisms the West is now condemned to bear as its cross (and as if the great Western philosophers, including Plato and Descartes, had not themselves labored to transcend these same binaries). Today the philosophy sections of bookstores have been replaced with shelves devoted to an amorphous subject located somewhere between "Health" and "Spirituality." They are filled with books on "breathing," "energetic harmony," the "Dao of sex," ginseng, and soy. It hardly needs saying that this bastardized philosophy vaguely linked to the "East" and proliferating under cover of cloudy mysticism is terrifying. There is, of course, a big difference between the "undividedness" that will guide our inquiry — and whose theoretical consequences I wish to explore — and the troubled waters in which "self-help" propagandists fish for the easy profits to be reaped at the expense of indolent minds. My method is opposed to this, and that is why I cannot refrain from denouncing the guilty ideological conscience that has insidiously taken hold today. It is high time that ideas about breathing, harmony, and feeding be rescued from this pseudophilosophy and coherently integrated into the realm of philosophical reflection. Otherwise, Western thought may casually abandon the ideals it has constructed and plunge into a socially disastrous irrationalism. This essay is also, secretly and without any need to develop the point explicitly, political as well as philosophical.

Zhuangzi at least did not hide the thought which opposed the attention he devoted to feeding life: the debates between the philosophical schools, for example, which pitted the Mohists against the Confucians, and, more broadly, all the effort poured into argumentation, a practice which wastes energy (embodied for him by the sophist Hui Shi, whom he describes as sitting "with his back against an eleococca tree," consuming himself with dialectical refutations of the "hard" and the "white").[12] Also opposed

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were heroism and the will to act: the "authentic men of the past" "did not train for feats of arms" or "make vast plans."[13] Ancient China was, of course, a culture without an epic. Zhuangzi also asked if one must sacrifice for the good of the world, gaining renown by giving up one's life so that "others might live."[14] Thus the question of feeding one's life also raised the question of what I believe is the most radical of human choices—more radical, in any case, than that between good and evil or *Hercules between Vice and Virtue* in our antique staging. Prior to the problem of values, which are always to one degree or another external, is the issue of the care and management of the self, the principle of which, we now know, is principally *economic*.

At this stage, we at last find *that which Zhuangzi did not envisage*. For while he had no difficulty seeing beyond morality (because concern for the good of course hinders the expression of vitality), he did not imagine how loss and pleasure (pleasure through loss) might be justified. Nor did he see what might justify a desire that, rather than consuming us because we failed to protect ourselves against it, is deliberately chosen and cultivated at the expense of longevity (even though all hope of immortality has been abandoned). Moreover, it is difficult to imagine how these two attitudes can be reconciled. Two possible attitudes exist toward the vital capital that is amassed through the "feeding" of the "self." Either we *preserve* it as best we can, purifying and decanting it so that it is not atrophied by the consuming pressure of the "exterior," by preoccupation, fear, or desire. Or, we act like Balzac's young hero Raphael, who negates in one orgasmic outburst all the meticulous effort devoted to preserving it, rushing "drunk with love" to his death in the lavish luxury of a Paris hotel. In this "last moment" he transforms the final spasm into apotheosis through the vigor of his violation: "no longer able to utter a sound, he set his teeth in Pauline's breast."[15]

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Chapter Two

Preserving the Freedom to Change

A break like Raphael's would be expenditure and its tragic challenge, confronting its limit. Or, in contrast, it could be the deliberate protection of one's potential, where, through an encounter with the philosophy of immanence, it develops into the *dao* of wisdom. For in addition to writing *about* one's desire, one can also write at a *distance* from it. Yet can this Chinese feeding of life become as intimate for us as Raphael's fate? We have stumbled upon a moment of resistance and it is precisely what we must take as our point of entry into this other form of intelligibility. My bias as a philosopher leads me to believe that what is commonly called "personal development" does not require us to convert but rather develops its own criteria for coherence. How can what we have designated both the *preservation* and the *purification* of something called the "self" come together in an articulated form? Or, to put it another way, how, by emancipating, decanting, and refining my physical being, do I learn to "preserve" its ability to grow and to develop my vitality to its full ("daoic") potential? Let us begin, we read at the beginning of one of the "outer" chapters of the *Zhuangzi*, by eliminating all activities and all forms of knowledge extraneous to the desired telos: he "who has mastered the true nature of life" is not concerned with anything removed from life; he "who

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has mastered the true nature of fate" is not concerned with anything that does not influence that fate.[1] A series of conclusions follows. "To feed the body" one must "begin with material resources and goods." Yet even if "we have more than enough material resources and goods," "the body may still go unnourished." At a higher level, "in order to ensure our vitality," we must "begin by making sure that life does not leave our body." But we also know that "even if life does not leave our body . . . our vitality may very well diminish." In other words, *Zhuangzi* concludes, contrary to what is all too frequently believed, "feeding the body is not enough to maintain vitality." Feeding the body is a necessary condition of vitality, but it is not sufficient. This leads logically to the central question: in addition to feeding the body, what else is necessary but not separable from it (thus ruling out something spiritual, as opposed to the physical), if I am to "feed" not only what I reductively call my body but also, and more essentially, or "quintessentially," my life?

Viewed solely in intellectual terms, the problem might be posed as follows: only by imagining what transcends my bodily form without divorcing itself from the physical, so that it vitalizes or energizes it, can I think of "feeding" in a unified way, avoiding the distinction between the literal and the figurative. But what mediation can effectively link these two distinct levels and thus banish *from my experience* the great dualism of the physical and the spiritual? On what grounds, that is, can I conceptualize this *qualitative elevation*, which does not *cut itself off* from the concrete (and therefore does not produce the famous "qualitative leap")? This mediation can be found in the transitional phase Chinese philosophy terms *the subtle*, or that which, without necessarily leaving the realm of the physical and concrete (and therefore without reference to the order of faith), is nevertheless already liberated from the encumbrances, limits, and opacities of the concrete.

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Although the Chinese did not investigate different and distinct levels of "being," as the Greeks did in their search for pure knowledge, they were nevertheless passionately interested in the *refined* and *decanted*, which they believed was more "alive" because it was more fluid and less reified, and from which they hoped to derive the maximum effect.

There are various angles from which the subtle becomes accessible to experience. In aesthetics, for example, there is the exquisite flavor of the barely perceptible, whether in sound or image, in the transitional stage between silence and sonority in music or between emptiness and fullness in painting, when the sonic or pictorial realization is barely evident or on the verge of vanishing. Whether just barely outlined or already beginning to fade, the subtle ceases to impose the brute opacity of its presence and can no longer be confined. Diffuse, vivid, and insinuating, it continues to emanate indefinitely. In military strategy, the subtle refers to the flexibility and suppleness of a maneuver undertaken before forces are deployed on the ground, thereby rendering the opposition relatively inert. If I remain alert, I elude my enemy's grasp and my extreme responsiveness constantly replenishes my potential. Conversely, my adversary is hampered by the rigidity of his plans and deployments. I maintain myself in the agile posture of the virtual, while the other remains mired in or confined by the actual and thus vulnerable.

All Chinese practices derive from this. At precisely this point, *Zhuangzi* introduces a term mentioned earlier which points in this direction: the term we have begun to translate as "essence" or "quintessence," which might also be rendered as "flower," "choice," "elite," or "energy" (*jing*).[a] This belongs to the realm of the physical, but it is not raw; it has been refined. Originally it denoted the seed of selected or hulled rice, the *fine fleur* as one says of the germ of wheat in French, but it was also applied to human sperm,

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to the spirit of wine, and indeed to any form of matter that has been decanted, subtilized, and thus energized and endowed with the ability to communicate its effect. For this reason it opposes the phase of the tangible, the opaque, the inert, the numb, and the crude. By using words such as "subtle," "spirit," and "quintessentialized," I am well aware that I may seem to be reintroducing an obscurantist vocabulary that predates the great conquests of Western science and its experimental, mathematical, and model-oriented rationalism, whose prodigious truth effects cannot be denied. Nevertheless, rather than avoid the word as a vestige of an archaic mentality, I have chosen to dwell on it: for besides the importance of this term in the *Zhuangzi*, it also provides us with an opportunity to use the parallel between Chinese thought and the history of our rationality to recover and rethink precisely those aspects of our most fundamental experience—the experience of life that modern Western science has covered up and obscured with its characteristic procedures (traditionally we have allowed this sort of thing a place only in alchemy, but only to exclude it all the more thoroughly). Nowadays we approach such matters only obliquely, by way of culturally repressed antirationalist, esoteric, and mystical categories, whose ill effects I deplored earlier. Our realm of intelligibility instead needs to welcome the "subtle" and "quintessential," which are the products of refinement and decantation and which bridge the gap between the concrete and the spiritual, the literal and the figurative. Zhuangzi has something to contribute to this task.

This will help us to grasp, in a form other than a moral *topos*, how the lack of concern with, and disengagement from, the affairs of the world recommended by both Eastern and Western wisdom can in fact *reinforce the vitality of the self*. *Zhuangzi* goes on to explain how, by committing myself ever more deeply to the process of emancipation, refinement, and decantation (compare the

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verbal repetition in Chinese, *jing er you jing*),[b] I simultaneously free myself from the fixations, stumbling blocks, and encumbrances — the crude screens that worldly affairs place in front of my inner flux and dynamism. I thereby restore the limpidity, subtlety, and alacrity of that flux and thus relate it ever more closely to the constant *influx* that links life to its source, both in myself and in the all-encompassing world process. For as the nutritional metabolism of my physical being already reveals at the most elementary level, and as the alternation of "concentration" and "dispersion" that marks the time of life and death exhibits on the cosmic scale, "feeding one's life," by entering into an ever-increasing subtilization (quintessentialization), will nonetheless always come down to this: "to remain open to change."[c] This is the first major point: nutrition is not progress toward something; it is renewal. The transformation that it brings about has no other purpose than to reactivate something (forsaking the problematic of sense to which the West is so attached: because life in itself makes no sense, as we know). Or, as Zhuangzi says earlier on the same page, in a formulation too concise to be translated literally: when I achieve "equality-placidity" by freeing myself from the "bonds" and impediments of worldly affairs and cares, I discover in myself the capacity for the natural transformation that perpetually irrigates the world. By connecting with this process and remaining in phase with its immanence (*yu bi*),[d] I put myself in a position to "modify-incite" and therefore to reconnect continually with life (in myself), rather than allow it to cling and adhere — to some investment, some representation, or some affect, as caring about things inclines us to do — and subsequently to stagnate and wither.

Here, though, there are grounds for disappointment. We had hoped to gain intimacy with the form of coherence associated with "nourishment," to the point where it became a life choice. Probing

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beneath the intricacies of our thoughts, we claimed to discover what was least abstract in them, the source of our vitality. But once this "nourishment" is no longer limited to the feeding of the "body," must it fly off into the realm of the speculative? How can we express that which constitutes experience without immediately splitting it in two? How can we construct it without losing it? A little later in the same chapter discussed earlier, we read about a prince, who asks a visitor a question: "I've heard that your master taught [how to nourish] life. What did you learn from this?" The guest offers an enigmatic answer: "I swept at the master's gate with a broom. What do you think I learned?" One might conclude that the guest is either avoiding the question or being modest, but I do not think that either is correct, because not to answer is in fact to provide an answer of sorts. It suggests that the questioner must make further progress before he can hope to be enlightened. More than that, however, the act of sweeping in front of the master's gate indicates in a most basic way that the visitor plays a discreet but effective role in the preservation and renewal of life. Frequently, particularly in Japanese temples, those who participate in the life of the temple sweep its stairs or wipe its banisters with a damp cloth, moving in a way that is neither nonchalant nor overexcited, neither hurried nor fatigued, cleaving to the form of things without pressing on them or breaking away from them. I believe that what we have here is an answer in the form of an action, or, rather, a movement, if I may put it that way: the movement of sweeping, which is repeated for each step. The prince fails to take in this answer, however, and is no doubt waiting for some theoretical content. His order elicits a laconic response: "I have heard my master say that to be good at nourishing life is like feeding sheep: if you notice some of the sheep straggling behind, you whip them."

An image comes readily to mind: sheep graze here and there,

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and a few slowly wander away from the rest of the flock. Scattered across the countryside, they lag behind and slow the others' advance. But why sheep? Perhaps simply because the Chinese character *yang*, which signifies "to feed," is composed of the key for "food" and the root for "sheep." More surely, however, because the attitude one should take toward one's nourishment is the same as that adopted by the shepherd who allows his flock to proceed at its own pace, following its noses, while he keeps an eye out for stragglers. This shepherd does not lead the animals in his charge by marching at their head like the good pastor in the Gospels, who guides his flock across the desert to a lush and fertile promised land. I see the shepherd in the Chinese text as a master who is content to follow along behind his sheep, making sure that no dissident motivation leads them astray and that the flock as a whole continues to move forward. Progress lies not in moving toward a visible ideal but "merely," as I put it earlier, in remaining open to change.

The question thus remains as broad as possible. It cannot be reduced to moralizing introspection (the famous "examination of our conscience" one learns as a child). Its sole concern is efficacy: to move forward, but with an openness to the interior dimension. This can be understood equally well in physiological terms or in moral or psychological ones (what *lags behind in me*), and it can be interpreted as disposition, function, impetus, or feeling: what will I have to "whip" in order to restore order — the common order of my vital evolution — and to keep moving forward? It can be interpreted in a medical or pathological register as the way cells or organs seek to develop on their own, isolated from the function of the whole organism, so that they no longer evolve with the rest and either atrophy or turn cancerous. Or one can read it in a psychoanalytic mode: the neurotic remains attached to some event in his past, so that his psychic life ceases to evolve. Or he may

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become "trapped" by some emotion in the wake of a pathogenic situation from which there is no exit. Or, in the most general sense, inertia is characteristic of the way the libido is invested, for psychoanalysis teaches us that it is always reluctant to abandon an old position for a new one and therefore tends toward paralysis through adherence and fixation.

The Chinese interpretation, proceeding as usual, insists that the "way" of *remaining open to change* requires valuing the median and therefore opposing any deviation toward either extreme. The prince's visitor eventually explains his meaning. Shan Bao lived among the cliffs and drank only water. He did not seek profit and was therefore not concerned with other men. He was thereby able to preserve his vital potential and reach the age of seventy without losing his childlike complexion. Unfortunately, he crossed the path of a hungry tiger, who, given the solitude in which Shan Bao lived, easily devoured him. Then there was Zhang Yi: he assiduously visited every single noble mansion and at the age of forty he was already weak inside and caught a fever, from which he died. "One fed his inside, but the tiger ate his outside, while the other fed his outside, but illness attacked him from within. Neither man applied the whip to what lagged behind." The path of true nourishment falls between the two. Make no mistake, however: the precise middle way is not equidistant from withdrawal, on the one hand, and social life, on the other, for such a middle path would also lead inevitably to immobility and impede life's renewal. The art of renewal instead lies in the alternation between tendencies. Confucius (whom Zhuangzi often portrays ironically but who is here acknowledged as an expert on the just middle) offers this comment: withdrawal "to the point of hiding" and cutting off relations with others (which leaves us alone and helpless when an external danger arises) is a mistake; so is activity so external that we are constantly exposed (to pressure, intrigue,

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and so on), deprived of relaxation, and eventually devoured by our preoccupations. The wrong lies not in one position or the other but in the attachment to a position, whatever it happens to be, to the point of becoming immobilized by it. We should not isolate ourselves in a certain position, lest we cut ourselves off from the opposite position and become deaf to calls to free ourselves from the position we happen to be in (so as to continue to advance); the alternative to this is necessity. Stuck in an extreme, life ceases to "feed" itself because it loses its virtuality, bogs down, becomes stalemated, and no longer initiates anything new.

In a laconic passage at the beginning of his chapter on feeding life, Zhuangzi makes the following point: "If you do good, do not seek renown. If you do evil, avoid punishment."[2] Ultimately it matters little whether the action is "good" or "evil": the important thing is not to become so attached to a position as to remain trapped by it. Even the good becomes a trap for vitality, not only when it becomes routine but also when we become prisoners of the label. This, moreover, is what we find embodied immediately thereafter in the *principal artery*, or *du*, which irrigates the back from bottom to top and is the vessel through which energy flows. Why does our attention, once liberated from the endlessly spendthrift thirst for knowledge, focus instead on this artery as defining the line and rule of life? Because, as we have already discussed, this median artery has a regulative capacity that ensures respiratory constancy. And what is respiration but a continual incitation not to dwell in either of two opposite positions—inhalation or exhalation? Respiration instead allows each to call upon the other in order to renew itself through it, thus establishing the great rhythm of the world's evolution, never absent from the Chinese mind: the alternation of day and night and the succession of the seasons. Thus respiration is not only the symbol, the image or figure, but also the *vector* of vital nourishment.

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Chapter Three

To Feed One's Life/To Force One's Life; or, How the Attachment to Life Turns against Life

If we therefore isolate our "nature" from everything that encumbers, conceals, or hobbles it; if we liberate ourselves from ideological perspectives and constructs, then we can restore our nature to what it truly and uniquely is: the vital potential that we are. Since we do not believe in another life, we preserve this life, here and now. Defying imposed values, we "preserve" life from illusory sacrifices and vain desires of glory and success. But what does "preserve" mean when the object of preservation is life? Does it mean to guard life as we would guard a treasure (our only treasure, since it is the one value that remains intact when the whole fragile edifice collapses in rubble)? Is it to cling to life, to retreat into it by making it our chief concern? Is it to care for life by protecting it against all forms of aggression and dissipation? It is at this point that vital nourishment attains philosophical depth, setting itself apart from all the recipes for vitality and taking on a dimension that is not strictly moral but more radical still. For to preserve our life is not to focus exclusively on it; nor is it to contrive to bottle up the life that is in us in order to save it for as long as possible from its despised opposite, death. To preserve our life is to plumb the depths of our life in search of the vital logic of which loss is as legitimate a part as inception, expiration

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as inspiration, and thus to "keep" our life open to renewal through the alternation of the global life process. "To feed one's life" does not mean to strive to enhance or prolong it, to seek to force life to sustain itself and endure. Indeed, it is only through de-willing, de-possession, that life can sustain itself and endure. This is the sense, bordering on a paradox, that must be carefully cultivated so as not to confuse it with other banal conceptions. Hence close reading is essential.

Let us therefore retrace our steps. In the progressive ascent that allows the Old Man to "preserve" his youth and achieve "long life," we came across a statement that may seem surprising. The Old Man says that we must treat as "external," and hence of no importance for our vitality, not only "the world" and "things" but also "life."[1] Without dwelling on this passage so as to preserve the tension inherent in the formula, I interpret this as meaning that only if I liberate myself from [my concern with my] life will I achieve the "transparency of morning" and rise to the full potential of my vitality, without further depletion or weakening. Similarly, when we were asked to deliver ourselves from worldly affairs, whose power to retain and fixate impedes our dynamism and internal renewal, we were subsequently told, as if it were self-evident, that "if we free ourselves from the cares of the world, our physical being will no longer be depleted," but, stranger still, that "if we abandon life, the quintessence of our vital being (*jing*) will no longer be lacking."[2] Here, modern commentators vie to diminish what they take to be the bizarre meaning of this passage: "life," it is claimed, should be understood in a weak sense as "futilities" and "petty matters." This reading restores the expected conventional meaning: no one takes offense at the idea that it is enough to "give up" life's pettiness and trifles (the better to concern ourselves with life itself). If, however, we follow the traditional commentators, we are confronted with a jarring literal

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meaning: the recommendation is *to give up life itself*, including our preoccupation with our longevity, so that the "quintessence" of our vitality will no longer be in short supply but will instead replenish itself.

One passage in the Old Man's statement is even more incisive, on account of an antithesis: "That which kills life does not die; that which engenders life is not born," or so the translation usually runs, thus construing the subject of both halves of the antithesis—supposedly the *dao*, the subject *par excellence*—as sovereign over the life and death of all living things.[3] By virtue of this operation, the *dao* becomes God (and the passage in question becomes mystical). But a whole tradition of commentary interprets this passage quite differently. Recall that in Chinese, *sheng* means both "to live" and "to engender":[a] "That which rids itself of life does not die; that which seeks to live [or, better, lives to live, *sheng sheng*] does not live."[4] Or, as the gloss would have it, he who worries about preserving and prolonging life, and who "is therefore preoccupied" with his own life, who "values" and "clings" to it, "does not live." He who thinks only of his own life does not live, not so much because this tiresome concern with his own life interferes with his joy of living but, more radically, because it obstructs and corrupts the very source of his vitality. By contrast, according to the commentator Guo Xiang, he who achieves the "transparency of morning" after treating life itself as "external" no longer fears life and death but finds peace and tranquillity in whatever happens to him. His vitality "unfolds" on its own and avoids becoming "bogged down" in any form of attachment, including the attachment to life. He is then free to respond to the only stimuli that come his way, and thus he "lives" in the cool "transparency of morning."[5] Let us therefore preserve this strong reading by retaining only the perspective of vitality (the Old Man still has a child's complexion) and refusing to theologize it as we do when we hypostasize the

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subject. Otherwise, the sense of the expression is immediately assimilated by our Western tradition: God, the absolute power who is neither born nor dies, can both kill and engender life. Such are God's primary attributes, which theology aims to define. Instead, if we follow the Chinese interpretation, we raise ourselves to the absolute level of the great process, or *dao*; we "abandon" our own lives, we "eliminate" ("kill") all concern for our own lives, and then we no longer die. We no longer instigate in ourselves anything that can hobble our lives, whereas he who wants to live, "to live to live," is no longer alive. In order to live life fully (completely), we must not cling to life. If we do not take this route, we would not be able to understand two statements: one at the beginning of the chapter which states that "the height of knowledge" is to live out the natural course of our days and not to die prematurely, and the other, a little farther on, which says that the "authentic" man does not know "love life" or "detest death," for "neither does he rejoice at his coming" into the world "nor refuse to return" to the undifferentiated: "easy does he come" and "easy does he go."[6] There is nothing that he is not prepared to "welcome" when it comes. Likewise, there is nothing that he is not disposed to "see off" when it goes. The "authentic" man accepts this coming and going and is life's gracious guest or host in each circumstance.

He who "lives to live" does not live. As always, the text should be read as literally as possible and without fear of its radical implications: that he who clings to life and is always thinking about how "to live more" depletes the source of life within himself. Or that he who is horrified by the idea of death, his own death, and seeks to ward against it thereby closes his life off to the natural respiration through which life constantly replenishes itself in him. He who strives after life depletes his life proportionately. He focuses on his life and makes it his supreme and indeed his only

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value, for all other values are reduced to naught by comparison the moment he learns that his life is threatened and that the dizzying abyss has opened beneath his feet. At bottom, he cares about nothing else: he wants to live, he lives to live, to live more, to live at any price. But by clinging to life he loses the ability to embrace life in all its variability; he forgets how to allow life to come and go within him, as the sea ebbs and flows without and as he inhales and exhales the vital breath within. He loses the knack of "welcoming" the influx of life and "seeing off" the efflux in a single, unified, never-ending gesture of solicitation and compensation. He thus freezes the life within him, paralyzes it, and by his own action hastens its end. Clearly Zhuangzi would have had little use for the self-help formulas that unwittingly reveal a fear of aging and death and try desperately to ward them off. Too much concern with life and anxiety at the idea of losing it ultimately turns against it.

Chinese thought teaches us at every turn that one will never attain the exact center by "holding" or clinging to the Middle (the supreme value of the Confucians) because to cling is to freeze and immobilize and thus to miss the always-moving point of equilibrium, of regulation.[7] Nor is it by clinging to the Void (the supreme value of the Daoists) that we achieve emptiness, for then we reify it as if it were fullness, its opposite, and thus lose the perpetually animating effect of vacuity.[8] Similarly, it is not by grasping at life or becoming obsessed with it that we learn to "feed" it. If Zhuangzi elevates the idea of the vital to an absolute, and indeed because he does so, he cannot treat it as an object of targeted intentionality and possessive will. Life, like God, fundamentally permeates and transcends us. We cannot possess God exclusively but can only wish that his grace be bestowed upon us. The same goes for life, which we cannot possess for ourselves alone.

The other great ancient Daoist text, the *Laozi*, sets this forth as

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a principle: "The reason why Heaven and Earth are able to endure is that they do not live for themselves. This is how they become capable of longevity."[9] "To live by oneself"[b] or "for oneself" is the Laozi's way of saying that one is preoccupied with one's own life and thinks only of it. Heaven and earth, which give generously of themselves to feed others, do not seek longevity for themselves, and that is why they "endure." Living is not an aim in the sense that I want to live, to "live to live," evermore, at any price; it is, rather, a result, just as elsewhere in the *Laozi* we learn that it is not "by showing off" that we "gain renown" or "by imposing ourselves" that we "become illustrious."[10] Regardless of whether the desired result is longevity, glory, or success, it must come about on its own. It must follow from the initial conditions, including both the process upon which we embark and the resources we invest, rather than be sought after as such. Any effort we make to bring about the result is wasteful and stands in the way of the advent *sponte sua* of the desired outcome. He who seeks to force the result expends his potential. This maxim can be read quite broadly: in the end, it is only to the extent that "we do not seek to be great" that we can "achieve greatness."[11] Conversely, when we see people who exhaust their energy, we know that they have attached "too much importance" to "living to live" (*sheng sheng*): they squander their strength when they should "husband" it so as to preserve the vital potential they contain within them.[12] It is bad to "enhance" or "force" life (*yi sheng*),[c] because our "spirit" then uses up our energy to enhance our strength, so that we embark upon the cycle in which increase is the prelude to enfeeblement and apogee is the prelude to decline, and life ends in "premature death."[13]

What we have here, then, is a maxim stated as an absolute principle of existence that is disturbingly similar to a well-known pas-

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sage of the Gospel. It is so similar that one wonders if some anthropological truth is being expressed, a truth couched, in the one case, in terms of the vital and, in the other, in terms of a division of the world into two realms: the here below which intersects with longevity, and the hereafter which corresponds to life everlasting. In any event, the antithetical power is the same, as is the way the attachment to life turns against life. "The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life."[14] Here, "life," which translates the Greek *psuche*, or "soul," but corresponds to the Hebrew *nefesh*, refers in the Greek of the Septuagint and the New Testament both to man the living individual and to that which constitutes his "self," just as in the Daoist text. What is this thing that has but one meaning, that must ultimately be construed in just one way, whether it be in Greek, Hebrew, or Chinese? What is this thing — at once transreligious, transcultural, translinguistic, and transhistorical (because it makes its appearance beyond, or rather prior to, the various articulations that different languages deploy) — that might ultimately allow us to dispense with any "point of view" and grasp that which constitutes the common core, the essence of life? It is this: what is "specific" to life is precisely its ability to elude its own grasp. This cannot be stated as a precept except in a contradictory mode: he who loves life will lose it; and one must renounce life if one wants to live it. Thus is it written in the gospel of John: "Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds."[15] This passage might express the irreducible aspect of life that is compatible with life in all its forms, taking in and setting side by side the merely nutritive life of the vegetal and the fate of man. Thus, looking again at Zhuangzi and translating still more literally, we have "He who kills life does not die; he who lives to live does not live."

(continued...)

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