Birds of Wisdom

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Introduction

The title of this essay requires explanation. While most readers will have some idea of what human wisdom consists in, it is less common to speak of animal and, more specifically, bird wisdom. To be sure, animals do have specific capacities. They are capable, for example, of orienting themselves in space. Moreover, the fact that animals can distinguish different things in the world, for example edible from non-edible food or friends from enemies, is proof of their capacity for judgment. Yet, in what sense can we speak of animal wisdom more generally and bird wisdom in particular? And, assuming that animals can be wise, what is the relationship between human and animal forms of wisdom? In order to approach these questions, it is helpful, in a first step, to engage in a detour and start by turning to human wisdom. This will enable a constructive engagement between human and animal wisdom. Socrates' claim that wisdom consists in an awareness of the limits of one's knowledge serves as the point of departure for the discourse on wisdom (section 1 below). Surprisingly, animals figure prominently as metaphors or symbols of wisdom in the European tradition from Aesop to Hegel (section 2). This article will compare some of the most noteworthy depictions of animals in the European tradition to selected animal representations in the Daoist classic the *Zhuangzi* (section 3). In the conclusion, the focus returns to the question of how best to understand the relationship between human and animal wisdom.

I. Human Wisdom as Limit Consciousness

From its inception in the classical European tradition, the wisdom that a philosopher, that is, a certain kind of human being, longs for has been presented by way of a comparison. Socrates both embodies wisdom and initiates a specific discourse about wisdom or "sophia" (σοφία) in his dialogue the *Apology*. After being proclaimed to be the wisest person in Athens by the oracle of Delphi, Socrates famously tries to disprove the oracle by going around Athens to find human beings wiser than he. He compares himself to others in order to determine whether the oracle, in contrast to his self-proclaimed assessment not to be wise, might be right after all. By going around the city of Athens and assessing the wisdom claimed by politicians, poets, and

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craftsmen—highly recognized professions at the time—Socrates exposes the fact that, while there is knowledge in, for example, the creation of beautiful works of art, the skill of a craftsman, or the sense of power in a politician, the people performing these professions are not wise. They might be knowledgeable and skilled in specific domains, but this is not quite the same as being wise in any substantive philosophical sense. The claim to wisdom by politicians, poets, and craftsmen is exposed by Socrates to be a sign of mere presumptuousness and vanity. Those pretending to be wise are overstepping the scope of what they indeed know. If anything, they inhabit islands of knowledge that they mistakenly consider to be more than islands.

What distinguishes Socrates' ironic wisdom from the other contenders he compares himself with is thus his paradoxical awareness of the limits of what he knows. Thus, Socrates states in what is perhaps the best known self-characterization in the history of European philosophy (in the words given to Socrates by his student Plato): "I know that I don't know" or, correctly translated, "I do not think I know what I do not know."[1] In the Socratic tradition human wisdom (ἀνθρωπίνη σοφία) consists in a form of reflective knowledge that is aware of its own limits. One can conceive of the Socratic account of wisdom as a humility theory that is distinguished from other accounts such as those emphasizing epistemic accuracy and knowledge, including theoretical knowledge concerning how to live well and the practical ability to live a good life.[2]

Rather than focusing on the features that need to be in place for someone to be justified in considering him- or herself wise, I will focus on the role of comparison and the sense of self-awareness that is crucial to the humility theory of wisdom in the Socratic tradition. Arguably the highest of virtues, a person of wisdom has a specific kind of self-awareness. What distinguishes the awareness of the wise person from other forms of awareness is that the former includes a consciousness of the limits of his or her perspective. Drawing on the Socratic account, I want to suggest that wisdom consists in the self-reflective capacity of putting one's perspective, including one's most considered convictions, values, and judgments, into perspective. The person who is wise puts her perspective into perspective by knowing about the limits of her knowledge without thereby claiming to possess a different kind or a higher form of knowledge. Understood in this sense, wisdom is an awareness of a limit and presupposes a shift in self-consciousness. Negatively stated, the wise person is someone who breaks with the all too human tendency of considering her respective convictions, values, and skills to be absolutely true, universally applicable, and of ultimate importance. In contrast, the wise person acknowledges that her way of viewing the world is not the only feasible perspective. In other words, the wise person decenters her perspective on the world, including her own position in it, in light of other possible centers and perspectives. Socrates suggests that a person's capacity for putting her way of viewing the world

into perspective can only be accomplished in light of that person's awareness of the existence or possible existence of other perspectives, both actual and imagined. By putting her perspective into perspective, the person of wisdom engages in a paradoxical task: the more she knows, the more she knows about what she does not know.

One crucial feature that has accompanied the philosophical discourse on wisdom from its inception is this limit consciousness or limit awareness. In contemporary terminology, one could speak of a second-order awareness that supervenes on and alters the status of the primary beliefs, desires, and convictions of someone aspiring to wisdom. The question emerges whether this second order awareness—or second order skepticism—is not purchased for the price of adopting new forms of blindness. Socrates' blind spot, to borrow this optical metaphor, consists in the fact that he considers his philosophical mission, the pursuit of wisdom, all too seriously. For him the search for wisdom is a matter of life and death. Taking the philosophical quest for wisdom a bit too far, he willfully stages the acceptance of his death sentence by the city of Athens since any other choice would prevent him from engaging in the wisdom-seeking obsession characteristic of philosophers. Not only was Socrates' quest perceived as being too serious, but it also presents a provocation to non-philosophers. Nobody would like to be exposed as not being wise. Claiming to understand the limits of your knowledge better than others can also be a form of pretentiousness and arrogance in a game of competition for wisdom that has characterized the philosophical marketplace since its Socratic beginnings.

The philosopher's blind spot can be revealed not by Socratic dialogue, but by decentering the human pursuit of wisdom in contradistinction to the wisdom of non-human forms of life. As stated before, wisdom is a comparative notion in which the person comes to be aware of the limits of his or her perspective. Drawing such a limit requires an awareness of what is outside one's perspective. This raises the question: what is outside the all too human discourse on wisdom? Traditionally this outside has been characterized as the divine in the theological tradition or as an absolute reality beyond all perspectives in the metaphysical tradition starting with Plato's theory of ideas. Indeed, Socrates' appeal to a *daimon* (δαίμων), a spirit or a divine sign telling him what to do, can be interpreted as belonging to the philosophico-theological tradition of overcoming perspectivism when it comes to wisdom since it suggests the existence of a divine knowledge free from all perspectives. Yet, it remains unclear what this notion of a *daimon* refers to and how it relates to human perspectives. The following section will thus suggest a different approach from the theological and the metaphysical approaches to making sense of wisdom. It will investigate the attempt to compare the human perspective to a perspective that is significantly different and yet, in contrast to the divine or metaphysical super-perspectives, distantly related to humans. Since the limit of human

wisdom becomes particularly visible, I want to suggest drawing on a common, but often overlooked trope: animal wisdom.

II. Animal Wisdom from Aesop to Hegel

In addition to comparing different human claims to wisdom and hinting at the wisdom of god(s) or an ultimate reality, Socrates distinguishes human wisdom (ἀνθρωπίνη σοφία) from other forms of non-human wisdom. The Oracle of Delphi, which was received through the priestess Pythia's communication with snakes (!), mentions that "human wisdom is worth little or nothing."[3] This relativization of human wisdom calls into question the previous superlative praise of Socrates as being the wisest. This putting into perspective of human wisdom as something worth little or nothing necessarily raises the question what other forms of non-human wisdom there might be and what they suggest about the pursuit of the philosopher. Socrates himself does not explain what these other forms of wisdom consist in, but he, or rather his scribe Plato, does give us a clue in the form of a series of images. As if engaging in a roleplay, Socrates presents an important metaphorical self-description that reveals the importance of animal perspectives, or the symbolic representation of such perspectives, when it comes to the task of inquiring into the nature of wisdom. In the *Apology* Socrates identifies himself as a "gadfly" (μύωψ), an annoying winged creature that, in spite of its small size, irritates, itches, and stings the Athenian horse, which, due to its sluggishness, is in need of philosophical irritation.[4]

The inner voice of the *daimon* Socrates credits for causing his intuitions—frequently interpreted as either a reference to god and/or the birth of conscience—might as well be thought of as analogous to the ominous birds and other animals used for making prophesies and performing divination practices, a parallel already noticed by Socrates' student Xenophon.[5] In the *Phaedo*, Socrates presents himself as "a fellow servant with the swans" who possesses "a gift of prophecy not inferior to theirs."[6] The conception of the soul as an aviary full of little birds is mentioned in the *Theaetetus* in the context of defining pieces of knowledge as being best thought of as birds in one's head. According to this image, one not only has access to these inner birds, but can also set them free by way of interpreting them properly.[7] Furthermore, in the *Symposium*, a mad Socrates dressed in rags arrives as the latest guest to the drinking and philosophical speech contest. In the early morning hours when "the roosters were crowing already"[8] Socrates discusses the relationship between tragedy and comedy with the comical effect of putting his interlocutors to sleep:

> He was about to clinch his argument, though, to tell the truth, sleepy as they were, they were hardly able to follow his reasoning. In fact, Aristophanes fell

> asleep in the middle of the discussion, and very soon thereafter, as day was breaking, Agathon also drifted off.[9]

Both the comedian poet Aristophanes and the tragedian Agathon have become bored and grown tired from listening to Socrates, this philosophical cock who was notorious for his belated arrivals and all too late—or, depending on one's perspective, all too early—departures. The *Symposium* is one of the few texts with an ironic twist and self-critique of the limits of philosophical discourse in Plato. After having argued his poet friends into sleep, Socrates rises up like a morning bird and flies away to return to his ordinary chores as if nothing had happened.

Representations of philosophical animals, as well as philosophers qua animals, have been surprisingly prominent in reflecting on wisdom. Elevated arguments about human sageliness have been underpinned by a bestiary. Animal metaphors and allegories have complemented dry philosophical definitions of wisdom and fueled them with imaginary force. Birds, and especially the owl, have become the emblem of philosophy. The owl of wisdom has morphed into what Hans Blumenberg has called an absolute metaphor that has given rise to numerous reinterpretations.[10] The owl accompanies the goddess Athena in Greece and her syncretic incarnation Minerva in Roman mythology. Athena and the owl were imprinted on ancient coins such as the Athenian tetradrachm (see Figure 1), which is also referred to as *glaux* (γλαύξ), or little owl.[11]

There has been disagreement on why owls figure prominently as symbols of wisdom. It is too simplistic to attribute this symbolism to the fact

Fig. 1. 465–462 B.C.E., Tetradrachm. https://coinweek.com/ancient-coins/ancient-coins-famous-coin-antiquity/.

that Athens, and especially the area of the Parthenon devoted to worshipping Athena, was home to many owls. As the goddess of wisdom, Athena is usually portrayed as "bright-eyed" (*glaukopis*) to symbolize her wisdom and power of vision.[12] The most striking feature of the owl consists in its large, unmoving dark eyes with their steady gaze and their capacity for nocturnal vision. While most bird eyes are located on the side of the head, the owl's eyes, like those of humans, face forward. The owl thus appeals to humans because its perceptive look is both mesmerizing in its human familiarity and estranging in its animal otherness. Owl eyes are especially hypnotizing because of their penetrating focus. In contrast to humans, owls are not only capable of nocturnal vision, but have the capacity to twist their head up to 270 degrees, which allows them to look not only behind, but also to the left by turning to the right, and vice versa.

Philosophers did not have a monopoly on using bird imagery in Ancient Greece. Birds of wisdom also inhabit the literary imagination. To mention two prominent examples, in Aesop's *Fables* and Aristophanes' comedy *The Birds* owls and other winged animals are omnipresent. Not rarely are they introduced to criticize the philosophical pursuits of wisdom.[13] Going back to the previous discussion of wisdom in terms of perspective shifts, we may say that Aesop's fables use animal characters in order to put the human perspective into perspective.[14] Often this happens with a humorous twist that allows for a decoupling and stepping back from our ordinary human ways of perceiving the world. Animals in fables are talking as if they are human, which is already funny and strange. In the fable "The Owl and the Birds," which is recounted by Aesop and later by La Fontaine, the early modern author of fables, the owl tries to warn other birds against natural as well as human traps and instructs them how to avoid or defuse impediments early on because it knows about these dangers. Of course, the other birds think that the owl is crazy and refuse to listen. When the owl, itself a predatory bird, sees a man with a bow with feathered arrows it warns: "This man will outstrip you with the help of your own feathers, for though he is on foot himself, he will send feathered shafts after you."[15] As usual, the other birds refuse to listen. When they do learn to take the owl's warning seriously, it is too late. Once the owl is recognized for its wisdom and foresight by the other birds who managed to survive, the owl has given up providing advice and from now on only complains. The wisdom-saying "The Eagle who is shot by his own feathers" advanced to become a commonly cited proverb. It suggests that one has been defeated by one's own means, especially by intellectual arrogance, which has prevented one from listening to valuable advice at the right time.

Another literary example in which birds of wisdom figure prominently is Aristophanes' comedy *The Birds* (not to be confused with the Hitchcock movie!). The birds in the play construct a city by the name of

"Cloudcuckooland" (Νεφελοκοκκυγία), a bird utopia that promises an escape from the harm caused by humans. This animal haven also provides refuge for Athenian citizens escaping from the boredom of philosophical and political debates. The birds do not proclaim to possess wisdom, but "muse upon eternal wisdom."[16] As in the above-mentioned case of Aesop's *Fables*, Aristophanes' comedy draws on birds to bring about a shift in human perspective and curb the tendency for human arrogance. The birds mock the inherited religious and mythical knowledge claims and the tendency of humans to take their pursuits, including the search for wisdom, all too seriously.

Aristophanes is known to ridicule the presence of philosophical claims to wisdom in his comedies, most famously in his caricature of Socrates in *The Clouds*. In this play one learns that, in contrast to human cosmologies, the origin of the bird universe is to be found in an egg and that the birds, born from love (Eros), are superior to the notoriously unreliable and constantly quarreling Olympian gods. The birds are fully aware of the utterly non-human advantage of having wings and, in a satirical tone of voice, the bird chorus invites the human audience to engage in a thought experiment, a form of imagined roleplay or inter-species swap:

> Only fancy, dear spectators, had you each a brace of wings,
> Never need you tired and hungry, at a Tragic Chorus stay,
> You would lightly, when it bored you, spread your wings and fly away,
> Back returning, after luncheon, to enjoy your Comic Play."[17]

Human beings are invited here to imagine what it would be like to be as free as a bird. The thought of flying away whenever bored or hungry and to return, recovered, for the continuation of the show clearly seems more appealing than having to sit through and listen to debates concerning wisdom, which, just as in the previous example from Plato's *Symposium*, is exposed as being profoundly boring. The imagination of birds via an inter-species roleplay allows humans to become aware of the limits of the human as well as the divine perspective and to yearn for birdlike capacities, especially the ability to take leave by way of flying away. The imagination of the avian freedom to fly away outplays other perspectives, be they comical or tragic, human or divine.

In the history of Western philosophy, animals surface again and again, often in pivotal passages of classical texts where one would least expect them. This is perhaps most obvious in Hegel. In the opening chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* dedicated to sense certainty, Hegel speaks of animal wisdom. This section is usually read as an epistemological discussion in which Hegel refutes the view that sense experience can adequately be captured by way of theoretical and linguistic abstractions as if our knowledge of the external world would be independent of our concrete practical engagement with this world. The references to animal wisdom are often

overlooked or dismissed as idiosyncratic asides. And yet they are essential and find echoes in later parts of the text dedicated to the spiritual zoo or spiritual animal kingdom (*geistiges Tierreich*) in which Hegel presents humans behaving like animals and vice versa as if in an interspecies parody.

In the chapter on sense certainty, Hegel attributes to animals a sense of practical wisdom that is lost when adopting an overly abstract epistemology. In contrast to the naive epistemological conception of claiming certainty about sense-objects independent of experience, animals have an immediate knowledge and practical grasp of the external world:

> [A]nimals are not shut out from this wisdom but, on the contrary, show themselves to be most profoundly initiated into it; for they do not just stand idly in front of sensuous things as if these possessed intrinsic being, but, despairing of their reality, and completely assured of their nothingness, they fall to without ceremony and eat them up. And all Nature, like the animals, celebrates these open Mysteries which teach the truth about sensuous things.[18]

It is animals who, in devouring external objects as food, mock the artificial arguments about the possibility of skepticism and the artificial striving for certainty by epistemologists. Animal wisdom consists in practically knowing and showing that the proof of the pudding is not in epistemology, but in the eating. For Hegel, animal prey and digestion reveal a better understanding of the "open mysteries" that bread is not just bread, and wine not just wine, but bread and wine are also and foremost nourishment, without the existence of a need for either special religious ceremonies or abstract epistemological theories.

Animals are introduced by Hegel not only as examples of practical wisdom defying abstract rationalizations by world-removed epistemologists. One animal stands for philosophical wisdom and is perhaps Hegel's most semantically laden, a truly absolute metaphor: the Owl of Minerva. Hegel's image of the owl of Minerva has been the topic of much discussion and provoked his successors and adversaries to extract ever more semantic layers. Here is the quotation from the preface to the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Right* in which the metaphorical owl figures prominently:

> When philosophy paints its grey in grey, one form of life has become old, and by means of grey it cannot be rejuvenated, but only known. The owl of Minerva, takes its flight only when the shades of night are gathering.[19]

At first sight, the owl metaphor seems to suggest that philosophical wisdom always comes too late on the scene. Philosophical wisdom comprehends the world after the fact and allows us to analyze what has already happened by painting a colorful and complex reality "gray in gray." This metaphor has often been cited to prove Hegel's implicit admission that philosophical wisdom consists in post-historical recollection. The owl is incapable of color

vision and comes too late to practically transform reality. To conceive of the world from a night bird's perspective is to see it late and from above.

Is the flight of the owl, the *Eulenflug*, thus indeed an escape of the owl, an *Eulenflucht*? Does the flight of the owl of Minerva imply abandoning the possibility that philosophical wisdom could teach us what can and perhaps even what ought to be done? Hegel introduces the image of Minerva to counteract the tendency of *Belehren*, the "*issuing instructions* on how the world ought to be."[20] Hegel, who was already called "*der Alte*," the old chap, by his classmates in the Tübingen seminary, seems to propagate the elderly, "gray" form of wisdom, a resigned form of acceptance and post-hoc interpretation rather than issuing colorful calls for revolutionary change.

It is Hegel's philosophical adversary Schopenhauer who radically reverses the image of the owl of Minerva. In contrast to Hegel, for Schopenhauer the owl is not the bird of wisdom at all. Rather it is a threat to wisdom and the emancipatory power of truth. The owl thrives in the darkness and lives off the refracted light of the moon. It is an emblem not of wisdom and the cunning of reason, but of refracted light and the poisonous force of error:

> [E]very error has a poison inside it. . . . [T]here are no harmless errors, and still less any worthy of reverence, any holy errors. . . . Error can indeed play its games in the night just as owls or bats do; nevertheless, it is more likely that these owls and bats will chase the sun back into the east than that a truth, once recognized and clearly and completely expressed, could be driven back so that some past error could once again occupy its broad seat without disturbance. That is the power of truth: its victory is difficult and troublesome, but once it is achieved, it can never be reversed.[21]

In contrast to Schopenhauser's rejection of Hegel's owl as a metaphor of enlightening vision and philosophical wisdom, Ernst Bloch tries to rescue the progressive dimension of this absolute metaphor. Indeed, Bloch objects to the reputation of Hegel's owl as resembling the reactionary resignation of the elderly Prussian state philosopher. In an attempt to rescue Hegel's image from its reputation of reflecting a necessarily belated philosophical wisdom, of philosophy as the colorless and belated comprehension of reality, Bloch emphasizes that Hegel's conception of philosophical wisdom stands eye to eye with the world spirit, resembled by Napoleon on horseback. To add force to his interpretation, Bloch refers to the passage right before the quotation in which the owl figures prominently. Hegel states: "philosophy, as the thought of the world, does not appear until reality has completed its formative process, and made itself ready" (*Als der Gedanke der Welt erscheint sie erst in der Zeit, nachdem die Wirklichkeit ihren Bildungsprozess vollendet und sich fertig gemacht hat*). The clause "reality has made itself ready" suggests, for the utopian Marxist Bloch, that owl-like philosophizing comes on the scene when the objective conditions are ripe for

future-oriented transformation processes that can be anticipated in the emancipatory wisdom of day- or waking dreams (*Tagträume*). The owl, as a bird of wisdom, is thus not the last, but the first animal to appear on the scene. The "brooding night-symbols" are in fact the "fiery owls of a crazy Minerva who nevertheless wants to glimmer with red dawn."[22] Those who understand the latent progressive tendencies in actual reality can see beyond this reality by correctly interpreting what potentials are nascent in it, only calling for being realized today rather than tomorrow. Herbert Marcuse goes even further than Bloch when suggesting that Hegel's owl is in reality a rooster announcing the new day at dawn.

In his allegory, Hegel implicitly juxtaposes the "gray in gray" with which philosophy paints and Mephisto's depiction of life as the "green of life's golden tree" (*grün des Lebens goldner Baum*) in Goethe's novel Faust. The "gray in gray" with which philosophical wisdom understands reality should not only be understood in contrast to a reality of different colors; a thinking which achieves depicting the "gray in gray" of reality manages to not succumb to black and white thinking. Philosophy in gray refuses to radically separate what is and what is not, what is and what should be. The task of philosophical wisdom consists in a thinking in different shades of gray. It requires the capacity to confront what is as it is, including its unrealized potential, and not fall for easy and perhaps more colorful alternatives that threaten to simplify an inherently complex and normatively ambivalent reality.

Owl-like philosophizing in gray consists, for Hegel and those thinking after Hegel, in the rethinking and the reconnaissance as well as the renaissance or rejuvenation of a reality.[23] Hegel and his contemporaries could still draw on the image of the owl as a symbol of culmination or formation (*Bildung*) and interpret the history as one of progress, the progress in the consciousness of freedom. For the systems-theoretician Niklas Luhmann, who has read his Hegel carefully, this speculative confidence in the owl's gray-in-gray vision has been upgraded by night-vision technology and scientific observation:

> We . . . can now encourage the owl of Minerva to stop hooting in the corner and begin its flight into the night. We have instruments to watch over it, and we know that its journey is a reconnaissance of modern society.[24]

Thus far, in an admittedly haphazard manner, we have only considered references to birds of wisdom from Socrates to Hegel in the European tradition with its culmination in the controversial and yet rich absolute metaphor of the owl of Minerva. It is surprising that birds are particularly prominent in the attempt to elucidate wisdom across different cultural traditions. A philosophical ornithology that would attempt to engage with the metaphor of birds of wisdom at a transcultural level would need to trace the attraction that birds as wisdom symbols have had in the human

imagination across cultural traditions. Birds of wisdom, as well as other wisdom animals, are prominent in all world civilizations. To illustrate this claim let me now, by way of example, turn to exemplary birds in the Chinese tradition and especially in the Daoist classic the *Zhuangzi*.

III. Wisdom Animals in the Zhuangzi

Classical Chinese texts are rich in animal imagery. Starting with the Shang dynasty, there has been nothing short of a bird cult in China.[25] There is uncertainty which bird the *xuanniao* 玄鳥, literally black bird, actually refers to. It is said to have given birth to the Shang, the bird people at the cradle of Chinese civilization. This ancestor bird is likely a form of phoenix, the mythological bird of Chinese legend. Bird motifs are frequently represented on classical archeological findings such as bronze bird-cups, which served as wine vessels (see Figure 2). The *xuanniao* designates any and no bird in particular. As Chen Zhi has argued, it "reflects man's pre-taxonomic belief system."[26]

Birds do play an important role when it comes to reflections about wisdom, including the limits of the philosophical pursuit of wisdom. The classical Daoist text the *Zhuangzi* alone mentions some seventy-five animals, including various mythological and hybrid animals. Bird—as well as fish—imagery is omnipresent in classical Chinese sources and especially in the *Zhuangzi*, where birds and fish appear nineteen times.[27] The function of bird images varies and ranges from being auspicious signs, models of spiritual freedom who are effortlessly moving in their natural environment, depictions of the harm being done when such freedom is taken away, and as personifications of Confucian sages and Daoist anti-sages. The phoenix occurs as a personification—or animalization—of Confucius and Zhuangzi alike, albeit with important differences in the manner of structuring. Whereas for Confucians the human and animal worlds are considered to be hierarchically structured, in the *Zhuangzi* animal imagery often serves to critique, ridicule, and subvert such hierarchies and, in addition, expose them as being rooted in misleading norms and conventions.

It is striking that the opening chapter of the *Zhuangzi* starts with the transformation of the fish Kun into the giant phoenix Peng. The bird-fish allegory in the opening passage can be considered an absolute metaphor in the rich reservoir of references from the classical Chinese tradition. It reads as follows:

> There is a fish in the Northern Oblivion named Kun, and this Kun is quite huge, spanning who knows how many thousands of miles. He transforms into a bird named Peng, and this Peng has quite a back on him, stretching who knows how many thousands of miles. . . . And the blue on blue of the sky—is that the

Fig. 2. Wine vessel (*chio*). Bronze. Height 10 inches, width 8 inches. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 43.24.1. Rogers Fund. Reproduced from Aschwin Lippe, "Two Bird Vessels," in *Archives of the Chinese Art Society of America* 19 (1965): 57–60, at p. 57.

> sky's true color? . . . The cicada and the fledgling dove laugh at him, saying, "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?"

The name Peng 鵬 is a pun and reminds the reader of *feng* 鳳, the phoenix. It consists of the character designating friend or companion, *peng* 朋, and

the character denoting bird, *niao* 鳥. The name can thus be rendered as companion or friendly bird.[28] This story initially creates a sense of awe in the reader about the capacity for transformation and long-distance flight of the mythological bird. However, it quickly reverses this admiration by introducing different forms of animal creatures, who have varying capacities and, based on these capacities, multiple perspectives on and standards for evaluation. The cicada and the dove, and in a subsequent version of the story also the quail, call into question the need for flying as high as the giant bird Peng. As Franklin Perkins has observed, the cicada (*tiao* 蜩) and the dove (*jiu* 鳩) ridicule the giant bird after its transformation from a fish and thus after it switched its environment and the mode of movement from swimming to flying.[29] Peng has left the habitat of the fish to enter the world of birds, even if in a radically different and, from the perspective of the smaller creatures, inflated manner. However, these smaller creatures equally fail to see that, when seen from the perspective of giant Peng, their movements must seem severely limited and ludicrously small.

Zhuangzi's animals demonstrate to the reader the variety of possible ways of viewing and inhabiting the world according to different standpoints, needs, and abilities. Discussing the potential normative implications of Zhuangzi's fish-bird imagery, Zuyan Zhou writes:

> In the fabled world of the *Zhuangzi*, fish and bird play leading roles, each appearing no less than nineteen times. The easy flight of birds in the sky and the jovial movement of fish in the water apparently inspired early Daoists to project their ideal of spiritual freedom in the images of these animals. . . . Four times in this Daoist classic, the bird image personifies a Daoist sage (ZS, 1:2; 12:306; 17:605; 20:680), and another four times it symbolizes Daoist modes of life or Daoist ideals (ZS, 7:293; 15:535; 18:621; 23:774). Although in the *Zhuangzi* bird images as references to common people and ordinary objects are sometimes value-neutral (ZS, 2:93; 6:275; 10:359; 11:389; 33:1106), and on one occasion 'a weird magpie' (*yique* 異鵲) is even presented as a bird of prey to ridicule cannibalism in the human world (ZS, 20:695), they are, by and large, the author's favored symbols to depict his yearning for freedom.[30]

In addition to being a symbol of spiritual freedom and serenity, in the Chinese tradition the giant bird Peng has played a role structurally analogous to the metaphor of the owl of Minerva in the West. It has become an "absolute metaphor" that served as a reference point for competing interpretations by generations of philosophers, literati, and poets engaged in reflecting on wisdom as well as the foolishness or impossibility of wisdom.[31]

The "gray in gray" that Hegel's philosophical owl paints when a form of life has grown old is mysteriously echoed, as if from a distance, by the "blue on blue" which Peng perceives when moving through the air after having left behind the form of life of fish Kun. Bird Peng has often been interpreted as the depiction of sagely wisdom due its capacity to soar above the earth

with its small point of view and limited perspective.[32] And yet, the text deconstructs the very desirability of this conception of wisdom in questioning whether the "blue on blue" perceived by Peng up high is indeed the true (*zheng* 正) color of the sky. The detail-blindness that comes with flying high is ridiculed by the laughing cicada, the dove, and the quail. These significantly smaller and yet also winged creatures consider the excessive dimension and resources needed for Peng's gigantic body to engage in long-distance flight to be pathetic when compared to their comparatively small, but at least as fulfilling, playful and nourishing exercises in aviation. From their smaller perspective, Peng's flight seems detached from the plants and the ground that constitute their habitat. It is equally removed from the original aquatic habitat of fish Kun. Peng has changed one medium (water) for another (air) and remains distant and familiar in his friendliness. The absolute metaphor leaves it open whether Peng is indeed to be considered as a model of achieved wisdom and ability. Bird Peng can also be considered to fall short of free and easy wandering (*xiaoyaoyou* 逍遙遊), the heading of the opening chapter, because Peng is striving for a definite goal: reaching the Southern Oblivion, and is thus not capable of wandering beyond these extensive, but ultimately also limited, spatial and form-specific boundaries.

Starting with bird Peng, Zhuangzi's animals present modes of practical wisdom. They had a particular role to play as models of what it means to live a spontaneous life that is embedded in its natural environment and focused on proximate experience rather than long-term planning and strategizing. What distinguishes the wisdom of animals from that of humans is that the former are naturally or spontaneously as they are while humans need to undergo a reverse education by learning how to forget the artificial features of cultivation. Zhuangzi's animals do not have magical or spiritual powers. They are just what they are and do just what they do without humans fully understanding what they do when they do it and what they see when they see it. In this capacity of seeing animals as being both familiar but also significantly different, of being birds but also distant companions, they are a model of a "wisdom without wisdom" or an "anti-wisdom," since they act according to their nature without having to force themselves to become something different through moral education and hideous cultivation for the purpose of acquiring wisdom. The Zhuangzi explicitly warns against the dangers of an excessive pursuit of wisdom (知). Wisdom creates disorder and easily turns into its opposite: "wisdom turns into cunning, like a kind of gradual poisoning, rigidifying and unmooring 'hard' and 'white,' disjoining and muddying 'sameness' and 'difference,' and ends up casting the people into a muddle of disputation. Thus it is that each and every great disorder of the world is caused by the love of wisdom."[33]

The depiction of Zhuangzi's animals is consciously imaginary and presents animals as sometimes clever, but often as ridiculous, suicidal, and

foolish in their self-assertive claims to wisdom. Most importantly in our context, these depictions are in contrast to the presentation of the search for wisdom as being deadly serious that one often encounters in philosophy. The closest parallel of Zhuangzi's depiction of animals in the European tradition is that of Aesop's fables and Aristophanes' comedies.[34] In contrast to the classical European tradition of fables, however, Zhuangzi's stories do not necessarily proclaim a moral lesson of the story as much as they may open up avenues for exploring possibilities for putting one's perspective into perspective.

Zhuangzian animals are self-consciously depicted as imaginary and funny creatures.[35] They have invented funny names, they often talk, they are sometimes strangely deformed, and they behave in a way that is in many ways all too human. Imagining how animals partake in discussions of philosophical questions as if they were human is a hilarious pursuit that performatively undermines the boring practice of philosophical debate. Zhuangzi's animals expose the very project of serious philosophizing about wisdom to be an ultimately futile, but sometimes also funny pursuit, at least when seen from an estranged outside perspective. The reader is thereby implicitly invited to imagine humans, especially philosophers, as if from the perspective of the animal world and vice versa. Animals serve as reminders who illustrate that the very human pretension to wisdom is both foolish and quite comical once imagined from an animal perspective. The liberating aspect of using animal-human roleplay consists in freeing humans from the pretentious and self-contradictory desire of wanting to become wise.

Conclusion

In conclusion, one may ask: why are animals, and especially certain birds, symbols of wisdom? What is it that makes birds a transcultural reference point in the discourse about what it means to be wise? Ultimately, the answer may be rooted in anthropology rather than a specific cultural tradition. Human beings are beings of lack. From a biological perspective, humans are born prematurely, featherless and incapable of flying. Humans are both incapable of and attracted to avian flight. Human prostheses such as airplanes can approximate, but not satisfy, this ornithological desire for avian forms of life.

Birds are what humans frequently see and hear, but do not completely understand. We see them, but do not *see like them*. We see them move, but *cannot move like them*. Birds are witnesses and spectators of us who, by way of their distinctive form of existence, put into perspective our given perspectives. They performatively "teach" humans to take less importantly their tendency to take the human standpoint, and the desire for human wisdom, to be the most important goal. Birds fascinate and we encounter them in attitudes ranging from awe and wonder to anxiety. At the bottom of

this fascination is the imagination of a vertical perspective and, at the same time, a virtuously gliding movement that seems to defy gravity. The possibility of lifting off and regarding the world from a top-down celestial perspective is qualitatively different from the experience of creatures whose movements are, for the most part, restricted to walking on a horizontal plane with occasional episodes of swimming and crawling. Humans are beings who are incapable of flying and whose vision is, for the most part, directed horizontally rather than vertically. The owl, in particular, is appealing as a bird of wisdom because it is equipped with night vision and can thus see what remains hidden from daylight vision. This constitutes the owl's mysterious and often uncanny, but also visionary and penetrating, gaze.

Contemporary philosophers have started to take the animal perspective more seriously in recent years.[36] The American philosopher Thomas Nagel raises the question "What is it like to be a bat?" Human beings do not have experiential insight into the experience of seeing as a bat sees if one can speak at all of "seeing" for an animal that uses a high-frequency sonar system to orient itself. The bat emits sounds beyond our hearing range—and interprets the echoes that will be reflected by objects within range to acquire a sense of orientation. This sense is rather distinct from the human sense of orientation. As an acoustic phenomenon, we might conjecture that the bat "calls" or "hears" what a room is like rather than seeing it. In short, we know that there must be some way in which we know what it feels like to be a bat, even though we will, as humans, never really know what it is like. We can imagine what it might be like for us, but not what it would be like for the bat. Ultimately, the bat remains for us, in spite of increasing biological knowledge, "a fundamentally *alien* form of life."[37] How does our knowledge of an alien form of life that we know of but do not understand matter?

Instead of a formal conclusion and in order to return to Minerva's owl, a brief reference to the visual arts could prove helpful. In addition to numerous other animals, Picasso had a profound artistic as well as personal appreciation for owls (see Figure 3). He depicted them again and again and saw in the owl the bird of both wisdom and death. In Picasso's owls, the depicted winged creatures often take on human form or humans take on the form of owls. Picasso, himself a crazy bird, frequently lived with rescued owls over extended periods of time, "dialogued" with them, and watched them prey on mice and small cats. He felt an elective affinity to owls and mimicked their screams. His owl depictions masquerade the clear-cut boundary between animal and human existence. In these works, traditional anthropocentric perspectives are being reversed and the spectator invited to imagine the animal as human and vice versa. In the photograph in Figure 3 it is not so clear who is imagining whom: Picasso his owl or the owl her Picasso or the painted owls hovering in the background of both Picasso and the adopted owl? It does appear, though, that Picasso and the owl have a

Fig. 3. Picasso and Owl (1947). Photo by Michel Sima. https://aarkangel.wordpress.com/2018/09/16/picassos-menagerie/.

strikingly similar gaze. They invite the spectator to rethink the Socratic tendency of considering the pursuit of wisdom all too seriously. Imagining animals as humans and humans as animals allows one to decentralize the human perspective and thereby reveal the philosopher's blind spot.

Notes

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1 – Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1997), *Apology*, 21d.

2 – For an overview of current debates about wisdom see Keith Lehrer, B. Jeannie Lum, Berlz A. Slichta, and Nicholas D. Smith, eds., *Knowledge,*

Teaching, and Wisdom (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996), and Sharon Ryan, "Wisdom," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2018 edition, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/wisdom/.

3 – Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. Cooper, *Apology*, 23b.

4 – In the *Meno*, Socrates is being compared to an electric ray, a fish that silences other creatures, thereby causing them to step back from their tendency to respond without deliberation (*Meno*, 80a–c, 84b–c). When discussing Socrates in terms of the images used to identify him—the midwife, the gadfly, and the electric ray—Hannah Arendt calls attention to the fact that Socrates has nothing to teach and insists that the simile of the electric ray is only fitting if it is taken to suggest that he himself is equally paralyzed by the questions raised: "the electric ray paralyzes others only through being paralyzed itself . . . . It isn't that, knowing the answers myself, I perplex other people. The truth is rather that I infect them also with the perplexity I feel myself" (cited in Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* [San Diego: Harcourt, 1978], p. 172).

5 – Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, trans. Amy L. Bonnette, introd. by Christopher Bruell (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), I 3.

6 – Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. Cooper, *Phaedo*, 85b.

7 – Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. Cooper, *Theaetetus*, 197c–d. The belief that revelatory madness is best characterized in terms of birds chirping in one's head may be a precursor to the modern attribution of the German idiom to "have a bird" (*einen Vogel haben*) or "showing someone the bird" (*den Vogel zeigen*) for signaling to them that they are mad.

8 – Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. Cooper, *Symposium*, 223c.

9 – Ibid., 223d.

10 – Hans Blumenberg has launched the promising research program of a genealogy of absolute metaphors, i.e., metaphors that frequently recur and whose meaning is too inexhaustible to be translated into non-metaphorical definitions. This project is an original alternative to Hegel's concept of absolute concepts as well as conceptual histories. See Hans Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, trans. Robert Savage (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), p. 13. From a methodological perspective, the present article draws on Hans Blumenberg's metaphorological approach and extends it to an intercultural level. Tracing the knowledge-constitutive role of absolute metaphors in different cultures allows for the revelation of the contingencies and parallels as well as potentials for constructive engagement between

different metaphorological traditions, as is being done here by focusing on birds as wisdom animals in China and the European tradition. Interestingly, Blumenberg himself has traced and interpreted the depiction of the lion, the most tender and aggressive king of animals, from Aesop to Thomas Mann in *Löwen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 2001), translated by Kari Driscoll as *Lions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

11 – Socrates' sparring partner in the *Republic*, just like Plato's elder brother, is called "Glaucon" or owl-like.

12 – For representations of Athena as the goddess of culture and civilization see David Kinsley, *The Goddesses' Mirror: Visions of the Divine from East and West* (Albany: State University of New York press 1989), pp. 139–164.

13 – It is often assumed that animals inhabit fables, because they were meant to be used to teach children important life lessons for many generations. According to this assumption, animals are simply anthropomorphized depictions of certain human characteristics. The fox is cunning, the lion is brave, the sheep is timid, and so on. Animal representations might allow easier identification for children, for whom many animal stories were written. However, this is not a sufficient explanation for the abundant presence of animals in what is sometimes considered to be wisdom literature. Rather than allowing for identification, animals, in their strange familiarity and related otherness, are tropes of decentering human perspectives.

14 – For a related interpretation on this issue see Tua Korhonen, "A Question of Life and Death: The Aesopic Animal Fables on Why Not to Kill," *Humanities* 6 (2017): 29.

15 – *Aesop's Fables*, trans. Laura Gibbs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), fable 488. See also fable 44 for another story of a bird being shot by his own feathers.

16 – Aristophanes, *Peace, Birds, Frogs* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924), p. 690.

17 – Ibid., p. 785.

18 – Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 109.

19 – Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 23.

20 – G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 23.

21 – Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 58.

22 – Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1995), vol. 1, p. 93.

23 – "This is the meaning of philosophy as Nach-denken, afterthought" (Shlomo Avineri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1972], p. 129).

24 – Niklas Luhmann, "Social Systems Writing Science" (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 488.

25 – Chen Zhi, "A Study of the Bird Cult of the Shang People," *Monumenta Serica* 47 (1999): 127–147. The first mentioning of the *xuanniao* myth is from the *Shijing* (Book of Odes) poem: "heaven commissioned the black bird to descend and give birth to the Shang. (His descendants) dwelt in the vast land of Yin."

26 – Ibid., p. 142.

27 – For an overview of bird and fish imagery from classical to later literati writings see Zuyan Zhou's chapter "Bird and Fish" in his *Daoist Philosophy and Literati Writings in Late Imperial China* (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2013), pp. 173–212.

28 – In his translation and commentary, Brook Zyporyn emphasizes the importance of paradox in the names Kun and Peng. While Kun combines etymological allusions to large and small proportions, Peng combines a reference to species difference (human-bird) and familiarity (friend). See Zyporyn, *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings, with Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis: Hackett 2009), pp. 58–59.

29 – Franklin Perkins, "Of Fish and Men: Species Difference and the Strangeness of Being Human in the Zhuangzi," in Roger T. Ames and Takahiro Nakajima, eds., *Zhuangzi and the Happy Fish* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press 2015), pp. 182–205, 188.

30 – Zhou, *Daoist Philosophy and Literary Writings in Late Imperial China*, p. 176. ZS refers to Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩, comp., *Zhuangzi ji shi* 莊子集釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2004).

31 – One of the most prominent adaptations of the Peng myth is that by the Tang dynasty poet Li Bai in his poem "Dapengniao fu" (大鵬鳥賦).

32 – Julian Pas, "Chuang Tzu's Essays on 'Free Flight Into Transcendence' and 'Responsive Rulership'," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 8, no. 4 (1981): 479–496.

33 – Zyporyn, *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings*, p. 220.

34 – The role of humor in antiquity was quite different from contemporary usage, even though there are parallels to *Schadenfreude*, the joy in others' misfortune. For an analysis of classical Greek humor see Stephen Halliwell, *Greek Laughter: A Study of Cultural Psychology from Homer to Early Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). On the specific forms of humor in the *Zhuangzi* see Hans-Georg Moeller and Paul J. D'Ambrosio, *Genuine Pretending: On the Philosophy of the* Zhuangzi (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

35 – The critical-imaginary element in the *Zhuangzi* is highlighted by Romain Graziani, "Combats d'animaux: Reflexions sur le bestiaire du Zhuangzi," *Extrême-Occident* 26 (2004): 55–87.

36 – The Western tradition depicts the animal primarily as lacking something that humans are claimed to have. Animals cannot speak, therefore they do not think and thus do not exist. This inference is suggested in the Cartesian conception of animals as machines and extends to Heidegger's claim that animals are poor in word, that they are without history, lack hands, dwelling, and especially language, dimensions that are constitutive of human *Dasein*. The mainstream philosophical tradition in Europe assumes that since animals are incapable of linguistically grounded higher orders of reflection, they could not be considered candidates for wisdom, either. Adorno's call for a solidarity with animal life is a noteworthy exception to the denigration of the animal. More recently, the question of the relationship between the animal and the pursuit of wisdom has returned to the philosophical forefront and initiated an "animal turn" through, among others, the late work of Jacques Derrida and Giorgio Agamben. Derrida's investigation is triggered by his awareness of being seen by his cat and, as a consequence, becoming aware of his forgotten animal nature, while Agamben deconstructs the dominant attempt of silencing animal perspectives in the tradition of Western philosophy. In spite of their timely intervention, Derrida, Nagel, and Agamben gloss over the important positive references to animals in general and animal wisdom in particular that are dispersed throughout the Western tradition at the intersection of philosophy and literature. See Nandita Batra and Mario Wenning, eds., *The Human-Animal Boundary: Exploring the Line in Philosophy and Fiction* (Lanham: Lexington 2018).

37 – Thomas Nagel, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat," *Philosophical Review* 83, no. 4 (1974): 435–450, 438.