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To cite this article: Tony Fry (2007) The Futuring of the Ancient: Review of François Jullien, Vital Nourishment: Departing from Happiness, Design Philosophy Papers, 5:3, 165-168

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/144871307X13966292017676>



Published online: 29 Apr 2015.



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REVIEW

The Futuring of the Ancient

Review of François Jullien, *Vital Nourishment: Departing from Happiness*

Tony Fry

This essay presents a review of François Jullien's book *Vital Nourishment: Departing from Happiness* (translated by Arthur Goldhammer; Zone Books, distributed by MIT Press, 2007, 176 pages).

The value of comparative philosophy as delivered by François Jullien is manifold. Certainly it brings what the western reader unknowingly knows to light via the power of ancient Chinese thought, which is to say it makes the metaphysical baggage we all carry from the Greeks on through the Enlightenment visible. But more than this, Jullien also draws our attention to fleeting insights, to subtle glimpses that are the product of knowing from experience, which are more than just reifications of revelatory knowledge. And then there is what arrives by a kind of enabled chance that is at the core of so much Chinese thought.

His first book in translation (1995) – *The Propensity of Things: Towards a History of Efficacy in China* – is a very

good example of Jullien's uncanny ability to deliver more than he intends. Unquestionably, he went beyond his aim of bringing original readings of ancient Chinese philosophy into contemporary culture to both reveal its value and counter the ways it had been dismissed by many Enlightenment thinkers, not least Hegel. However, and unbeknown to Jullien, what he had to say directly connected to ideas around 'ontological design' that were starting to emerge in the USA and Australia – to which he made an unintended but significant contribution. There is, of course, a link – the writing of Martin Heidegger, especially on 'The Thing' (first presented in a lecture at Bremen in 1949 and subsequently published in *Poetry, Language, Thought* in 1971). During the time period he was exploring this topic – the 1950s – Heidegger was also investigating the ideas of *Daoist* thinker *Lao Tzu* and Asian philosophy in general. Although he acknowledged this debt at the time, the influence has been shown to be far more substantial than was indicated.¹

One of the still largely unrecognised fundamentals of sustain-ability is the necessity of sustaining the self. Again this imperative flows through Jullien's concerns in *Vital Nourishment* (which is actually the third in a trilogy on the topic of 'living' – books one and two have not been translated). And again 'sustaining the self' overlaps with Jullien's agenda as expressed by the notions of 'feeding the body' and 'one's life' – his views it should be said are totally at odds with a 'New Age' appropriation of eastern thought for subjectivist preoccupations with 'personal development', 'pata-therapy' and 'the body'. In fact a large part Jullien's book was the result of his recoil against this degeneration and commodification of the care of self – as explicitly stated in his opening chapter. From the outset he gives centrality to work attributed to Zhaungzi (circa 370–286 BCE), and to later exegetes of his work.

Jullien's primary focus on 'feeding the body' and thereafter, 'one's life', centres on the act of nourishment – indivisibly an act of self-sustainment. He makes clear that to preserve one's life, to secure it, to act toward vital change, is the obverse of the preoccupation with the self demonstrated by much contemporary western culture, especially its overt and closet 'New Age' factions. Self-preservation via the ideas Jullien mediates does not mean 'forcing life to sustain itself to endure' but rather giving way to its vitality as a way of living. This implies being open to (one's) life and acknowledging that one cannot 'hold onto one's life' by 'clinging and grasping'. As is recognised by Jullien, the idea that in order to have a life, one's life has to be risked, is perhaps a universal 'anthropological' truth – it appears to transcend time and culture. Certainly, the statement is found in many languages, times and places, including ancient China, the Christian Bible (via the words of John) and in the Enlightenment, as expressed by Hegel in his *Philosophy of Right*.

So framed 'feeding the body' come from, goes to and transcends the self by connecting to the essence of one's nature lodged

within the individual and global unity of *dao*. This is to say the difference through which the self realises its being, comes out of, and goes to, the unity of that process that is *dao*. The divisions of mind, body, spirit all dissolve in flows of energy, animatory forces and transformations that *dao* designates. Although the language is very different, there is again a resonance with sustain-ability – which equally recognises the indivisibility of commonality (that which fundamentally sustains) and difference (that which sustainment enables).

Vital Nourishment has twelve chapters – the first seven lead to the heart of the book. Chapter eight is pivotal and turns on key readings of Zhuangzi, especially his ‘On the Principle of Vital Nourishment’. The remaining four are a series of interesting qualifications. Again, it becomes clear that the ancient world can present ideas to the late modern world that resonate and have purchase with the present. Jullien makes this point powerfully in his critique of the western pursuit of happiness. This longstanding mission is argued to be predicated on unhappiness as the normative condition, defined in a binary relation to what is lacking – happiness. As an alternative to this fated quest Jullien accepts Zhuangzi’s view (together with Laozi) that something more fundamental and embracing should be adopted – ‘feeding one’s life’ and being open to what life presents.

In restating the imperative of ‘feeding one’s life’ (as an enduring statement with Chinese culture past and present) the indivisibility of the act from vital nourishment (and sustaining the self) becomes grounded in the effort toward a healthy and long life.

The other absolutely contemporary message that travels across time and flows into the need for sustain-ability is Zhuangzi’s case for the relinquishment of ‘plenitude’. Essentially he argued that being a prisoner of ‘things’ produces a diminishment of living – one is bonded by what one owns as much as being enabled by it. Freedom thus comes out of less rather than more. What becomes increasingly clear in the present is that excess and abject poverty are equally destructive of the very ground upon which the ‘freedom to live’ stands. One final point is very telling, and takes us back to a misplaced New Age search for the true self. What Jullien’s reading Zhuangzi makes apparent is that the search for individual authenticity, in conditions of profound inauthenticity, is indivisible from the avoidance of responsibility.

The richness of *Vital Nourishment* has to be encountered to be comprehended. To gain from it is not merely an act of passive reading but active production – one has to read into the book, that is bring something to it, to find its true value. So approached, it provides two valuable insights: to learn about sustain-ability one has to look in non-obvious places; and, the ancient world still has much to teach the future (for all our excessive instrumental cleverness, wisdom remains a rarity).

Note

1. Reinhard May, *Heidegger's Hidden Sources* (trans. and additional essay by Graham Parkes), London: Routledge, 1996.