

# Platforms of contemplation in times of confinement: a philosophico-physiological reflection

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## Background

The forced confinement due to the Covid-19 pandemic has been framed as a condition from which to reassess modern life's habits and values, and build upon such reassessment in order to reimagine a more sustainable and equitable future.

A ubiquitous feature of such confinement has been the transition from physical/presential modes of expression and interaction to virtual ones, typically supported through electronic platforms. In the current conditions of physical distancing and confinement, electronic-platform culture presents a tension between two opposite but coexisting aspects – isolation and connectedness – both of which it seems to amplify: the former through its implication of physical distance, the latter through its global reach.

Here I propose to reflect on today's recourse to electronic platforms under conditions of physical confinement in light of physiological evidence and philosophical ideas, in particular the work of ancient Chinese thinker Zhuang Zhou (369-286 BC).

## Focus

A prominent feature of Zhuang Zhou's thought is the emphasis on contemplation and spontaneity as vehicles for the achievement of virtue and wisdom. In his writings, Zhuang Zhou maintains that 'the perfect man does nothing, the true Sage performs nothing, beyond gazing at the universe. In the hope of attaining, by contemplation, a like spontaneity'.

Zhuang Zhou's emphasis on wisdom as associated with the attainment of spontaneity (as opposed to with deliberate action) echoes Zhuang Zhou's Greek contemporary Aristotle's (384-322 BC) account of ethical virtue as acquired through automatic habit (as opposed to through wilful effort). Similarly, Zhuang Zhou's emphasis on spontaneity and automaticity resonates with the prominent role of involuntary mechanisms in human physiology, as exemplified by the autonomic nervous system, which, bypassing consciousness, agency, and free will, ensures human survival through largely unconscious, automatic processes. In other words, the individual's survival relies on automaticity, unconscious detachment, and inaction, which are therefore as central to physiology as they are to Zhuang Zhou's philosophy.

## Relevance

Zhuang Zhou's stress on the link between virtue and spontaneity continues to be relevant today, as its emphasis on the pursuit of contemplation and inactivity challenges the intuitive understanding of the human individual as defined by conscious, deliberate, and wilful choices, and highlights instead the centrality of unconscious, non-deliberate, and automatic physiological mechanisms that largely regulate human survival. Furthermore, Zhuang Zhou's emphasis on the pursuit of contemplation and inactivity as the path to wisdom resonates with sections of the rhetoric permeating the discourse around the current pandemic-related forced confinement.

## Aim (work in progress)

In my work in progress I am exploring the possibility of bringing Zhuang Zhou's theory of spontaneity and inactivity into dialogue with physiological mechanisms, as they relate to the use of electronic platforms under conditions of confinement. By pitting Zhuang Zhou's intuitions against Aristotle's theory and today's state of affairs I aim to prompt reflection on ways in which the specific circumstances of the current pandemic affected the production of – and the cultural practices surrounding – electronic literature, as well as how literature may in turn orientate the ways in which the specific circumstances of the pandemic are framed and experienced.



source: wikipedia (image in public domain)

Zhuang Zhou (369-286 BC)