“Nothing” as Head and “Things” as Beginning: Zhuangzi and Shen Dao on Equalizing Things*

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Abstract

Starting from “equalizing all things”, Shen Dao develops the life philosophy of “rolling and swirling along with things” and the political theory of respecting the law and emphasizing the people. Based on “everything exists”, his theory of equalizing things shows respect to differences and the objective value of things, requiring to act along with things at the cost of agency. Yet Zhuangzi believes in an ultimate state when “before things exist”, and tries to equalize “things” with “nothing”. His philosophy embraces a complete picture from before the beginning of things to after there are already things, in which “things” are merely the temporary appearance of the Creation-Transformation in an inferior level. Having found the origin of “things”, i.e. “the Way”, the spirit is able to go beyond limits of things toward the state of independently rambling.

Key Words: Equalizing things, Before things exist, Nine changes, Transformation of things, Zhuangzi, Shen Dao

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1. Introduction

Zhuangzi talks about equalizing things (*qi-wu* 齊物) in his “Discussion on Equalizing things” (*Qiwulun* 齊物論), and in “The World under Heaven” (天下) he mentions that Peng Meng (彭蒙), Tian Pian (田駢) and Shen Dao (慎到) “take equalizing all things as beginning” (齊萬物以為首; Zhuangzi talks about “I lost myself” (吾喪我), “not knowing” (不知)1), Shen Dao also says “to abandon intellect and do away with self” (棄知去己)2). Zhuangzi argues “the lightning up of rights and wrongs is the reason why the Way is flawed” (是非之彰，道之所以虧)3), and Shen Dao “puts aside both right and wrong” (舍是與非) as well. Shen Dao being so similar to Zhuangzi in his articulation of equalizing things, he is criticized in “The World under Heaven” that he did “not really know the Way” (不知道), but only heard something of the Way. Then where do the differences lie between Zhuangzi’s equalizing things and that of Shen Dao?

I have seen two separate viewpoints concerning this problem. One sees “Discussion on Equalizing Things” as a piece of work of Shen Dao, which was edited into the book of Zhuangzi by mistake. This opinion essentially sees no difference between “Discussion on Equalizing Things” and Shen Dao’s account of equalizing things. Represented by Fu Sinian (傅斯年), Rong Zhaozu (容肇祖) and Gu Jiegang (顧頡剛), this viewpoint takes evidence from the formulation of thoughts of Shen Dao and alike in “The World under Heaven”. Another support is from *The Grand Scribe’s Records* (史記) mentioning that Shen Dao wrote twelve discussions (十二論), and “Discussion on Equalizing Things” (齊物論) is a “discussion” (論)4). The other viewpoint argues

1) “Gaptooth asked questions of Wang Ni, four time asked and four times he did not know.” (齧缺問于王倪，四問而四不知), see *Responding to the Emperors and Kings* (應帝王) and *Discussion on Equalizing Things* (齊物論). Wang Xianqian (王先謙), *Collected Commentaries of Zhuangzi* (莊子集解) (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1987), 70.
3) “Discourse on Equalizing Things”. In *Collected Commentaries*, 17.
4) Gu Jiegang (顧頡剛), “Inferring the Age of Lao Zi from Master Lü’s Spring and Autumn Annals” (從呂氏春秋推測<老子>之成書年代, in *Doubting Antiquity* 4, 古史辨 第四冊 (Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Press, 1982), 8, 505-506. Today there are still scholars arguing for the identity between Zhuangzi and Shen Dao’s “equalizing things”, and even believing Zhuangzi was “recognizing his own school” in assessing Shen Dao, see Ma Zuowu (馬作武), “Shen Dao’s View on Law” (慎到的法律觀), *Jurist* (法學家) no. 6 (2003): 50.
for the differences between the two theories of equalizing things despite their superficial similarities. Scholars, such as Tang Junyi (唐君毅) and Xu Fuguan (徐復觀) hold this view. Xu suggested Shen Dao’s theory of equalizing things loses the spirit of the subject, which is a reasonable point yet not a sufficient answer to this problem.

In the present discussion of the problem, some scholars tend to disparage Shen Dao’s account of equalizing things in order to prove Zhuangzi’s superiority. This view suggests that Shen Dao tries to even out differences among things and force them to be equal, while Zhuangzi recognizes the differences, respects things for their distinct values, and claims to take equal care of things. Yet I consider this interpretation of Zhuangzi’s equalizing things fails to reach the height of Zhuangzi’s very theory and actually falls into Shen Dao’ view. Shen Dao does not diminish differences; on the contrary he has a true understanding of differences and values of distinct things. Without understanding Zhuangzi’s theory of equalizing things, it is hard to make sense of its difference with Shen Dao’s theory.

Here I will first explain Shen Dao’ theory of equalizing things in order to make account of its divergence with Zhuangzi’ view.

2. Shen Dao’s Doctrine and the Position of Equalizing Things in It

1) Text materials

There are two types of materials about Shen Dao: the first are fragments of his writings, and the other are records mentioning him in books of history and works

of other ancient philosophers. The fragments include seven existing passages of Shenzi (慎子), lost texts collected from works of ancient philosophers and genus-books, and “Shenzi Speaks of Reverence and Thrift” (慎子曰恭俭) in Bamboos in Shanghai Museum (上博簡). Other figures’ narrations and comments on Shen Dao’s doctrine can be seen in “The World Under Heaven” (天天下) in Zhuangzi, “Against the Twelve Master”, “Discussion on Heaven” and “Undoing Fixation” in Xunzi (荀子·非十二子, 天論, 解蔽), “Censuring Propensity” in Hanfeizi (韓非子·難勢), “Cautious about Propensity” in Master Lü’s Spring and Autumn Annals (呂氏春秋·慎勢), etc. Moreover, Shen Dao’s life and activities are mentioned in “Stratagems of Chu” in Stratagems of Warring States (戰國策·楚策), “Tian Jing and Zhong Wan” and “Biographies of Mengzi and Xun Qing” in The Grand Scribe’s Records (史記·田敬仲完世家, 孟子荀卿列傳), and “On Confucianists” in Discussion on Salt and Iron (鹽鐵論·論儒). The following discussion is based mainly on fragments of Shenzi and “The World under Heaven” in Zhuangzi.

2) Equalizing things and the life philosophy of “rolling and swirling along with things” (與物宛轉)

The primary point of Shen Dao’s philosophy is equalizing things. He believes that “everything has something acceptable and something unacceptable” (萬物皆有所可, 有所不可), affirming distinct values of each thing on the basis of their differences. Shen Dao argues that nothing is perfect: “Heaven is capable of sheltering but not of bearing up, earth is capable of bearing up but not of sheltering. The Great Way is capable of embracing all things but not of discriminating among them.” (天能覆之而不能載之, 地能載之而不能覆之, 大道能包之而不能辯之.) Even the most superior things, i.e., Heaven, earth and the Great Way have both acceptable and unacceptable things,

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7) The Shenzi mentioned in “Lu kingdom wanted Shenzi to be general” in “Gaozi II in Mencius (《孟子·告子下》)” was not Shen Dao, see Li Xueqin (李學勤): “On Shenzin the Chu Bamboos” (《談楚簡<慎子>》). Chinese Culture (《中國文化》). no.2 (2007): 43-45.
9) Ibid.
and are therefore equal in this sense. The alleged “equalizing things” means this very cognition of “nothing that is not acceptable” (無物不可).

(1) “To make a choice is to lose the all-pervading; when any one thing is taught, something else is blocked out. But the Way excludes nothing” (選則不遍，教則不至，道則無遺) as a principle of action

Shen Dao suggests a principle of action based on “equalizing things” that To make a choice is to lose the all-pervading; when any one thing is taught, something else is blocked out. But the Way excludes nothing. (選則不遍，教則不至，道則無遺者矣) 10)

Artificial choices presuppose the distinction of good and bad, and when this is chosen that is lost. Since everything has something acceptable, “this” enjoys no superiority over “that”; therefore, choices become unnecessary. To choose is to lose and thus to miss universality. Not to choose means nothing lost. Teaching is established on a hierarchy of the teacher and the taught; thus, if there is no such hierarchy, there is no need for teaching. The existence of teaching means there is something left to be acquired, so “when any one thing is taught, something else is blocked out”. And when there is no teaching, there is nothing blocked out.

Since men do not need to “choose” and “teach” actively, what should we do then? Actually, the key is not what to do but rather the very action “to do”. Therefore, Shen Dao speaks of “The Way excludes nothing”. Here, like “choosing” and “teaching”, “Way” is a verb, or more precisely, a gerund. It is not the philosophical “Great Way”, but rather “walking along the Way”. There is no point in deciding which path to choose, and the key lies in “acting” rather than “choosing”. Moreover, born in the world, men usually have no choice facing determined circumstances. The “Way” men walked along is predetermined by external situations, and walking along it guarantees nothing would be excluded. This is “following whatever is unavoidable” (緣不得已). 11) This philosophy has no faults, since it “has no worries about

10) Ibid.
establishing oneself” (無建己之患), “Moving only when pushed, proceeding only when pulled” (推而後行，曳而後往).12)

This principle of action finds its foundation in two aspects. The first one is equalizing things. Given the philosophy that everything is equal and has its acceptable things, one should stop to be active, accept the status quo, and act along with things.

The second is emphasis on “propensity” (勢). Propensity are external situations opposed to men, which amounts to “things”. Shen Dao considers that beauties such as Mao Se (毛嬙) and Xi Shi (西施) are not beautiful anymore once they wear “horrible masks” (皮倛); Long-distance hikers hurt their feet without proper medicine; Dragons and snakes ride upon clouds and mists because there are clouds and mist in the first place.13) Clothes, medicine, clouds and mists are things, while being beautiful, walking and flying depend on the help of these external things. This help from external things is “propensity”, which determines what men can do. Hanfei (韩非子) opposed the view that earthworms cannot fly even with clouds and mists. Yet it is not difficult for Shen Dao to respond to this criticism. Dragons, snakes and earthworms are such because from where they are born. And what their parents are is already-existing “propensity”, which spares no room for choice. Along this approach, everything is attributed to external things, and men cannot but “move only when pushed, proceed only when pulled”.

Considering the two points above, the Way men carry out is the consequence of natural elimination, for which Zhuangzi says that Shen Daowas “eliminated by things, taking this to be the Way-principle” (泠汰於物以為道理).14) What is being “eliminated by things” then? It is men, opposed to things. For an analogy, things or propensity is like a sieve, and men are sieved. What is removed or left is determined

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12) Ibid. 293.
13) “Authority and Virtue”in Shenzi (慎子·威德): "Mao Se and Xi Shi, the most beautiful ones in the world, clothed with horrible masks, make those who see them run away…Thus rising snakes wandering in the mist and flying dragons riding clouds are equal to earthworms once the clouds disappear and the mist falls apart because they lose what to ride."Collection of Philosophers: Shenzi (諸子集成·慎子), (Shanghai: World Press, 1935),1.
14) "The World under Heaven",292.
by the sieve instead of men themselves. Therefore men need not bother their intellect, since whatever is removed or left is consistent with the “principle” (理) of the sieve. Here the “Way” (dao 道) and “principle” (理) occur together as “the Way-principle” (道理). The Way is what men walk along, and the principle is basically the principle of things. It is precise to apply “the Way-principle” to Shen Dao’s thought since he draws the “Way” of men closer to the “principle” of things. This is quite different from Zhuangzi’s “the Way is accomplished by men walking along it” (道行之而成), where Zhuangzi views the Way not as a dead principle but what is made by walking. The accuracy of words applied to criticize Shen Dao in “The World under Heaven” can be seen. It is written in this chapter that “the way of Shen Dao is not what the living walk along but a principle for the dead” (慎到之道，非生人之行，而至死人之理).15) The “Way” (dao 道) is different with “Principle” (li 理). The Way is completed upon being walked, and which way to walk is decided by living subjects, i.e., men. Thus, the Way is not entirely objective but related to men, and thus should be “what the living walk along”; While the “principle” (理) is objective, needing no participation of men, which is ridiculed in “The World under Heaven” as “a principle for the dead”. Zhuangzi emphasizes the Way over the principle, while Shen Dao equals the Way to the principle.

Based on the emphasis of “things”, “propensity” and the objective “principle”, Shen Dao develops a life philosophy of passively acting. He promotes that actively choosing and teaching miss universality and perfection, and men should only walk along the Way determined by “things” and “propensity” so that they lose nothing.

(2) Against intellect, for common sense

Since the “Way” men walk along has been determined by “things” and “propensity”, why is intellect necessary anymore? Thus, Shen Dao argues against using intellect:

To know is not to know, and so one should despise knowledge and work to

destroy and slough it off. (知不知，將薄知而後鄰傷之者也。)\(^{16}\)

There is space for discussion in all explanations of this sentence. Guo Xiang (郭象), Cheng Xuanying (成玄英), Sun Yirang (孫詒讓)和 Qian Mu (錢穆) considered this sentence to be Zhuangzi’s criticism of Shen Dao.\(^{17}\) Yet there is a “saying” (曰) before this sentence, obviously suggesting it to be Shen Dao’s own criticism of others’ using intellect. Jiang Xichang (蔣錫昌) added a subject “men” (人) and view “it” (之) in “destroy and slough it off” (鄰傷之) as referring to the men. Taken this way, the sentence means that men are hurt by intellect. This claim occurs in Zhuangzi, yet Shen Dao does not emphasize men’s value over things or intellect like this because he claims that men are pulled by things and intellect. He “abandons intellect” not because men are forced by intellect, but because there is no point in utilizing it. Jiang further read “despise intellect” (薄知) as “despised by intellect” (薄於知), changing the verb-object structure into a passive structure, which violates the original text. Liang Qichao (梁啟超) modified “despised intellect” as despising “things” to attain “intellect”,\(^{18}\) actually changing the original text.

The reasons for the variety of explanations this sentence contains: 1) The variety of punctuations 2) That all three 知 can be read either as “intellect/wisdom” (zhì 智) and as “knowledge/knowing” (zhī 知) 3) That 知 can be a noun, a verb or an adjective 4) The variety of explanations of 薄 5) The difficulty in explaining 鄰 6) What 之 refers to is unclear. I read this sentence as:

智不智，將薄知而後鄰傷之者也。

智不智 means it is unwise to bother the intellect. The subject for 將薄知而後鄰傷之者也 is still the intellect (智). 之 refers to 知, i.e., knowledge.

There can be three explanations of 薄. 1) “迫”, to get closer and oppress so as to damage something. 2) “薄薄”, to despise knowledge. 3) “使之薄”, to scuff knowledge.

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\(^{16}\) “The World under Heaven”, 292.

\(^{17}\) These four explanations are collected in Wang Shumin (王叔岷), Revision and Commentary of Zhuangzi (莊子校詮) (Beijing:ZhonghuaShuju,2011),932.

\(^{18}\) For the commentaries of Jiang and Liang, see Chen Guying (陳鼓應), Modern Commentary and Translation of the Zhuangzi II (莊子今注今譯下冊) (Beijing:ZhonghuaShuju,2011),932.
and make it thin. All three are acceptable and reconcilable.

As for “鄰”, most commentators view it the same as “磷” in “rubbed but not scuffed” (磨而不磷) in the Analects, meaning to scuff, which is acceptable. It is also rich in connotations if this 鄰 is interpreted as 鄰 of 鄰居 (neighbor). In Laozi it can be seen that “watchful, as if threatened from all sides” (猶兮若畏四鄰). Those closer can hurt oneself much more easily. These interpretations can be consistent with the three explanations of 鄰 mentioned above as well. 薄 can mean to oppress closer and 鄰 means being close, and when intellect oppresses closer it would hurt “knowledge” (知). Moreover, distance creates respect while proximity leads to profanity and disrespect, “neighbor” can also be identified with the “to despise” meaning of 薄. And the “to scuff” meaning can be linked to the “to make it thin” (使之薄) meaning as well.

The whole sentence means: To be intellectual means not to be intellectual, and to oppress (despise/scuff) knowledge and then damage it.

Taken this way, Shen Dao is not against knowledge, but rather against damaging knowledge. Isn’t it contradictory with his “abandoning knowledge” (去知)? In fact, what Shen Dao “abandons” is the very act of acquiring knowledge through intellect, while “knowledge” is what he tries to defend, which is actually “common sense”. There is no contradiction between defending common sense and rejecting the use of intellect. 知 in 去知 should be read as 智, applying 智 can damage common sense 知. Hui Shi (惠施) applies intellect to draw the abnormal knowledge that one has already arrived yesterday when he sets out today (今日適越而昔至); When people get to know that the earth orbits the sun, the old common sense that the sun rises from the east and sets in the west is hidden. This is how “intellect” damages common sense “knowledge”, of which Shen Dao has an accurate insight, and that is why applying intellect would “oppress knowledge and then damage it”.

We can make a comparison like this: Common sense is overthrown by ingenious logic in Hui Shi, and his “knowledge” (知) transcends daily life; For Zhuangzi, neither common sense nor the ingenious logic that overthrow it are of any significance,
and what is important is the “true knowledge” (真知) that both fail to grasp, while common sense is most respected by Shen Dao. Men can live their lives smoothly with this ordinary knowledge. Shen Dao respects common sense to a great extent. He recognizes reality and passively and economically goes along with it. His thought roots in present existence and never goes beyond it.

3) “Respecting the law” (尚法) and its relation with “equalizing things”

Xunzi (荀子) refers to Shen Dao as “fixated on laws and not understanding the value of having worthy people” (蔽於法而不知貴), yet Shen Dao actually suggests employing worthy people in that “peace or war lies in worthy people in charge of positions” (將治亂，在乎賢使任職),19) with the only requirement that the worthy does not violate the laws. The persistence of social order depends on laws rather than the worthy, thus the respect for the law instead of worthy people. Shen Dao’s ideal political picture is like this: The king does nothing, yet is respected by the world; The people provide for the king, ministers committed to their separate jobs, and there are not any worthy people with centralized power under the king, i.e., that “ministers do not own concurrent positions” (士不兼官). If this balance is broken, then arises the condition that there is “no lasting ways of the state, no lasting rules for ministers” (國無常道, 官無常法), thus the strong need for worthy people,20) which is implied by “the principle of the Way is lacked thus the appreciation of virtue and intellect, when virtue and intellect are appreciated the key of the policy of a state falls in one man’s mind” (道理匱則慕賢智, 慕賢智則國家之政要在一人之心矣).21) Respecting the worthy causes the worthy to compete with the king for power, which results in disorder, i.e., “To respect the worthy when there has been a king means the worthy disputing the king, the disorder brought by which is severer than that brought by absence of a king. (立君而尊賢，是賢與君爭，其亂甚於無君)22)

19) “Knowing Loyalty” in Shenzi (慎子·知忠), 5
20) “Authority and Virtue” in Shenzi (慎子·威德), 2.
21) “Authority and Virtue” in Shenzi 2.
22) “Lost Texts” in Shenzi (慎子·慎子逸文), 7.
The core of these claims lies in respecting the law, which shares similarities with modern constitutionalism. Its legal basis is that “the sage possesses the world by accepting rather than obtaining it” (聖人之有天下也, 受之也, 非取之也)\(^{23}\), and people ought to “set a king for the world rather than set the world for the king” (立天子以為天下，非立天下以為天子)\(^{24}\). The king does not own the world under heaven. He is put into the position because “the principles cannot work without a primary one in the world” (天下無一貴, 則理無由通)\(^{25}\), thus he is only what maintains the functioning of the state. The foundation of this political arrangement is the establishment of a public institution of rituals and laws: “To establish the public means to abandon the private.” (凡立公, 所以棄私也)\(^{26}\) The king, ministers, and people all have to behave according to this code of conduct. With these laws, the state needs no loyal ministers. A peaceful society calls for no sage or virtuous people, i.e., “From top to bottom there’s nothing to be done, only the laws serve at their places.” (上下無事, 唯法所在)\(^{27}\) As for the origin of laws, Shen Dao suggests that “the king or the elder” (君長) can “amend the laws with the Way” (以道變法)\(^{28}\), implying that the legislative power lies in the king. Whereas the principle of law making is the significance of people because the king is in his position for the world under heaven and he must legislate for people’s interests: “The laws do not descend from heaven nor arise from the earth. They occur among people and work according to people’s mind.” (法非從天下, 非從地出, 發於人間, 合乎人心而已)\(^{29}\)

The fragments of Shenzi provide Shen Dao’s thought of law, while “The World Under Heaven” supplements his ideas of things. Through formulating the inner logics of his articulation on law and things separately,\(^{30}\) it can be seen that he constitutes

\(^{23}\) “Authority and Virtue” in Shenzi, 1.
\(^{24}\) “Authority and Virtue” in Shenzi (慎子·威德), 2.
\(^{25}\) “Authority and Virtue” in Shenzi, 2.
\(^{26}\) “Authority and Virtue” in Shenzi, 3.
\(^{27}\) “King and Ministers” in Shenzi (慎子·君臣), 6.
\(^{28}\) “Lost Texts” in Shenzi (慎子·慎子逸文), 9.
\(^{29}\) “Lost Texts” in Shenzi, 12. This piece of lost text faces some doubt, yet I consider it as consistent with Shen Dao’s thought.
\(^{30}\) Feng Youlan (馮友蘭) considered his “equalizing things” and “respecting the law” as consistent as well. Yet he argued for an analogy between the “king-minister” (君臣) relationship in “respecting the law” and the “Dao-things”
his system of law with the very same philosophy of his “equalizing things”. The logic of Shen Dao’s “equalizing things” in “The World Under Heaven” is:

A. Things: “everything has something acceptable and something unacceptable” (萬物皆有所可，有所不可) —— “Equalizing things” (齊物)

B. Men: “to abandon cleverness and do away with self” (棄知去己), “rolling and swirling along with things” (與物宛轉) —— acting along with things.

The logic of laws in the fragments of Shenzi goes like this:

A. People (民): “living mixedly with their separate and various capabilities” (雜處而各有所能, 所能者不同) —— “breeding all” (兼畜)

B. King (君): “depending on people’s capabilities as recourses, including and breeding them all” (因民之能為資, 盡包而畜之) —— “acting along with” (因循)

A. Laws (法): making laws according to the people, and when laws are established both king and the people desert the private and respect the laws. (因循於民而立法, 法立則君民皆棄私而尊法)

The “things-human” relationship in the thought of equalizing things corresponds to that of “people-king” in the articulation of laws. The principle that the king should obey people’s nature constitutes the foundation of making “laws”. The laws are established according to the people, and serve as the codes of conduct for everyone and the basis for the king to make judgements once they are established: “The great king acts along the laws without intervening in affairs of the flesh, then affairs are resolved by the laws themselves.” (大君任法而弗躬, 則事斷於法矣)

To compare Shen Dao’s system of things and that of laws:

(道物) relationship in “equalizing things”, which I consider as inaccurate. Shen Dao does not understand things from the perspective of Dao, in “rolling and swirling along with things” (與物宛轉) he only grasps things in their relation to human. See New Edition of History of Chinese Philosophy (中國哲學史新編) (Beijing: Renmin Press, 1998), 491.

31) For king’s all-breeding and acting-according-to people, see “People Mixed” in Shenzi (慎子·民雜), 3-4. The thought of making laws according to the people can be inferred from Authority and Virtue (威德), “Acting Along With” (因循), etc. The doctrine of establishing the public and abandoning the private can be seen in passages like “Authority and Virtue”, “People Mixed”, “The Man as King” (君人), ”King and Ministers” and “Lost Texts”.

The System of Things
Everything has something acceptable and something unacceptable
Human equalizes things
Human “abandons intellect and does away with self”
and “rolls and swirls along with things”

The System of Laws
People have their separate capabilities
The king breeds the people
The king “does not intervene in the flesh” (弗躬) and “acts along with the law” (任法)

These two systems are consistent. When Shen Dao discusses laws he emphasizes “acting according to” (因循), as passively as acting along with things. Zhuangzi said he “revolved like a whirlwind, spun like a feather” (若飄風之還, 若羽之旋). In “revolved like a whirlwind”, “revolving” presupposes “blowing away” (去); A feather has no root and thus spins as the wind blows. These both mean to remove subjectivity, making humans resemble dead objects. Similarly, for laws, Shen Dao focuses on passively respecting and utilizing the “laws”, which is far less aggressive than the theories of Shang Yang (商鞅) and Han Fei (韓非). Thus, Shen Dao’s theory of laws can neither empower the state and its military nor fulfill the king’s desire, but merely serve to maintain the peace in an already peaceful world with a benevolent king and docile people.

“The World under Heaven” mentions Shen Dao’s equalizing things, and Shenzi discusses laws, thus scholars usually believe Shen Dao “equalizes things with laws” (以法齊物), which is imprecise. The system of things and that of laws are parallel, and if the formulation of laws is attributed to social-political science, the formulation of things leads to natural science. Yet Shen Dao, like most pre-Qin philosophers, does not care about things too much, and once reaching “everything has something acceptable” he turns to the life philosophy of “rolling and swirling along with things”. And if we are to complement a noun in the “things-human” system according to the “people-king-laws” system, that would be “principle” (理), i.e., the natural principles
of things. In fact, the word “principle” can be found in Shenzi, e.g., “The reciprocal-action between the light and the weight is the principle of heaven and earth.” (輕重迭相橛, 天地之理也.) Here “the principle of heaven and earth” (天地之理) refers to certain natural law. “When the officials have no sufficient capacity the Way-principle is in shortage.” (官不足則道理匱) “The Way-principle” (道理) is, as is interpreted above, a modified structure referring to the order supposed to be obeyed. “Without the primary one, the principle cannot be accessible. Only when the principle is accessed can the world be ruled.” (天下無一貴，則理無由通，通理以為天下也。) If there is no king, the order of the world cannot be reached. This “principle” is the “law” in social-political aspect. The law is a set of order established according to people’s nature, while the principle is the natural regulations of things. The “law” works in the social-political sphere to equalize “all actions under the heaven” (天下之動), i.e., human affairs, while “things” can be equalized only by the “principle” rather than the “law”. “Things” can mean “affairs” (事) in some occasions in pre-Qin texts, but apparently Shen Dao uses “things” by simply referring to “things”. Taking the thought of equalizing things as the starting point of his philosophy, Shen Dao derives both his claims of laws and philosophy of life. Therefore, Zhuangzi refers to him as “taking equalizing all things as beginning” (齊萬物以為首).

3. How Zhuangzi Goes beyond Shen Dao’ Equalizing Things

It is said in “Discussion on Equalizing Things” that “Things all must have that which is so; things all must have that which is acceptable. There is nothing that is not so, nothing that is not acceptable.” (物固有所然，物固有所可。無物不然，無物不可。”)

34) “Authority and Virtue” in Shenzi, 2.
35) Ibid.
This is consistent with Shen Dao’s “everything has something acceptable and something unacceptable” (萬物皆有所可，有所不可). Whereas Zhuangzi articulates what’s “acceptable” and “unacceptable” from the perspectives of different subjects, emphasizing value of things related to subjects rather than their purely objective properties. Subjects have a decisive impact on judgement. The judgement of what is acceptable varies with separate subjects; therefore, Zhuangzi points out through Wang Ni (王倪) that there is no objective “right position” (正處), “right color” (正色) or “right odor” (正味). This view is basically the same with Shen Dao’s view except its emphasis is the value of the subject. This is also what is familiar for scholars. Yet this is not the essence of Zhuangzi’s theory of equalizing things.

1) The key to Zhuangzi’s equalizing things: “before things exist” (未始有物)

Zhuangzi goes beyond Shen Dao in that he speaks of “things” from a level superior to “things”, while Shen Dao goes no further than the level of “things”. It is said in “Discussion on Equalizing Things” that:

The knowledge of the men of ancient times went a long way. How far did it go? To the point before things existed—so far, to the end, where nothing can be added. Those at the next stage thought that things exist but recognized no boundaries among them. Those at the next stage thought there were boundaries but recognized no right or wrong. (古之人，其知有所至矣。惡乎至？有以為未始有物者，至矣盡矣，不可以加矣。其次以為有物矣，而未始有封也。其次以為有封焉，而未始有是非也。)38)

The “knowledge” of the “men of ancient times” is divided into four levels. The ultimate one maintains what was “before things existed”; The second being “things exist but with no boundaries”; Then “there were boundaries but no right or wrong”; And the lowest one recognizes there are both things and rights and wrongs. What

37) “Discussion on Equalizing Things”, 15. A similar paragraph can be seen in “Gengsang Chu” (庚桑楚).
“before things existed” means is a state with “no things” prior to the existence of things, which Zhuangzi praises as “nothing can be added”. We can infer that this is the “true knowledge” (眞知) often mentioned by Zhuangzi.

I consider one major defect of current researches on *Discussion on Equalizing Things* is that they focus solely on analysis of “equalizing things”, ignoring the point where Zhuangzi really goes beyond other theories of equalizing things during his time, i.e., “before things existed.” Actually “before things existed” is mentioned several times in *Zhuangzi*:

What I call the smug-and-satisfied are those who, having learned the words of one master, put on a smug and satisfied look, privately very pleased with themselves, considering that what they’ve gotten is quite sufficient, and not even realizing that they haven’t even begun to get anything at all. (“Xu Wugui”) (所謂暖姝者，學一先生之言，則暖暖姝姝而私自說也，自以為足矣，而未知未始有物也。徐無鬼)

The sage has never begun to think of Heaven, has never begun to think of man, has never begun to think of a beginning, has never begun to think of things. He moves in company with the age, never halting… (“Zeyang”) (夫聖人未始有天，未始有人，未始有始，未始有物，與世偕行而不替…則陽)

How to make sense of “before things existed”? This is a difficult problem skipped by most commentators. Yet Guo Xiang (郭象) did not escape but rather attempted to provide an explanation:

This means to forget the heaven and earth, to abandon all things, not recognizing the universe outside, not realizing oneself inside, so one can do without obstacles, transform along with things and respond to everything. (此忘天地，遺萬物，外不察乎宇宙，內不覺其一身，故能曠然無累，與物俱往，而無所不應。)39

Guo Xiang (郭象) interprets “before things existed” (未始有物) as a subjective state of “forgetting”, where the subject forgets the heaven and earth, all things and

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himself. This interpretation recognizes there “are things” at the first place so then one can “forget things”. Things exist objectively but the subject refuses to recognize them. This means “things exist” rather than “things do not exist”. After all, Guo Xiang does not believe in a state “before things existed”. Likewise most of us, he could not go beyond the common belief that “things exist”. And in order that what “before things existed” be reasonable against the background of “things-exist”, the explanation can be found nowhere but inside the sphere of the subject’s spirit.

Nonetheless, “nothing” (無物) is a kind of “knowledge” (知) and even “true knowledge” in the texts of Zhuangzi. For Zhuangzi, some “knowledge” is “true” in that it possesses not only epistemological rationality, but also a reference to the ontological truth. Yet Guo Xiang discusses nothing about where “things” come from nor the existence of an ultimate state “before things exist”, actually changing Zhuangzi’ philosophy into a vulgar practical thought. This interpretation seems clever and ingenious and therefore acceptable, yet it cannot reach the “truth”. But Zhuangzi cares much about “truth”, and thus the frequent occurrence of the “true man” (真人), “true knowledge”. This is exactly the point where Guo Xiang failed to catch Zhuangzi.

In the above paragraph Zhuangzi is not only talking about “knowledge”, but also speaking of the truth of the universe through the ultimate “knowledge”. If we believe this is the “true knowledge”, then we would agree on the existence of a state “before things existed” prior to “things”. While I, like Guo Xiang, have been living in a “things-exist” background and therefore find the “before-things-existed” state hard to imagine, Zhuangzi surely knows it and takes it as the ultimate truth of the universe. And this is where his difference with Shen Dao lies.

Shen Dao knows only “things exist” instead of what is “before things existed”, thus his thought is established on the basis that everything exists. Furthermore, he takes “things” as the “beginning” (首), respecting “things” fully even at the cost of human subjectivity, allowing humans only to act along with things. Zhuangzi sees the flaw of this view that it cannot go beyond “things”. Zhuangzi focuses on “nothing”, and “things” can be “equalized” not because of their separate values, but because
they are “zero” in the ultimate sense. Things need not equalizing then, for they are already equalized in the first place. This is why Zhuangzi criticizes other thoughts of equalizing things at that time as “bothering their spirit to make things into one without realizing they are all the same” (勞神明為一，而不知其同也).40) Things are equalized by “nothingness” (無) instead of “things” (有).

It is said in “Mastering Life” (達生) that:

All that have faces, forms, voices, colors—these are all mere things. How could one thing and another thing be far removed from each other? And how could any of them be worth considering as a predecessor? …But things have their creation in what has no form, and their conclusion in what has no change. (凡有貌象聲色者，皆物也，物與物何以相遠？夫奚足以至乎先？…則物之造乎不形，而止乎無所化…)

“How could one thing and another thing be far removed from each other” means “things” are similar and no single thing can be considered “as a predecessor”. Upon searching for the origin of things there can be no single thing serving this end, for anything as a predecessor must presuppose another predecessor. “Things” cannot create things, and what can create things is “what has no form” (不形) here, which amounts to what is “before things exist”.

There are several occurrences of “things have their creation in what has no form” in Zhuangzi:

In the Great Beginning, there was nonbeing; there was no being, no name. Out of it arose One; there was One, but it had no form. Things got hold of it and it came to life, and it was called Virtue. (“Heaven and Earth”) (泰初有無，無有無名41)。

But I looked back to her beginning and the time before she was born. Not only the time before she was born, but the time before she had a body. Not only the time before she had a body, but the time before she had a spirit. In the midst of

41) The original punctuations is "泰初有無，無有無名".
the jumble of wonder and mystery, a change took place and she had a spirit. Another change and she had a body. Another change and she was born. Now there’s been another change and she’s dead. ("Supreme Happiness") (察其始而本無生, 非徒無生也,而本無形, 非徒無形也, 而本無氣。雜乎芒芴之間, 變而有氣, 氣變而有形, 形變而有生,今又變而之死。至樂)

The bright and shining is born out of deep darkness; the ordered is born out of formlessness; pure spirit is born out of the Way. The body is born originally from this purity, and the ten thousand things give bodily form to one another through the process of birth. ("Knowledge Wandered North") (夫昭昭生於冥冥, 有倫生於無形,精神生於道, 形本生於精, 而萬物以形相生。知北遊)

As is manifested in all the above, “things” with “forms” do not exist at the first place, but derive from “noform” or “nothingness”. What do “before things existed” and “no form” refer to then?

2) The “nine-changes” hierarchy of the great Way and the position of “things”

The very presence of what is “before things exist” illustrates that “things” do not occupy a high level in Zhuangzi’s philosophy. A material from “The Way of Heaven” (天道) help make sense of the position “things” occupy in Zhuangzi’s grand philosophical system:

Therefore, the men of ancient times who clearly understood the Great Way first made clear Heaven and then went on to the Way and its Virtue. Having made clear the Way and its Virtue, they went on to benevolence and righteousness. Having made clear benevolence and righteousness, they went on to the observance of duties. Having made clear the observance of duties, they went on to forms and names. Having made clear forms and names, they went on to the assignment of suitable offices. Having made clear the assignment of suitable offices, they went on to the scrutiny of performance. Having made clear the scrutiny of performance, they went
on to the judgment of right and wrong. Having made clear the judgment of right and wrong, they went on to rewards and punishments. Having made clear rewards and punishments, they could be certain that stupid and wise were in their proper place, that eminent and lowly were rightly ranked, that good and worthy men as well as unworthy ones showed their true form, that all had duties suited to their abilities, that all acted in accordance with their titles. It was in this way that superiors were served, inferiors were shepherded, external things were ordered, the inner man was trained. Knowledge and scheming were unused, yet all found rest in Heaven. This was called the Great Peace, the Highest Government. Hence the book says, “There are forms and there are names.” Forms and names were known to antiquity, but the men of old gave them no precedence. Those who spoke of the Great Way in ancient times could count to five in the sequence [described earlier] and pick out “forms and names” or count to nine and discuss “rewards and punishments.” But to jump right in and talk about “forms and names” is to lack an understanding of the source; to jump right in and talk about “rewards and punishments” is to lack an understanding of the beginning. Those who stand the Way on its head before describing it, who turn it backward before the way that superiors were served, inferiors were shepherded, external things were ordered, the inner man was trained. Knowledge and scheming were unused, yet all found rest in Heaven. This was called the Great Peace, the Highest Government. Hence the book says, “There are forms and there are names.” Forms and names were known to antiquity, but the men of old gave them no precedence. Those who spoke of the Great Way in ancient times could count to five in the sequence [described earlier] and pick out “forms and names” or count to nine and discuss “rewards and punishments.” But to jump right in and talk about “forms and names” is to lack an understanding of the source; to jump right in and talk about “rewards and punishments” is to lack an understanding of the beginning. Those who stand the Way on its head before describing it, who turn it backward before expounding it, may be brought to order by others, but how could they be capable of bringing others to order? Those who jump right in and talk about
“forms and names,” “rewards and punishments,” have an understanding of the tools for bringing order but no understanding of the way to bring order. They may work for the world, but they are not worthy to make the world work for them. They are rhetoricians, scholars cramped in one comer of learning. Rites and laws, weights and measures, the careful comparison of forms and names—the men of old had all these. They are the means by which those below serve those above, not the means by which those above shepherd those below. (是故古之明大道者，先明天而道德次之，道德已明而仁義次之，仁義已明而分守次之，分守已明而形名次之，形名已明而因任次之，因任已明而原省次之，原省已明而是非次之，是非已明而賞罰次之，賞罰已明而愚知處宜……知謀不用，必歸其天。此之謂太平，治之至也。故書曰： “有形有名。”形名者，古人有之，而非所以先也。) 古之語大道者，五變而形名可舉，九變而賞罰可言也。驟而語形名，不知其本也；驟而語賞罰，不知其始也。倒道而言，迂道而說者，人之所治也，安能治人！驟而語形名賞罰，此有知治之具，非知治之道：可用於天下，不足以用天下。此之謂辯士，一曲之人也。禮法度數，形名比詳，古人有之，此下之所以事上，非上之所以畜下也。)

The men “who understood the Great Way” knew nine levels which are top-down: Heaven, the Way and its virtue, benevolence and righteousness, observance and duties, forms and names, assignment of suitable offices, scrutiny of performance, the judgment of right and wrong, rewards and punishments (天，道德，仁義，分守，形名，因任，原省，是非，賞罰). These nine have not only close correlations with politics, but also profound philosophical meanings. “Things” have forms and names, thus ought to rank no higher than the “forms and names” level. The four levels before “forms and names” can be called “above the forms” (形而上), those after “below the forms” (形而下). “Things” obviously belong to the sphere “below the forms”. It is intentionally mentioned that the ancient men knew “forms and names” as well, yet they “gave them no precedence” (非所以先), and “forms and names” appear only after “counting to five” (五變). And rewards and punishments do not appear until “counting to nine” (九變). Those who jump right in and talk about “forms and names”, “rewards and punishments” do not know the source and“stand the Way on its head before describing it, who turn it backward before expounding it” (倒道而言，迂道而說). In this critique
in *The Way of Heaven*, Zhuangzi sharply points out the fundamental shortcoming of the School of Names and Legalism. The same critique can be applied to Shen Dao as well. “Things” rank middle to low in this hierarchy, yet Shen Dao takes them as the “beginning”, and this is why Zhuangzi criticizes him for “taking equalizing all things as beginning” (齊萬物以為首).

3) "Transformation of things" (物化)

At the end of *Discussion on Equalizing Things*, Zhuangzi raises the concept of “transformation of things” through his experience of turning into a butterfly. “Transforming” into “things” means distinctions, which in turn bring limitations. Therefore Zhuang Zhou is not the butterfly and vice versa, “between Zhuang Zhou and a butterfly, there must be some distinction” (周與蝴蝶則必有分矣).42) Yet both Zhuang Zhou and the butterfly are “things” that are “transformed” into: Zhuang Zhou is transformed into “solidly and unmistakably” (蘧蘧然), and the butterfly is transformed into “flitting and fluttering around” (栩栩然). Neither Zhuang Zhou nor the butterfly is the ultimate truth, and both being “solidly and unmistakably” and “flitting and fluttering around” are temporary. The term “transformation of things” is an objective description of Zhuangzi transforming into a thing with no praise nor blame. “Flitting and fluttering around” as a butterfly is “following his whims” (適志) for Zhuangzi. Yet this “following whims” is not real “wandering freely” (逍遙) in the ultimate sense, since it still depends on the form of a butterfly, and “his body decays, his mind follows it” (其形化，其心與之然).43) The reference to “transformation of things” actually embodies Zhuangzi’s provocative reflection of “things”: Once realizing “things” are not as actual or fixed as we thought, but are merely appearance of the great Creation-Transformation (大化), we can spiritually go beyond the limits things put upon us. Another fable further illustrates the meaning of “transformation of things”. It is said in “The Great Source as Teacher”

(大宗师) that:

When a skilled smith is casting metal, if the metal should leap up and say, “I insist on being made into Moye, the famous sword!” he would surely regard it as very inauspicious metal indeed. Now, having had the audacity to take on human form once, if I should say, “I don’t want to be anything but a man! Nothing but a man!” the Creator would surely regard me as a most inauspicious sort of person. So now I think of heaven and earth as a great furnace, and the Creator as a skilled smith. Where could he send me that would not be all right? (今之大治鑄金，金踴躍曰：‘我且必為鏌鋣’，大冶必以為不祥之金。今一犯人之形，而曰：‘人耳人耳’，夫造化者必以為不祥之人。今一以天地為大爐，以造化為大治，惡乎往而不可哉！)

With “heaven and earth as a great furnace” and “the Creator as a skilled smith”, things, and even human beings, are cast by this great furnace with forms. The metaphor “a skilled smith casting metal” exactly means “transforming into all things”. The Creation-transformation functions magically to form all things, and things return the great furnace of heaven and earth and are reprocessed. Thus, the forms of all things are temporary, and what meaning, independent to the Creation-Transformation, do they own? Are there any fundamental differences between transforming into “Moye” (鏌鋣) and transforming into scrap iron? What to cheer upon attaining the “form of a human being”? All things are forms transformed into by “the Creator”, and in this sense “things” are all “equalized” and “everything has something acceptable”. With this insight, one can take no care of how good or bad the form he has been transformed into, and thus go beyond limits of “things” to acquire an unfettered life attitude of “where could he send me that would not be all right” (惡乎往而不可)．

4. Conclusion

Zhuangzi shows a different spiritual style with Shen Dao in his “equalizing things”, which orients from their different understanding of “things”. Zhuangzi reaches the
state before the appearance of things, while Shen Dao knows only what is after
the existence of things. To apply Zhuangzi’s own metaphors, Zhuangzi “sees nothingness
as his own head, life as his own spine, and death as his own bottom” (以無為首,
以生為脊, 以死為尻),44) while Shen Dao sees “things” as his head and thus has merely
bottom, thus Xunzi’s critique that he is “fixated on what follows and not understanding
what’s prior” (蔽於後而不知先). Zhuangzi possesses an all-embracing vision to search
out the beginning and the end, and his philosophy embraces a complete picture from
before the beginning of things to after there are already things, in which “things”
are not so significant because the ultimate state “before things exist” is seen.
Meanwhile Shen Dao sees solely what is “after things exist”, emphasizing “things”
and claiming to act according to limits and guides of things passively. In Zhuangzi’s
“transformation of things”, fixed and dead “things” are eventually transformed, and
the subject’s spirit breaks limits and comes to wander freely; While in Shen Dao’s
“equalizing things”, he “transforms himself into a thing”, i.e., pulling the subject down
to the level of “things”. Facing the common limits of things, Zhuangzi sets a bottom
line to acting along with things. When he says “In your actions, it is best to follow
along with him” (形莫若就), it is said simultaneously that “though you follow along,
you don’t want to be pulled into his doings” (就不欲入), i.e., to keep one’s spirit not
tainted by things; yet, Shen Dao maintains only “to follow along with him”. Being
his “rolling and swirling along with things” seemingly able to prevent harm from
external things, yet actually the subject has lost its spirit and appears like “the dead”.
Contrary to this cowering life philosophy of Shen Dao, Zhuangzi’s “equalizing things”
leads toward freedom and wandering “independently” (無待).