

1 **Seeking Oneness: The *Zhuangzi* and Psychedelics**

2
3 *The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that there is a connection between*
4 *the ancient Chinese philosophical text the *Zhuangzi* and psychedelic-*
5 *assisted therapy — particularly in their shared capacity to promote the*
6 *realization of oneness. After explaining what I mean by “the realization of*
7 *oneness,” I will then propose an interpretation of the *Zhuangzi* — one that*
8 *is in line with the views of scholars David Loy and Mark Berkson — which*
9 *asserts that the text not only advocates for the existence of oneness but also*
10 *skillfully uses language to jolt readers into phenomenologically*
11 *experiencing it. In the third section of this paper, I will turn to a series of*
12 *studies conducted at NYU and Johns Hopkins University that suggest that*
13 *psychedelic-assisted therapy is effective in treating a number of*
14 *psychological disorders and outline a leading theory on the matter with*
15 *respect to the biological basis for why this therapy is so effective. Next, I*
16 *will demonstrate that there is a link between this data on psychedelic-*
17 *assisted therapy and the *Zhuangzi* by showing that, as observed in the*
18 *former case, patients experienced the realization of oneness that the latter*
19 *embraces. Finally, I will briefly note some interesting implications of the*
20 *connection between psychedelic-assisted therapy and the *Zhuangzi* I draw,*
21 *including how their shared therapeutic qualities might imply that the two*
22 *seemingly disparate mediums can one day be used in conjunction with one*
23 *another.*

24 25 26 **Introduction**

27
28 Psychedelics are currently undergoing a cultural-wide renaissance (Sessa
29 2012). There are a number of reasons why these drugs have rapidly been
30 gaining such widespread attention in the past few decades, but one of the main
31 reasons is that, in that time, several studies¹ have come out that suggest that
32 when used in conjunction with psychotherapy, psychedelics are effective in
33 treating a wide range of psychological disorders, including depression and
34 anxiety. The aim of this paper is to show that there are parallels between
35 psychedelic-assisted therapy (PAT hereinafter) and the Ancient Chinese
36 philosophical text the *Zhuangzi* insofar as both the therapy and the text aim to
37 facilitate a realization of the oneness of all things. In the first section of this
38 paper, I will expand on what I mean by “the realization of oneness.” To this
39 extent, I’ll make use of the work of scholars P.J. Ivanhoe (2017) and Ronnie
40 Littlejohn (2016) to show that, as a Daoist text, the oneness that the *Zhuangzi*
41 refers to can be understood as an expression of a worldview that takes
42 everything that exists to be interconnected rather than fragmented and sees
43 conventionally accepted dichotomies to be illusory. After illuminating this
44 worldview by contrasting it with an ontological view diametrically opposed to
45 it, Plato’s theory of the Forms, I then explicate three different features of the

¹ E.g., Belser et al. (2017), Schenberg (2018), Luoma et al. (2020).

1 realization of oneness that the *Zhuangzi* refers to in the second section of this
2 paper by analyzing specific passages from the text and making use of analyses
3 provided by David Loy (1996) and Mark Berkson (1996). Accordingly, these
4 three features are: (1) the epistemic feature that refers to the knowledge that
5 everything is interconnected, (2) the ethical feature that attributes value to
6 knowing that everything is interconnected and (3) the phenomenological
7 feature of actually facilitating the concrete experience of oneness for readers
8 through the creative use of language.

9 In the third section of this paper, I turn to a series of studies conducted by
10 Belser et al. (2017) that took place at Johns Hopkins University and New York
11 University which demonstrated that PAT was effective in treating patients
12 suffering from depression, addiction and existential distress. Next, after
13 utilizing the findings of Belser et al. (2017) and a few other studies, I
14 demonstrate that the therapeutic success of PAT in these cases was predicated
15 on the mediation of an experience of oneness among patients. In light of this
16 phenomenon, I turn to Carhart-Harris et al.'s (2014) research which suggests
17 that this experience of oneness that PAT facilitates is catalyzed by the silencing
18 of the Default Mode Network (DMN hereinafter) of the brain which is active
19 when one self-reflects, self-criticizes and ruminates. In the fourth section of
20 this paper, I argue that, like the *Zhuangzi*, PAT phenomenologically sets out to
21 facilitate the concrete experience of oneness insofar as it silences the DMN.
22 Moreover, I argue that the PAT studies I discuss in this paper also validate the
23 epistemic and ethical features of oneness that the *Zhuangzi* refers to insofar as
24 patients from the relevant studies maintained that their experience with oneness
25 was real and that they tangibly therapeutically benefited from this experience
26 for an extended period of time after it was over.

27 Lastly, I discuss why demonstrating a parallel between the *Zhuangzi* and
28 PAT is a significant endeavour in the first place. Mainly, I argue that making
29 this connection is relevant to the extent that it speaks to the possibility that
30 there is a synergy between the two mediums that can be tapped into by
31 psychedelic-assisted therapists. Specifically, as psychedelics are in the process
32 of becoming legalized in therapeutic settings in North America, a question
33 remains as to how psychedelic-assisted therapists can optimize the
34 psychological state that patients enter their psychedelic experience in (also
35 known as the “set” of the patient) and the physical and social environment in
36 which the psychedelic experience takes place in (also known as the “setting” of
37 the patient). If, as I argue, the *Zhuangzi* mirrors the therapeutic process of
38 psychedelic-assisted therapy, then it is likely that the text can be an
39 indispensable tool for psychedelic-assisted therapists to optimize their patients’
40 “set and setting” and thus assist them on their path towards mental health.
41 Hence, the significance of demonstrating that there is a connection between
42 PAT and the *Zhuangzi*.

43
44

1 **Section I: What is Oneness?**

2
3 Before delving into a comparison between the *Zhuangzi* and PAT's
4 relationship with oneness, it will be necessary to first explain what I mean by
5 "oneness" in the first place. As a Daoist text, the oneness referred to in the
6 *Zhuangzi* can be understood as an expression of a worldview that asserts that
7 everything that exists is interconnected rather than separate, making us
8 "inextricably intertwined with other people, creatures, and things" (Ivanhoe
9 2017, 1), and that, consequently, there is a fundamental unity between
10 seemingly isolated phenomena (Littlejohn 2016). Importantly, there are two
11 main, albeit related, points that can be teased out of this position: the negative
12 argument that proposes that conventionally accepted dichotomies, including
13 the notion of a subject as distinguished from an object, good as distinguished
14 from evil and up as distinguished from down, are illusory and the positive
15 argument which asserts that because said dichotomies are illusory, everything
16 that exists holistically makes up one cohesive whole and, thus, a oneness. As I
17 will address shortly when I deal with the *Zhuangzi* in the next section, there is
18 an inherent challenge when it comes to conceptualizing and articulating the
19 features of oneness because Daoists understand it to go *beyond* conceptual
20 thinking and language altogether (Berkson 1996). For now, I will attempt to
21 face the challenge of illuminating these features by briefly comparing them to
22 the features of an ontological position that is diametrically opposed to them:
23 Platonic dualism.

24 For Plato, everything that exists can be broken down into two broad
25 categories: abstract, imperceptible Forms and imperfect, perceptible particulars
26 that cohere with these Forms. In turn, this ontological distinction is understood
27 to manifest itself in the dichotomous human faculties of reason (which allows
28 one to access the Forms or the realm of Being) and the senses (which one
29 depends on to experience particulars or the realm of Becoming). The duality of
30 reason and the senses is perhaps best explained in the *Phaedrus* where Plato
31 compares reason to a charioteer who must whip the black and white horses that
32 represent human spirit and appetite respectively in order to tame them (246a-
33 254e). Such fragmentation of reason and the senses can be juxtaposed with the
34 Daoist symbols of *yin* and *yang* which are portrayed diagrammatically as a
35 black and white side within a circle that contains a dot of the opposing colour
36 in each side. Accordingly, this diagram is intended to express that apparent
37 polarities — such as, dark and light, appetite and reason and good and evil —
38 depend and borrow from their opposites to make themselves known and would
39 therefore not exist otherwise. In other words, while Plato's story in the
40 *Phaedrus* speaks to the fundamental *separation* of what is, say, dark and light,
41 the Daoist symbols of *yin* and *yang* speak to a fundamental *unity* between such
42 polarities.² Furthermore, while the individualist worldview prevalent in the

²I am indebted to Barrett (1958) for the comparison I make between Plato's dualism and the *yin* and *yang* symbols of Daoism.

1 Western world tends to presuppose that the self exists as “a self-centered
 2 maximizer of its own best interests” (Ivanhoe 2017, 4) fragmented from the
 3 world it participates in, as P.J. Ivanhoe (2017) notes, the worldview that
 4 embraces the oneness of all things regards phenomena in nature as akin to
 5 different organs in the human body: just as each individual organ cohesively
 6 interacts with others to maintain the healthy human body, so too does
 7 everything in nature, from this perspective, relationally exist and cohesively
 8 interact with each other to make up the oneness of all things.

9 While perhaps any talk of “oneness” or “unity” may sound empirically
 10 suspicious, uncomfortably esoteric or even downright mystical to skeptical
 11 readers, it should be noted that the position at hand is compatible with
 12 naturalism.³ To this extent, consider the following example. In a certain sense I
 13 can acknowledge that the natural world and myself are unified insofar that I
 14 cannot exist without it: I depend on its vegetation and animals for food, I drink
 15 its water, I live on its land and I require its oxygen to breathe. I might, then,
 16 ordinarily take myself and the natural world to be two distinct entities on the
 17 surface, and yet in a more fundamental way, my dependence on it for my
 18 survival and livelihood indicates a “oneness” I have with it: in contributing to
 19 its health and well-being, I am tangibly contributing to my own health and
 20 well-being and to neglect and abuse it would be to ultimately neglect and abuse
 21 myself.⁴ Importantly, in this case, I can note three distinct features of realizing
 22 the oneness between myself and the natural world: (1) the epistemic feature of
 23 *knowing* that these two seemingly separate entities are in fact one, (2) the
 24 ethical feature of *treating* the natural world as one with myself to live a good
 25 life, and (3) the phenomenological feature of *experiencing* myself and the
 26 natural world as one so that I am not solely theoretically aware of the oneness
 27 at hand and disingenuously going through the motions of preserving it.⁵ On the
 28 larger scale, the Daoist understanding of oneness and, accordingly, the oneness
 29 that is discussed in this paper can be understood as an extension from my
 30 interconnectedness to the natural world that I’ve discussed thus far to

³In fact, Nelson (2020) makes the compelling case that a Daoist outlook, including its emphasis on the oneness of all things, can be utilized to help humanity form a healthier relationship with the natural world and combat the current ecological crisis.

⁴It is for this reason that I think it is more appropriate to call this worldview an “eco-ontological” position, to borrow Thomas Alexander’s (2013) phrasing, than a metaphysical position, strictly speaking: while embracing the oneness of all things certainly involves a belief about the nature of existence, it can be understood as directly referring to the world in which humans inhabit rather than, say, Plato’s notion of the Forms which refers to a metaphysical plain outside of nature altogether.

⁵An interesting philosophical question remains in respect to why humans ordinarily experience everything that exists as fundamentally separate rather than as one interconnected whole. Both the Daoist philosophical tradition and the science of psychedelics, as we will soon see in Sections II and III respectively, provide accounts for why this is the case, but for readers interested in pursuing this question further, see Heidegger (1998) who, interestingly enough, attributes this phenomenon to the success of Plato’s theory of truth and Merchant (1980) who believes that the Scientific Revolution is responsible for this phenomenological shift.

1 everything else within it, such as “other people, creatures, and things” (Ivanhoe
2 2017, 131).

3 4 5 **Section II: The *Zhuangzi* and Oneness**

6
7 Having established what oneness consists in, one way to make sense of the
8 *Zhuangzi* is to divide it into three parts that correspond to the epistemic,
9 ethical, and phenomenological aspects of oneness that I outline above. On the
10 one hand, one can note explicit references to oneness that the text provides that
11 sheds light on its existence:

12
13 For whatever we may define as a beam as opposed to a pillar, as a leper as
14 opposed to the great beauty Xishi, or whatever might be [from some perspective]
15 strange, grotesque, uncanny, or deceptive, there is some course that opens them
16 into one another, connecting them to form a oneness. (Ziporyn 2009, 13)

17
18 Hence, all things are neither formed nor destroyed, for these two also open
19 into each other, connecting to form a oneness. It is only someone who really
20 gets all the way through them that can see how the two sides open into each
21 other to form a oneness. (Ziporyn 2009, 13)

22 In these two passages, one can observe that the text is attempting to
23 convince readers that apparent opposites such as grotesqueness and beauty or
24 formation and destruction can be understood as possessing an implicit unity
25 (they “open into each other to form a oneness”) that one can see so long as she
26 surpasses the inclination to solely perceive them to be fragmented from one
27 another (“it is only someone who really gets all the way through them that can
28 see how the two sides open into each other”).

29 Furthermore, beyond noting that oneness exists, the *Zhuangzi* also
30 contains passages that attribute *value* to the realization of it:

31
32 Thus, what they liked was the oneness of things, but what they disliked was also
33 the oneness of things. Their oneness was the oneness, but their non-oneness was
34 also the oneness. *In their oneness, they were followers of the Heavenly. In their*
35 *non-oneness, they were followers of the Human.* (Ziporyn 2009, 42; my emphasis)

36 But when you rest securely in your place in the sequence, however things are
37 arranged, and yet separate each passing transformation from the rest, then you
38 enter into the clear oneness of Heaven. (Ziporyn 2009, 48)

39
40 In these passages, one can note that the *Zhuangzi* not only associates
41 oneness with the way things really are, but also with what is “Heavenly” in
42 contrast to the lesser “Human” quality of “non-oneness” or, in other words, the
43 tendency to perceive everything that exists as isolated from other phenomena.
44 As Mark Berkson (1996) points out, this inferior “non-oneness” that the
45 *Zhuangzi* refers to reflects a way of primarily experiencing the world through
46 rational thinking and language which, at bottom, lends itself to separating
47 everything that exists into fragmentary parts. To use the word “dog,” for

1 example, I inevitably have to isolate the animal from its background and
 2 neglect its interrelationship with other organisms to properly conceptualize it.
 3 The same can be said for when one employs the concept “good” as opposed to
 4 “bad” or “subject” as opposed to “object.”

5 What makes the attachment to such “non-oneness” not only epistemically
 6 misguided but ultimately harmful for the *Zhuangzi* is that it stifles an intuition
 7 that humans naturally have that allows them to spontaneously take part in the
 8 Way of existence (or “Dao”) and thus resembles the painful futility of choosing
 9 to resist the currents of a river instead of letting them take their course: “[When
 10 in touch with oneness], one becomes aware of the true nature of reality, the
 11 patterns and movement of nature. One’s intuitions allow one to tap into the
 12 deep, underlying pulse of the Dao, a pulse normally covered up by the static of
 13 human thinking and social constructs” (Berkson 1996, 116). From the
 14 *Zhuangzi*’s perspective, then, there is a natural way or pattern in which
 15 everything that exists follows (the “Dao”) that one naturally has immediate
 16 access to so long as she perceives the oneness of all things; however, the
 17 tendency to perceive oneself and everything in one’s environment as disjointed
 18 that is afforded by the artificial means of conventions of language and other
 19 “social constructs” leads one to become out of touch with this intuition and
 20 therefore painfully out of touch with nature itself.⁶

21 Thus far I have shown the aspects of the *Zhuangzi* that draw its readers’
 22 attention to the epistemic and ethical dimensions of oneness. However, the text
 23 additionally aims to actually *initiate the experience* of oneness. This aspect of
 24 the text is particularly significant because even if one can theoretically
 25 acknowledge that oneness exists and that it is valuable to realize it, it is quite
 26 another feat altogether to be able to actually experience it if over the course of
 27 a lifetime one has become accustomed to perceiving the world and oneself as
 28 fragmented. In the same vein, in contextualizing the *Zhuangzi* in Daoist
 29 history, David Loy (1996) points out that the text would have been aware of
 30 the difficulty of experiencing the realization of oneness through mere choice or
 31 even effort:

32
 33 Daoist history is the story of a progressive decline in our understanding of the
 34 Way. Some of the old sages knew the ultimate, which is that there are no self-
 35 existing things; everything is a manifestation of the Dao... After that, people came
 36 to see things as truly discrete, the world became a collection of objects, yet even
 37 they did not use discriminative thinking to understand the world. Once people
 38 employed and became trapped in their own dualistic concepts, the Dao was lost.
 39 (55)

40
 41 In response to this obstacle, besides directly referencing oneness, Loy and
 42 Berkson point out how the *Zhuangzi* indirectly promotes the realization of it by

⁶It should be noted that this position isn’t saying that language and other social constructs are bad or trivial per se but rather that the *attachment* to these things as the sole sources of truth is problematic because it hinders the realization of the oneness of all things.

1 skillfully utilizing language to undermine the fragmentary perception of
 2 ordinary consciousness that gets in the way of the realization of oneness. Take
 3 the following passage, for example:

4
 5 There is a beginning. There is a not-yet-beginning-to-be-a-beginning. There is a
 6 not-yet-beginning-to-not-yet-begin-to-be-a-beginning. There is existence. There
 7 is nonexistence. There is a not-yet-beginning-to-be-nonexistence. There is a not-
 8 yet-beginning-to-not-yet-begin-to-be-nonexistence. Suddenly there is nonexistence.
 9 But I do not-yet know whether “the existence of nonexistence” is ultimately
 10 existence or nonexistence. Now I have said something. But I do not-yet know:
 11 has what I have said really said anything? Or has it not really said anything?
 12 (Ziporyn 2009, 15)

13
 14 Ordinarily, as dictated by common sense and language, things like
 15 beginning and end or existence and non-existence appear to be neatly distinct
 16 from one another. However, by introducing the self-evidently absurd concepts
 17 of “not-yet-beginning-to-be-a-beginning” and “not-yet-beginning-to-be-
 18 nonexistence” and in turn demonstrating that concepts like beginning and end
 19 or existence and non-existence cannot be neatly separated from one another,⁷
 20 these concepts inevitably become muddled in the reader’s mind, creating a
 21 sense of frustration with conceptual thinking in general. Consequently, such
 22 frustration leads the reader to face the limitations of conceptual thinking and
 23 language altogether and, rather than merely aiming to stupefy readers, the
 24 *Zhuangzi*’s purpose is ultimately therapeutic insofar that it undermines any
 25 attachment to dualistic thinking readers may initially have with the effect that a
 26 realization of oneness comes afterwards: “The reason that *Zhuangzi* dismantles
 27 the usual structure of language and reason is to allow a deeper intuition to
 28 emerge from within and come into play, an intuition that has been obscured by
 29 societal linguistic and conceptual schemes” (Berkson 1996, 116). In this
 30 respect, then, the *Zhuangzi* not only refers to the existence (i.e., the epistemic
 31 feature) and value (i.e., the ethical feature) of the realization of oneness but
 32 also therapeutically aims to facilitate the experience of it (i.e., the
 33 phenomenological feature) through demonstrating the limitations of reason,
 34 language or any other human construct responsible for obstructing the
 35 realization of oneness.

36 37 38 **Section III: PAT and Oneness**

39
 40 Now that the features of the *Zhuangzi* related to oneness have been made
 41 evident, this section of the paper will focus on the aspects of PAT that mirror
 42 them in significant ways. In short, PAT consists in the use of psychedelic

⁷I.e., is the existence of nonexistence existence or nonexistence? What is a beginning if there is also a not-yet-beginning-to-be-a-beginning *ad infinitum*?

1 drugs, including psilocybin and LSD, in conjunction with a trained therapist
 2 (also known as a “guide”) to treat a number of different psychological
 3 disorders. Having been featured prominently in scientific studies and
 4 psychological treatments from the 1950s to 1960s, any further research
 5 concerned with PAT was halted by the 1970s when the American government
 6 criminalized psychedelics.⁸ However, since the early 2000s what has been
 7 called a “psychedelic renaissance” (Sessa 2012) has taken place due to a
 8 number of reasons, including a growing open-minded curiosity on the subject
 9 from newer generations as well as the increasing desperation of the medical
 10 community to seek alternative remedies to help address the deteriorating
 11 mental health of a staggering number of people.⁹ Accordingly, a series of
 12 studies that took place at Johns Hopkins and New York University in 2016¹⁰
 13 that aimed to take account of the effectiveness of PAT in treating a number of
 14 psychological disorders will be significant for our purposes in the following
 15 ways: (1) many participants in the studies phenomenologically went from
 16 feeling stuck in a bleak, fragmented way of perceiving the world into realizing
 17 a blissful state of oneness through the use of PAT — a sequence that mirrors
 18 the therapeutic process of the *Zhuangzi* and therefore the phenomenological
 19 component of oneness it offers to readers and (2) the participants who had the
 20 most profound realizations of oneness were generally the ones who benefited
 21 the most from PAT — a fact that, as I will show in Section IV, supports the
 22 epistemic and ethical features of the realization of oneness that the *Zhuangzi*
 23 refers to.

24 With this in mind, I will now turn to the PAT studies themselves, which
 25 included participants struggling with depression, addiction and existential
 26 distress in response to terminal cancer diagnoses (Belser et al. 2017). As Belser
 27 et al. (2017) note in a follow-up study called “Patient Experiences of
 28 Psilocybin-Assisted Psychotherapy,” the results were promising: for those who
 29 suffered from addiction, about 80% of them remained abstinent six months
 30 after while 67% remained abstinent for a year after. Similarly, among the
 31 cancer patients who had previously been overwhelmed with anxiety and
 32 depression, 80% of them were significantly less symptomatic for at least six
 33 months after the studies took place (Belser et al. 2017). The least successful
 34 treatment proved to be the patients suffering from depression, with more than
 35 half of them eventually succumbing to the same destructive patterns of
 36 thinking in the months that followed the studies (Belser et al. 2017). However,
 37 since a similar percentage of them as the other studies felt that their PAT

⁸The rise and fall of psychedelics in North American history is a fascinating topic in and of itself. For further reading, see Oram (2018), Dyck (2012) and Hartogsohn (2020).

⁹i.e., 1 in 10 people in the world is said to currently suffer from depression, the current opioid crisis, the complexity of treating veterans suffering from PTSD.

¹⁰These are only a couple of studies on PAT and therefore their results should be approached somewhat cautiously. Nonetheless, when considering the number of patients involved in them (80 in total) and how such a large percentage of them, as we will soon see, clearly significantly benefited from PAT in similar ways, I think the results of these studies at the very least are sufficient in suggesting that the patients’ experiences were not anomalous.

1 sessions significantly impacted their lives in a positive way, these results might
 2 just be a sign that depression requires more frequent PAT sessions than the
 3 other disorders.

4 For our purposes, perhaps the most significant aspect of the success of
 5 PAT in these cases was the fact that, consistently, the participants who had the
 6 most intense experiences of what they referred to as “unity” and “oneness”
 7 were the ones who benefited the most from the treatment. An addict named
 8 Charles Bessant, for example, claimed that during his PAT session his “ego
 9 had dissolved... It was terrifying. People use words like ‘oneness,’
 10 ‘connectivity,’ ‘unity’—I get it! I was part of something so much larger than
 11 anything I had ever imagined” (Pollan 2018, 362-363). Similarly, Patrick
 12 Mettes, a man on the verge of death from cancer, noted: “From here on, love
 13 was the only consideration . . . It was and is the only purpose. Love seemed to
 14 emanate from a single point of light . . . and it vibrated . . . I could feel my
 15 physical body trying to vibrate in unity with the cosmos” (Pollan 2018, 342).
 16 And finally, Belser et al.’s 2017 follow-up concludes that “typical themes
 17 found in the majority of transcripts included the following: exalted feelings of
 18 joy, bliss and love... [and] *a movement from feelings of separateness to*
 19 *interconnectedness* (355; my emphasis).

20 Besides what patients experienced at the PAT trials at NYU and Johns
 21 Hopkins University, other studies have also shed light on the connection
 22 between psychedelics and oneness. After surveying over 600 psychedelic
 23 users, for example, Kettner et al. (2019) suggest that there was a significant
 24 correlation with their psychedelic use and an experience of “nature relatedness”
 25 (1) or, in other words, a sense of connection to the natural world – a
 26 consequence that lasted in the months that followed the initial psychedelic
 27 experience.¹¹ In the same vein, one participant exclaimed: “Before [the
 28 psychedelic experience] I enjoyed nature, now I feel part of it. Before I was
 29 looking at it as a thing, like TV or a painting. [But] you’re part of it, *there’s no*
 30 *separation or distinction, you are it*” (Kettner et al. 2019, 4; my emphasis).
 31 Moreover, after interviewing patients in a six-month follow-up who
 32 participated in a study regarding psilocybin’s effects on treatment-resistant
 33 depression, Watts et al. (2017) found that out of the seventeen patients who
 34 therapeutically benefited from the treatment, all seventeen mentioned that the
 35 treatment provided them with a greater sense of connectedness when asked
 36 about what made it effective. One patient in particular who participated in the
 37 study pointed out: “this connection, it’s just a lovely feeling... this sense of
 38 connectedness, we are all interconnected” (Watts et al. 2017, 534).

39 The question of what exactly is happening to the human brain when one
 40 experiences such dramatic, long-term therapeutic insights while participating in
 41 PAT has sparked a lively scholarly debate in the field of psychedelic
 42 research.¹² One leading theory on the matter which provides particularly

¹¹A correlation between psychedelic use and nature relatedness was also observed by Lyons & Carhart-Harris (2018).

¹²For a broad overview of this debate, see Letheby (2021).

1 relevant implications for the thesis of this paper will now be unpacked. As
2 Robin Carhart-Harris et al. (2014) observed when performing brain imaging on
3 people under the influence of psychedelics, what stood out to them the most
4 was how the DMN in the brain appeared to be significantly less active when
5 compared to images of the human brain during one's ordinary, everyday
6 consciousness. The DMN itself is understood to play an "orchestrator" role in
7 the human brain insofar that it regulates other parts of the brain and has been
8 observed to be most active when one ruminates, self-reflects, self-criticizes and
9 thinks about the past and future or, more generally, when the mind is
10 wandering and not focused on a specific external task (Carhart-Harris et al.
11 2014, 6). Furthermore, the DMN has also been theorized to be instrumental in
12 the "construction of mental models," including one's sense of a narrative,
13 consistent self or ego and one's representations of phenomena confronted in
14 the external world (Buckner 2013, 35; Davey & Harrison 2018).

15 The evolutionary purpose of the development of the human brain is clear
16 from the perspective of this theory: by allowing the human organism to
17 construct a coherent sense of self, break down what it experiences into
18 predictable representations and reflect on its past and plan for its future, the
19 human organism can efficiently master its environment and fulfil its survival
20 needs (Andrews-Hanna 2012; Dohmatob et al. 2020). Nonetheless, a peculiar
21 consequence of the evolutionary purpose of the DMN, according to this theory,
22 is that although the DMN may be an indispensable biological tool for human
23 survival, insofar that it practically filters out certain information from one's
24 environment and shapes the information it lets in, the human brain necessarily
25 conceals aspects of the external world and one's relationship to it to fulfil its
26 function efficiently (Carhart-Harris et al. 2014; Pollan 2018). In order to
27 develop a coherent sense of self, for example, one must conceptually
28 distinguish it as separate from everything else in the world that it encounters,
29 including nature itself. While reflecting on an interview he conducted with
30 Carhart-Harris about the features of the DMN, journalist Michael Pollan
31 succinctly expresses this evolutionary worry by pointing out: "the achievement
32 of an individual self... is one of the glories of human evolution, but it is not
33 without its drawbacks... The price of the sense of an individual identity is a
34 sense of separation from others and nature" (Pollan 2018, 304).

35 The DMN can also be problematic, Carhart-Harris et al. (2014) argue,
36 when it is overactive, which they theorize underlies a number of different
37 psychological disorders, including depression, addiction and existential distress
38 since these disorders are marked by "a repetitive, involuntary, and almost
39 compulsory return to specific thoughts" (Kessler 2016, 146). In this respect, an
40 overactive DMN means that activity between other parts of the brain is
41 suppressed, causing one to have stubbornly rigid thinking patterns, chronic
42 self-criticism and a distorted sense of separation from one's surroundings: the
43 cancer patient on the brink of death who suffers from existential distress will
44 spend hours of her day ruminating about the uncertainty of her inevitable fate
45 and, in turn, will become detached from her relationships and daily routines;
46 those who are depressed will equally remain narrowly focused on their own

1 feelings of emptiness and joylessness; and the addict will be trapped in a
 2 vicious cycle of spending her days fixated on seeking the next hit only to look
 3 for it again once the desire is momentarily satisfied, all the while believing that
 4 she is not “the kind of person” who is capable of becoming sober (Kessler
 5 2016).¹³ In the following section, I will show how the DMN, its overactivity in
 6 the cases of these psychological disorders and how it is affected by
 7 psychedelics can allow for a connection between PAT and the *Zhuangzi* to be
 8 made.

11 **Section IV: Comparing PAT to the *Zhuangzi***

13 Seeing that depression, addiction and existential distress are marked by the
 14 sensation of fragmentation from one’s external world, a connection can be
 15 drawn between them and what the *Zhuangzi* calls “non-oneness” since, as we
 16 have seen in Section II, the latter is marked by the painful process of
 17 perceiving everything that exists, including oneself, as isolated from everything
 18 else. To a further extent, a connection can also be drawn between what Loy
 19 (1996) describes as “the story of a progressive decline in our understanding of
 20 the Way” in Daoism in which humanity gradually goes from perceiving the
 21 oneness of the world to being too “trapped in their own dualistic concepts” (55)
 22 to be able to anymore and the evolutionary story of the development of the
 23 DMN. In the latter case, as the development of the DMN helped maximize the
 24 human species’ survival, it came at the phenomenological cost of obstructing
 25 each individual within this same species’ perception of the interconnectedness
 26 of all things — and in extreme cases, it came at the cost of psychological
 27 disorder. However, in the same way that the *Zhuangzi* uses language to jolt
 28 readers out of this painfully flawed phenomenology with the aim to facilitate
 29 the realization of oneness, so too does PAT aim to do the same thing by
 30 temporarily silencing its patients DMN.¹⁴ While there is undoubtedly a
 31 difference in respect to the *degree* to which the *Zhuangzi* and PAT affects
 32 readers and patients respectively since a text cannot possibly hope to affect the
 33 human brain as dramatically as a powerful psychoactive drug can, it is
 34 nonetheless clear that they both set out to cause a similar experiential sequence
 35 by challenging one’s fragmentary or dualistic perception of the world so that
 36 the realization of oneness takes its place. Hence, the *Zhuangzi* and PAT share
 37 the phenomenological feature of setting out to cause one to concretely
 38 experience oneness.

¹³ Observing such commonalities between a number of different psychological disorders, physicians, including Kessler (2016), have argued in favour of a more unified understanding of mental illness.

¹⁴ This is not to say that silencing the DMN through the use of psychedelics alone is enough to catalyze the experience of realizing oneness. Typically, patients require guidance from their therapist during and after their psychedelic experience to properly and safely process its events. Hence the significant role that therapy plays in the effectiveness of PAT.

1 As for the epistemic dimension of oneness, while the *Zhuangzi* explicitly
 2 makes textual references to why everything is one, the successful PAT
 3 experience demonstrates this feature of oneness implicitly. Specifically, one
 4 notable feature of the PAT experiences among patients in the NYU and Johns
 5 Hopkins studies was their noetic quality — that is, the fact that the patients did
 6 not merely interpret their psychedelic experiences to be temporary
 7 hallucinations devoid of facts but as undeniably real. Recall the way in which
 8 the patients Bessant and Mettes as well as the patient from the Watts et al.
 9 (2017) study described their interaction with oneness, for example: “From here
 10 on, love *was* the only consideration . . . It *was* and *is* the only purpose; I *was*
 11 part of something so much larger than anything I had ever imagined; we *are* all
 12 interconnected” (Pollan 2018, 342, 362 – 363, Watts et al. 2017, 534; my
 13 emphasis). While how real an experience feels to someone is not sufficient to
 14 prove that what she is experiencing is actually real,¹⁵ as has been established
 15 already in Section I, since the belief in the oneness of all things is not
 16 empirically dubious nor incompatible with naturalism and the realization of
 17 oneness was observed to take place so consistently among patients in the
 18 relevant studies, the fact that this realization took place via PAT at least
 19 *supports* the epistemic position that it is real — just as the *Zhuangzi* does.

20 Lastly, the ethical component of oneness that speaks to its value can be
 21 observed in the relevant PAT studies to the extent that patients involved in
 22 them tangibly benefited therapeutically from their realization of oneness for an
 23 extended period of time after it was over beyond phenomenologically
 24 experiencing it and coming out of the experience epistemically confident in the
 25 oneness of all things. Conversely, the “non-oneness” that they experienced
 26 before their psychedelic experiences in which they abnormally perceived
 27 themselves to be isolated from the world cohered with the psychological pain
 28 of depression, addiction or existential distress. In sum, then, from an ethical
 29 standpoint, the PAT studies conducted at NYU and Johns Hopkins bolster the
 30 *Zhuangzi’s* claim that “in their oneness, they were followers of the Heavenly.
 31 In their non-oneness, they were followers of the Human” (Ziporyn 2009, 42).

32
 33

34 **Conclusion: Why the Comparison in the First Place?**

35

36 In this paper, I have demonstrated some parallels between the *Zhuangzi*
 37 and PAT insofar as both mediums promote the realization of oneness. An
 38 interesting point of discussion that I have not covered at length in this paper but
 39 will nonetheless be worthwhile to touch on in passing is what exactly the
 40 significance is of making this particular connection in the first place. For one,

¹⁵In fact, one concern with PAT is that it may cause patients to maintain delusional beliefs afterwards (e.g., that aliens exist) because they feel like everything that they experienced while on psychedelics — no matter how peculiar — was real (e.g., that aliens communicated with them). For further reading on this concern and how scholars have responded to it, see Letheby (2021).

1 psychedelics are rapidly gaining traction in North America as respectable and
2 promising remedies that can help combat mental illness to the point that
3 psilocybin is now legal in Oregon and it seems like only a matter of time
4 before other states and countries follow suit. What this means is that in the
5 following years it will be integral for psychologists, psychiatrists and
6 philosophers alike to dedicate their research to figuring out how to maximize
7 the therapeutic qualities of the psychedelic experience for patients undergoing
8 PAT and, in general, how psychedelics can best be reintegrated into our social
9 fabric.

10 One pertinent obstacle in this reintegrative process that a number of
11 scholars have alluded to is the fact that the therapeutic effects of PAT are
12 significantly dependent on the “set and setting” (Hartogsohn 2020) of patients
13 – that is, the psychological state that a patient is in as she begins her
14 psychedelic experience and the physical and social environment that this
15 experience takes place in. Thus, if a patient is in a precarious state of mind or
16 takes a psychedelic drug in an unwelcoming environment, she is significantly
17 less likely to be therapeutically benefited than if she was in an optimal state of
18 mind and environment when it took place. A question remains among the
19 scholarship of psychedelics, however, about what exactly an ideal set and
20 setting ought to look like to optimize the therapeutic benefits for a patient
21 undergoing PAT. With this question in mind, if, as this paper suggests, a key
22 ingredient of the therapeutic success of a PAT experience is a realization of
23 oneness and the *Zhuangzi* not only lays out the benefits of realizing oneness
24 but also sets out to provoke readers into experiencing, it seems reasonable to
25 me that the text can one day be used as an indispensable tool for psychedelic-
26 assisted therapists to help them guide their patients into realizing the same
27 oneness that is necessary for their path towards mental health. In other words,
28 when the similarities of the *Zhuangzi* and PAT are taken into account, it is
29 plausible that there is a synergy between the two mediums that can be tapped
30 into by psychedelic-assisted therapists. For example, in order to ensure that a
31 patient is in the appropriate “set” in her psychedelic experience, a psychedelic-
32 assisted therapist can assign passages from the *Zhuangzi* beforehand that speak
33 to the oneness of all things or even passages that aim to phenomenologically
34 facilitate the experience of oneness through demonstrating the limitations of
35 language. Alternatively, perhaps the psychedelic-assisted therapist herself can
36 utilize passages from the text to create a strong “setting” for her patient’s PAT
37 experience to take place in.

38 On a smaller scale, I think that the *Zhuangzi* and PAT can be seen as
39 adding interesting layers to the other’s perspective on the topic of oneness. For
40 example, the data on the DMN and how it operates when active and silenced
41 when one is under the influence of psychedelics can perhaps provide some
42 insight as to what happens to a reader’s mind when she is reading a particularly
43 perplexing *Zhuangzi* passage. On the flip side, the way in which there are
44 studies that demonstrate a noetic quality that patients of PAT associate the
45 realization of oneness with and a connection between this realization and long-
46 term therapeutic benefits provides empirical support for the epistemic and

1 ethical claims that the *Zhuangzi* makes about oneness. It is my hope that
 2 beyond what I allude to in this paper, more can be said about the relationship
 3 between PAT and the *Zhuangzi* in the future and that perhaps one day the
 4 former can be noted for its Zhuangist qualities while the latter can be
 5 appreciated as a psychedelic text.

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