

### *Wu and Wo*

What is this undigestible portion, which will not resolve into any identity? A crucial step towards an answer is taken in a famous line from the second chapter of the *Zhuangzi* (Z 2.2.1): *wu sang wo* 吾喪我, or 'I lost myself'. The crucial step is the distinction between the characters, here translated as 'I' (*wu* 吾) and 'myself' (*wo* 我).

The character *wo* 我 is an ideogram of a hand holding an axe, and has been read literally as meaning 'self-holding' or 'self-attachment'.<sup>28</sup> The portion of the self that is never absorbed into any identity, on the other hand, is *wu* 吾.<sup>29</sup> Visually, this character is composed of *wu* 五 (you can see it in the top half), which refers to the number five, but in this case might only provide the sound, and *kou* 口 (the bottom half), which represents an open mouth, perhaps indicating that *wu* 吾 stands for a way of referring to or speaking of oneself – a linguistic indexical rather than a term standing for a defined object.<sup>30</sup>

The *wu* 吾 is thus something that can be pointed to but never identified; it remains always beyond any objectifiable identity – that is, beyond any *wo* 我.<sup>31</sup> A relevant grammatical feature of *wu* 吾 is that it almost always appears in the subject position of sentences and never in the object position (it can be part of a predicate, but only when negated, e.g. 'did not see me' [*bu wu jian* 不吾見]).<sup>32</sup> Thus the *wu* 吾 can grasp at an idea of itself as a *wo* 我, but this idea could always change, and so in that sense our *wu* 吾 is always 'un-selfing'.<sup>33</sup>

One way to understand the situation of the *wu* 吾 is to compare Zhuangzi's framework to an idea presented by the nineteenth-century Danish philosopher and pioneer of existentialist philosophy, Søren Kierkegaard:

*Against Identity*

The self wants [. . .] to savour to the full the satisfaction of making itself into itself [. . .]. And yet what it understands itself to be is in the final instance a riddle; just when it seems on the point of having the building finished, at a whim it can dissolve the whole thing into nothing.<sup>34</sup>

If we rewrite this passage, inserting Zhuangzi's terms, the point comes out more clearly:

The *wu* 吾 wants to savour to the full the satisfaction of making itself into its *wo* 我. And yet what it understands its *wo* 我 to be is in the final instance a riddle; just when *wu* 吾 seems on the point of having the building finished, at a whim it can dissolve the whole thing into nothing.

Closer to our own time, in the twentieth century, some existentialist philosophers would make a grand point of this, adding (in case anyone should be tempted to relax) that deciding on your identity never ultimately settles the question of who you are. Past decisions are always revisable, so the work of choosing who to be is never finished.

For an existentialist (we will examine some sources in Chapter 7), the authentic, honest response to this situation is to sustain a constant sense of responsibility for your own being. You must never allow yourself to believe that nature, culture, heritage or circumstance have settled your identity – your *wo* 我, in Zhuangzi's terms. But there is a contradiction in the existentialist ethic.<sup>35</sup> Suppose that somebody does not *feel* like being authentic. If the existentialist exhorts him with a *demand* to be authentic, then this imposes authenticity as an ethical obligation. Yet authenticity imposed as an obligation seems like a contradiction in terms. The whole point of authenticity is that