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PHI351 — Classical Chinese Philosophy

Final Paper

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Zhuangzi's butterfly dream and the culture of individualism in relation to the cycle of life, (and death)

First introduced by philosopher, Laozi, Daoism was given a literary form in the Dao De Jing in the fourth century BC. Daoist philosopher, Zhuangzi came on the scene in the following century and introduced irreverence as well as humor to the proceedings in a collection of stories entitled Zhuangzi.

In this journal, I will discuss Zhuangzi's butterfly dream in relation to the infinite cycle of life and death within the Dao, and will provide a comparison to our contemporary philosophy of individualism where the more finite culture of separation between the "me" and "other" is used as a form of personal validation.

Zhuangzi's renown butterfly dream traces the one oneiric experience of the Chinese philosopher when he once became a butterly, "showing off and doing as he pleased, unaware of being Zhuangzi," (Ivanhoe et al, p. 224). When he woke up from the dream, Zhuangzi could not tell whether it was Zhuangzi who had dreamt the butterfly or the butterfly dreaming Zhuangzi," (Ivanhoe et al, p. 224). He called this realization "the transformation of things," (Ivanhoe et al, p. 224). Through his journey within this dream, Zhuangzi makes the case

that everything is relative — Zhuangzi's experience of being the butterfly was only one aspect of the dream as the Butterfly's experience of dreaming Zhuangzi might have been the other one. Is Zhuangzi here making a case for moral relativism? For example, if Zhuangzi were alive today, would he ask us to consider the people's pandemic guideline response from the side of a pro-masker as well as from that of an anti-masker because everything is relative? Unlikely.

Zhuangzi's butterfly dream is positioned at the end of *Chapter Two: On Equalizing Things*, throughout which the Chinese philosopher argues in favor of expanding our perspective in order to see the bigger picture and let our awareness become heightened by the possibility that there might be more than one view of a situation (ours). Zhuangzi's point is that questioning something in order to discern reality and illusion will help us gain a higher level of consciousness (Reninger, 2020). Zhuangzi's dream is a metaphor for his personal awakening through the process of self-transformation.

In another passage within the same chapter, we see another metaphor for spiritual awakening:"Only after waking do you know it was a dream. Still, here may be an even greater awakening after which you know that this, too, was just a greater dream. But the stupid ones think they are awake and confidently claim to know it," (Ivanhoe et al, p. 222). That is, our ignorance can be compared to a dream — while we are in the middle of it, we believe it to be real. However, once we wake up, we realize this and let go of our ignorance. A less spiritually developed human being may be unable to recognize he is dreaming. He is more likely to delude himself that he is fully awake.

In the culture of individualism that pervades the Western world, however, there is a tendency to see ourselves as the center of the universe, unquestionably unable to see the bigger picture, since

we experience ourselves as being separate from everything else. Our perception of the world through binary means (“me” / “other”) ultimately makes us feel fragmented and lonely which, in itself, expands the possibility of moral bankruptcy. This is because, if we do not understand that everything that is in the world is in us, we may have less of an incentive to care about our contribution to the world. Zhuangzi’s “transformation of things” is born from and occurs within the DAO that see everything as one, a more morally nurturing philosophy.

Yet, one might argue that Zhuangzi’s “transformation of things” might be a paradox. How could he see more than one perspective when he also states that the DAO experiences everything as one? Why does he question himself on his view of reality? Is there a butterfly that wrote a book detailing her dream about being a Chinese philosopher once? It is obvious that the only reality about Zhuangzi’s dream is that of the Chinese philosopher dreaming of being a butterfly (and not the other way around). It was Zhuangzi’s ability to see the butterfly’s side as a component of himself that turned into a spiritual awakening that ultimately constituted the moral lesson of this dream. This is because “me” and “other” exist in a loop and the Sage who sees things from the point of view of the “other” is in harmony with the Dao as he “stands, as it were, at the center of the circle,” (Fung, p. 112). In other words, there are layers of awareness within the dream that connect the experience to the one infinite element (the Dao).

One extra layer within this dream is that of the “wu wei” concept (effortless action). This is not a state that can be forced, but one that is effortlessly reached by acting in harmony with the laws of nature. That is how Zhuangzi was able to dream to be a butterfly and Zhuangzi was also able to realize that he was Zhuangzi. A good analogy for this is that of learning to swim. Before we can swim, we must learn to float in the water. Frantically flailing our limbs around in the water will

cause us to drown. Once we learn to let go and move according to the laws of nature, through wu wei (effortless action), we suddenly realize that we can float. It is this process of realization and self-transformation that we can learn to swim using all different styles (backstroke, breaststroke, side stroke and ironically, the most complex and intense one — *butterfly* stroke). That is truly when we are at one with the water, nature and therefore the Dao.

The culture of individualism in which we live in the United States, however, will make us look at a simple example as the one of learning to swim as a skill that we have acquired by ourselves. We do not give credit to nature for supplying the water and we do not grasp the process of self-transformation that has to take place for us to learn to swim. Instead, we use this separation between "me" and "other" as a measure of personal validation — I (internal) learned to swim (external) through my own hard work (internal).

This separation between "me" and "other" is what will produce the sense of uniqueness that we crave. In our culture of individualism, there is no room for sharing with others (including nature). We only "feel complete" when we convey that our achievements were reached through our efforts alone. In our *dream*, we do not know what it is like to be the butterfly. We only know what it feels like to be Zhuangzi. What is missing for us is the process of questioning reality vs illusion to reach self-transformation and a sense of spiritual awakening. And since this operation is missing, so is our subsequent recognition of the laws of nature and our ability to effortlessly align with the flow of life that requires us to live in the moment. We are too focused on either being anchored towards the past or *dreaming* about the future. The separation between "me" and "other" is what isolates us from the Dao.

To this effect, Chapter, Zhuangzi writes:“Their division is their completion and their completion is their ruin,” (Ivanhoe et al, p. 218). We can conclude that their division is their ruin. Zhuangzi then continues:”Only the penetrating person knows to comprehend them as one,” because “when you penetrate, you get it,” and when you get it, “you’re almost there. Just go along with things. Doing that without knowing how things are is what I call the Way,” (Ivanhoe et al, p. 215). Here Zhuangzi is saying that we embrace intuitive insight of the Dao through the idea of “wu wei” (effortless action). Be flexible. Let things go. Go with the flow.

Does this mean that in order to be a Sage we should leave our current lives, move to some forest area and stop caring about everything or everyone that we have known so far? Is Zhuangzi telling us to endorse a lifestyle that will see us at the mercy of others? Is he tells us to accept our fate and not care? Unlikely. Zhuangzi is not advocating for us to be victims in life, but he is telling us to consider more than just our perspective, question our reality and become aware of our surroundings in order to live in harmony with it. The concept of “wu wei” is the equivalent of doing “nothing with purpose” (DCD, 2017). We must care, just not only about ourselves and our point of view.

Making a distinction of something is ruinous, Zhuangzi says, because there is no distinction. So, let’s take the example of the distinction we make between “construction” and “destruction”, in relation to a table. When you make a table out of wood, “from the viewpoint of the table, this is an act of construction, But from the viewpoint of the wood or the tree, it is one of destruction,” (Fung, p. 112). In other words, depending on what side you observe this distinction, it will feel like there are two, though from the point of view of the Dao, there is only one as it is part of the continuous cycle of life for the Dao.

So, if the “transformation of things” is a constant element of the cycle of life, how does death fit into this equation? In Western society, death is seen as the end of life. Death is yet another separation for us. As birth is the construction of life, death is the destruction of it. We also tend to glorify sorrow in death and we tend to measure our love of the beloved person (or pet) who passed on by how much we are hurting when they die. For example, some people wait months or years before they decide to adopt another pet because they feel that they cannot “replace their recently departed dog” (even though, there are thousands, if not millions, of abandoned pets who need a good home, at all times, and the moral thing to do would be to take one out of the circle of sorrow that is the dog pound). In this sense, our pain is very ego-centric as it focused on the “me” which is separated from “other”. In the case of the death of a mother or a father, we may even experience a deep depression. In death, as in life, we are islands, the “me” being separate from the rest of society (“other”), still fragmented and therefore, still lonely.

When it comes to Zhuangzi’s butterfly dream, instead, there is also a correlation between his reality vs illusion analysis and the conversation about life and death. We ought to question both processes and wake up from the *dream* with the brand new awareness of our participation in the cycle of life (and therefore, death) within the DAO that sees them as one.

In this context, Zhuangzi’s teachings cannot change the reality of death and cannot make it stop. However, they provide a different side to it. When Zhuangzi’s wife died, for example, a representative of the School of Names, Huizi turned up to mourn her. Once he arrived to their house, he found Zhuangzi “squatting down, beating on a tub, and signing,” (Ivanhoe et al, p. 247). Huizi wondered why Zhuangzi was not crying for her and Zhuangzi responded that at first, he acted like everyone else,

> "but then I considered her beginning, before she was alive. Not only before she had life, but before she had form. Not only before she had form, but before she had *qi*…the qi changed and there was form. The form changed and she had life. Today there was another change and she died. It's just like the round of the four seasons: spring, summer, fall, and winter," (Ivanhoe et al, p. 247).

Similar to the concept of rebirth in Buddhism, where one's physical body goes through a "transformation" and takes on a different form, Zhuangzi's comment about his wife's transmutation is reminiscent to him of the *round of the four seasons*, a natural process that cannot be stopped and must be accepted. In addition, he describes her participation in the cycle of life that, through the DNA that she shared with her ancestors, goes back to a time before she even had form or "qi" (energy). After she grew old in this life and she ultimately passed on, her body was buried. As it decomposed, it became food for worms that, in turn, became food for birds and so forth. That is how we participate in this infinite cycle of life within the Dao according to Zhuangzi. There is another insightful exchange on this issue in *Chapter Thirty-Two: Mister Clampdown Lie.* As Zhuangzi is about to die, he tells his students, who want to bury him lavishly:"I'll have Heaven and earth for a casket, the sun and moon for ornaments, the constellations as pall-bearers, and the ten thousand things as mourners. Isn't everything prepared for the funeral? What could you add?" His students are afraid that "the crows and kites will eat you," (Ivanhoe et al, p. 250). Shuangzi, then, delivers one of the wittiest lines in the book:"Above ground I'll feed the crows and kites. Below I'll feed the crickets and ants. Stealing from one to feed the other would be awfully unfair," (Ivanhoe et al, p. 250). Zhuangi is fully aware of his personal collaboration in the eternal cycle of life.

There is another example in *Chapter Three: The Key to Nourishing Life*, about the time that Laozi and when Qin Shih went to mourn him, his reaction aroused suspicion in other students as they wondered why he did not mourn like everyone else. Qin Shih explained:

> ”Our teacher came because it was time and left when the time had passed. If you are content with the time and abide by the passing, there’s no room for sorrow or joy…you can point to the exhausted fuel. But the flame has passed on, and no one knows where it will end.” (Ivanhoe et al, p. 225).

Using the metaphor of the fuel and the flame that passes on, we are reminded that we ought to focus on the flame’s onward journey rather than on the exhausted fuel. By accepting this notion of the cycle of life and death, Qin Shih does “nothing with purpose” — he does not despair, but trusts the flame’s onward journey.

When Zhuangzi talks of the notion that “perfect people have no self; the spiritual people have no accomplishment; and sagely people have no name,” (Ivanhoe et al, p. 210) to delineate that when someone has a complete understanding of the nature of things, they are not disturbed by emotions. If we could transcend the separation between “me” and the “other”, then we would be like the Sage that is at one with the Dao (Fung, p. 114).

If we could replace the Western glorification of sorrow when dealing with death with the Daoist concept of the “transformation of things”, and we could truly understand that we are perennial participants in this inexhaustible cycle of life, we might not feel so upset when it is out time to die and we might not feel so bereft when our loved ones pass away. This transition happens to everyone and it is just like the “succession of day and night, which cannot disturb our inner peace,” (Fung, p. 114).

Lastly, the story of the beautiful, Lady Li, who was expected to marry the duke of Jin, provides us with an additionally inspiring argument to accept death as a natural element of life. Lady Li was dreading her marriage to the duke of Jin to the point that “her tears fell until they soaked her collar. But once she reached the royal palace, slept in the king’s bed, and ate the meats of his table, she regretted her tears,” (Ivanhoe et al, p. 222). Zhuangzi concludes the parable with a question:”How do I know that the dead don’t regret that they ever longed for life?” In other words, since Lady Li hated the thought of becoming the wife of the duke of Jin before she married him, and then, once she became his wife, she enjoyed it, could those of us who dread the idea of death find that it might be so great that we’ll end up regretting having ever lived? (Slingerland, loc. 52). Therefore, how can we truly know what is good for us before it happens? And when it happens, will we have the ability to let it unfold effortlessly (through “wu wei”) or will we fight against its nature? Will we be able to discern reality from illusion in order to wake up and reach our spiritual awakening?

This is why Zhuangzi’s butterfly dream is so relevant as a way to inspire us to improve ourselves through self-transformation in order to live in harmony with our surroundings and within the Dao.

In our contemporary Western society, we would greatly benefit from incorporating these wise teachings into our everyday lives.

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