

Analysis of Themes in “The Zhuangzi”

Chinese Philosophy
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The work of Zhuangzi is an imaginative collection of stories and advice that attempt to make sense of reality, both in the physical and spiritual realm. Using rich visual imagery and poetic narratives, Zhuangzi offers his wisdom about many aspects of life. Although his style is more straightforward than the Dao De Jing, his work is still open to much interpretation. Descriptions of his philosophy range from mystical, to scientific, to poetic and many non-contingent themes can be identified throughout his work. These themes can at times seem unrelated and possibly contradictory when examined at the surface. However when we analyze these ideas more closely, they converge as a broad application of one attitude and belief.

Throughout the many stories offered by Zhuangzi there are five major themes that recur in his philosophy. These beliefs are the relativity of perception, the concept of non-action, the dichotomy of the physical and mystical universe, and finally spontaneity and its role in nature. These are ideas that can be found throughout the book and reappear in many different manifestations. Although these themes are identified individually, The Zhuangzi is not merely the compilation of them but is instead a collection of chapters that provide different incarnations of Zhuangzi's one philosophy.

The Relativity of All Things

Relativity is perhaps Zhuangzi's predominant theme and it pervades his entire work. We must take care when referring to the concept of relativity because it encompasses many specific ideas. There is not one definition of relativity that can be explained, instead it

can be thought of as an attitude or lens through which all things can be viewed. Among these things are relativity of perception, language and morality.

Relativity affects Zhuangzi's entire philosophy because every thought he expresses is be footnoted with the idea that all things are relative. Zhuangzi puts forth his many ideas but not without qualifying each one with the fact that this opinion and reality do not apply objectively. For this reason he does not offer logical proof of his concepts. Instead Zhuangzi puts forth questions and stories in the hope of gaining an insight into reality. Zhuangzi ask us to question what we think we know, our awareness, and the assumptions that have been put upon us. My favorite story of his illustrates the idea of perceptual relativity.

“Once I had a dream that I was a butterfly, fluttering hither and thither, to all intents and purposes a butterfly. I was conscious only of following my fancies as a butterfly, and was unconscious of my individuality as a man. Suddenly, I awaked, and there I lay, myself again. But, I do not now know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly dreaming I am a man.”

In this story Zhuangzi asks the question, which is the proper reality? Is it possible that we mix our distinction between reality and dreams, and if so do we have any way of distinguishing between the two? Although Zhuangzi himself says that “life is really a great dream,” the point of the story is not to tell us that we might believe in the wrong reality. Here Zhuangzi tells a story and asks a question, but leaves it unanswered.

Zhuangzi is telling us there are no answers, at least not any real ones. Between a butterfly and a man, Zhuangzi says, there is a necessary difference, but whether you believe yourself to be a butterfly or a man, it is just the illusion of perception. It is not important to figure out if you are now dreaming or awake; rather the whole world is a

dream. There is an important distinction between what happens in this world and we must devise ways to function among those distinctions. Zhuangzi's other concepts deal with the world and how to act, but Relativity is innately woven into every one of these constructs continually questions our subjective perception.

According to Zhuangzi's philosophy, it is silly for us to fear death and love life because we do not know what is beyond death. We will perhaps awaken from a great dream and at death begin to live. "How do I know that life is not a delusion?" In regards to life and death we are like the lady Li Chi who cried when she heard that she was arranged to be married. She cried because she loved the life she knew and was afraid to lose it, as we are afraid to lose our life. But when she went to her husband she found that she enjoyed being there and regretted having wept. She could have just as likely been miserable there, and then would be justified in crying, but Zhuangzi says she did not know what was to come and therefore should not have necessarily feared the unknown. Why do we fear death when we know nothing about it? It is not necessarily the end of us, nor is it something great that we should prematurely end our lives to attain. According to Zhuangzi, we have no way of knowing and therefore so should not worry about it. His advice is that for now we should enjoy life and when we die we will find out whether we are now dreaming or awake.

This concern between dreams and reality is a discussion of relative perceptions and the shows the contrast of Mysticism and Rationalism. Many times we see Zhuangzi try to explain reality as best he can. However he always comes to a point where after everything is said, there still exists that which cannot be explained. There is a force or existence beyond our world that we cannot conceive of and that does not fit into our

physical or mental reality. It is the Mystical existence that, like Relativity, qualifies every statement. We speak of life and death as constructs of our physical world but there exists something beyond that. Zhuangzi says “Life and death are all powerful, but they cannot affect the soul. Heaven and earth may collapse, but that will remain. These are things of the physical world. They can be destroyed but the mystical remains. How is this so: From the point of view of difference.” Here we see that even the Mystical barrier is relative.

As mentioned earlier the idea of relativity can also be applied to value or moral judgments. What this means is that while we can create rules and ideas for the correct way of doing things, these do not apply to all things the same. Every entity has its own nature that is generated spontaneously and all things should follow that nature. Zhuangzi explains that people eat meat, deer eat grass and other animals eat other things. He mockingly asks which of these eats the right thing, because it is obvious that what is right for one is different for another.

The mistake would be to believe that any of these preferences are the universal and can be either right or wrong and try to assign the nature of one thing to another. To do so would be harmful because it would be acting unnaturally. Here again we find that we should follow Non-Action and allow ourselves to follow our nature. The example of fish being frightened by a beautiful woman is similar. Beauty, which is preferred even more arbitrarily than food, is not real. There is no thing that is beauty; it is just a perception that is relative based on ones point of view. That point of view of course is dependant on your inner nature and is produced spontaneously.

Non-Action is another concept that appears throughout Zhuangzi's philosophy and at first appears to be more of a prescription or structure rather than a concept. But when we examine it closely we see that the idea of Non-Action is not an individual concept, but more an attitude that is applied to all things.

Wu-Wei – The Principal of Non-Action

Non-Action, which can also be called Wu-Wei, is what I feel to be one of the most subtle and complex ideas in Taoism. It is hard to straightforwardly describe it with a simple definition. However Zhuangzi does a very good job illustrating what is meant by Non-Action through several stories. A large part of the problem arises from the name. Non-Action seems to imply no action. But this idea is actually concerned with acts and action, not the rejection of it. A better translation might be non-interference, because Wu-Wei wants to allow all things to exist naturally. Non-Action tries to describe a way of living and thinking that does not interfere with nature, a proper way to create our relative reality.

It is difficult to explain the difference between Action and Non-Action, but Zhuangzi provides some examples, one of which is the story of Prince Hui's cook. The way he cuts up sections of meat from the bullocks is a great illustration of Non-Action. It is described as a rhythmic dance where every slice is precisely located. His technique is to find the interstice and place the blade in between it allowing the meat to be separated. To do this the cook sees only the parts of the animal and no whole. Because the identity is an illusion and the whole is just relative we can look past this. Non-Action in this sense is simply the concept of Relativity applied to action.

Zhuangzi compares this to an ordinary cook who “hacks” through the animal. This metaphor excellently shows what is meant by Non-Action because we can see that it does mean involvement in the world. He even tells us that there are hard parts where the blade meets difficulty, as we meet difficulty in our lives. The answer is not to bow out, but to fix your eye and gently apply the blade. Do not force unnatural actions and your reward is that the blade does not get worn out, which translates in life to happiness and fulfillment.

Non-Action also makes claims about value and usefulness and is concerned with evaluating good and bad. The traditional attitude toward usefulness values things that can be consumed, and that have a specific application. A valuable tree is one whose wood is straight and strong, so that it can be used to make a boat or a ship. In the same way a valuable person is one who is strong and accomplished.

Non-Action is an idea to the contrary. It puts value in non-value and non-being. If we think of a bowl, we might say that the bowl is the wood it is made up, but the concept of non-action would say this evaluation misses the point. The real bowl is the emptiness inside it; its use is in its vacuity. A bowl with no emptiness has no use and it is this emptiness that is as much the bowl and its value as the solid wood that surrounds it. So when we think of Non-Action we do not want to make the mistake of thinking there should be no bowls. Real Non-Action is understanding what makes the bowl valuable and applying that to our life.

As we have said, Non-Action applies to the value of things and here too we see the idea of relativity. Everything is both useful and useless at the same time depending on the point of view and the application. Further there are different types of use and

Zhuangzi has his own opinion of which is preferable. There is the immediate and consumable use which society typically puts value in. Non-Action however values and describes a different type of use, one that is differed.

Zhuangzi gives us an example of this type of use in the sacred Li tree. This tree was said to be marvelously huge; the smallest branches could have made an entire boat. However it was never cut down to be used. The reason is that the wood of this tree is warped and knotted. Anything that was made of it would rot or break down, and consequently it was passed by for many years to grow old.

The tree was fittingly said to be “good for nothing.” This is a value judgment based on society’s consumable valuation. Zhuangzi says that orange, pear, and pumelo trees are considered valuable and are therefore cut down in midlife. By their own value they injure themselves, but through Non-Action the Li tree was able to avoid this fate. That is how it attained its present use. In the same way Zhuangzi’s proverbial sage has experienced many times in his life when he was in danger, but through Non-Action he was able to attain the use he has today. The important point to this story, concerning non-action, is that Zhuangzi is not saying the tree should be useless. He thinks that use is important, but that we should try for a different kind of use through Non-Action.

The Mystical Nature of the Universe

The third major theme presented by Zhuangzi is that of Mysticism and it is this concept that most distinguishes his work. Zhuangzi speaks eloquently about that which he knows, but accepts that which he cannot know. It is this proclamation of ignorance that is most intriguing. He attempts to explain the universe as he sees it, but at the end of that

he feels that there is something else there that you really can't name or put your finger on. This is something that can't really be described or known. He takes a somewhat agnostic attitude toward this and says, "Knowledge that stops at what it cannot know is the ultimate." This ultimate is what I call his Mysticism and it creates an interesting ceiling to his philosophy, where words stop being useful. This sometimes makes his work seem to have two characteristically different styles, both rational and mystical. However again this distinction is just an illusion and it is really a philosophy that describes one idea that exists where Mysticism and Rationality meet.

Zhuangzi tells a story of the time when he saw piglets hanging around their dead mother. After a while they looked at their mother and went of on their own because they realized that this was no longer their mother. He explains that, "what they loved was their mother, not the body which contained her, but that which made the body what it was." Even the litter of pigs can recognize that there is something to life beyond that which is physical. Zhuangzi does not attempt to detail exactly what this is; he is content to acknowledge that it exists as a mystery.

Many religions attempt to give supernatural causes and controls to worldly events. Further they try to explain these supernatural existences in natural terms, usually manifested in an anthropomorphic god. Zhuangzi's Taoism includes the belief in heaven, but does not try to explain it in this same way. He attempts to explain that which can be explained and not explain that which can't be. Zhuangzi's philosophy is both descriptive and proscriptive in that he attributes cause and effect to the rules of nature and both explains the universe as well as try to elucidate a proper way in which to live. The philosophy is concerned with the physical universe and its workings, not that of an

intentional god. This part is thought to be the rational side whereas his thoughts on the ultimate are considered to be heavenly. Taking this point of view it might seem like these explanations are in opposition to each other. But when we consider the fact that it is just one idea that addresses one thing taking two forms, Zhuangzi is really commenting on reality. Zhuangzi explains this by saying, “What is beyond the world, the sage leaves as it exists... What is within the world, the sage discusses but does not pass judgment.”

What is interesting about this attitude is that it places an importance on the physical world, much like Hinduism or Confucianism. Whereas in religions like Christianity, the physical world is thought to be inferior and the goal is to reject it and go toward heaven. Although Zhuangzi says that it is an illusion, we still must recognize that the illusion exists and live within it.

The principal of Spontaneity says that all things contain an inherent power or strength that comes from their own essential being and inner nature. These things carry with them a natural potential guided by an unseen cause, which commands their growth. This cause is not external, but internal to the thing. There are however many external forces that can have their influences but do not change their nature.

Zhuangzi commented that plants seem to come up from the ground randomly, with no obvious external cause. Many religions attribute this to god who exerts his planned will. Taoism however says that these plants grow because of Spontaneity, which is inherent in them. However what this spontaneity is cannot be explained. Zhuangzi says that our emotions spring up like mushrooms, and we cannot simply “lay our finger upon their cause.” Here we see how spontaneity is one of his mystical ideas, because he claims that we just do not know where they come from. Without emotions he would not

be himself and with him the emotion would not exist. He even postulates about a soul saying this might be part of the cause, although its existence is “wanting.”

People have an inner virtue and have emotions that are aroused by spontaneity, but are unique because we have the ability to deny our nature and act against it. Non-Action allows us to realize our natural forces and relates to Spontaneity.

As we discuss these different concepts it is easy to see how these themes rise up and distinguish themselves. However if we think about what they are trying to say we can see how they all point to one idea of the universe, and that it is in the language alone that they are distinct. As we point to the moon we must not mistake the finger for the moon, and in the case of Zhuangzi realize that although there are many fingers, they all point to the same moon.