

Zhuangzi on Death

I Introduction

Not surprisingly, death has been a long-lasting topic in philosophy. Plato, in the *Phaedo*, even described philosophy as “the practice of death”. Interestingly, western philosophy has a history of focusing on one’s own mortality and death has been understood as an event in which “each man would discover the secret of his individuality¹”. Ancient Chinese ethics, on the other hand, has an emphasize on the social aspect of death: other people will die, what shall we do with it? The passages in the book *Zhuangzi* on the topic of death appear to be surprising and seemingly self-contradictory at first glance. Regarding his own death, Zhuangzi refused a burial on his deathbed:

“... The disciples replied, 'We are afraid that the crows and kites will eat our master.' Zhuangzi rejoined, 'Above, the crows and kites will eat me; below, the mole-crickets and ants will eat me: to take from those and give to these would only show your partiality.’”

The passage shows an extremely rational and, to some extent, a bit callous attitude towards death. And we can find the same attitude in the passage on the death of Zhuangzi’s wife. When Zhuangzi’s friend Huizi came for mourning, Zhuangzi was “squatting down, beating on a tub, and singing”. Of course, Huizi got surprised and questioned Zhuangzi, in replying to which, Zhuangzi gave a speech of how death is merely a natural change. Yet the passage on Zhuangzi’s mourning of Huizi seems to suggest a different attitude, a much tender and humane one. When Zhuangzi passed by Huizi’s grave, he returned and sighed “since he died, I have been without material. I have no one to talk to.” On the surface, Zhuangzi’s attitudes on death seem to be self-controversial. Yet it is unlikely that this is the case of Zhuangzi being sloppy, since how to face death is a key topic of philosophical debate in Zhuangzi’s time. Different schools give different answers to the question. For example, the Confucianists suggest treating death as a big moral event, especially when one’s parent passed away. The appropriate way to handle such moral event is to practice excessive rituals and prolonged mourning. The Mohists, on the other hand, argued against extravagant ceremonies and promoted moderate funerals. The paper seeks to resolve the tension in Zhuangzi’s arguments on death and to better understand what attitude Zhuangzi suggests for us to take in facing death.

The short answer is that Zhuangzi is not promoting a purely rational and anti-sentimental attitude towards death. There is nothing contradicting here, as different passages in the book *Zhuangzi* focus on different aspects of the understanding of death. From a rational point of view, Zhuangzi understood death as merely a natural change. From a sentimental point of view, Zhuangzi explained why such change, the death of closed ones, is heart-breaking: “I have no one to talk

¹ Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death*, trans. Patricia M. Ranum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 110.

to". As Olberding suggested, "The challenge of death consists in the way it unmakes what companionship with others makes."² The rational component helps relieve the emotional component but is not meant to replace it. After all, death is a complicated enough problem that cannot be explained in one line or from a single viewpoint. Our answers provide a possible understanding of Zhuangzi's view on death and potentially helps with understanding Zhuangzi's philosophy. One may agree or disagree with Zhuangzi's view on death. Regardless, his viewpoint provides a perspective that worth thinking of in our reflection on the ultimate problem of death.

The rest of the paper is organized as following: Section II reviews passages in the book Zhuangzi on death and Section III discusses the Zhuangzi's view on death and makes connections to Zhuangzi's philosophical system.

II Literature Review

The paper focuses on three important passages in the book Zhuangzi on the topic of death.

The first passage is in Chapter 32. Zhuangzi was on his deathbed and his disciples proposed to give him a grand burial. Zhuangzi, however, suggested to simply throw his corpse out:

"I shall have heaven and earth,' said he, 'for my coffin and its shell; the sun and moon for my two round symbols of jade; the stars and constellations for my pearls and jewels; and all things assisting as the mourners. Will not the provisions for my burial be complete? What could you add to them?"

He further suggested that burial to protect the corpse from the crows and kites is simply "partiality". Afterall, "Above, the crows and kites will eat me; below, the mole-crickets and ants will eat me."

The second passage is in Chapter 18 on the funeral of Zhuangzi's wife. When Zhuangzi's friend Huizi came for mourning, Zhuangzi was "squatting down, beating on a tub, and singing". Huizi got surprised and questioned Zhuangzi. Zhuangzi replied:

"... When she first died, don't you think I was like everyone else? 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 was *qi*. In all the mixed-up bustle and confusion, something changed and there was *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...She was resting quietly, perfectly at home."

² OLBERDING, AMY. "Other People Die and That is the Problem." The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Early Chinese Ethics and Political Philosophy (2019): 205.

The tone of the first passages above is extremely rational and callous, if not downright cruel. The second passage is rational and calm, with a touch of affectionateness.

A much more humane and sentimental passage on death is in Chapter 24. When Zhuangzi passed by his friend Huizi's grave, Zhuangzi told a story of Plaster Monkey and Builder Stone who used to collaborate on a trick: Builder Stone slice off a thin speck of mud in Plaster Monkey's nose. After Plaster Monkey passed away, Builder Stone was once summoned by a lord and asked to do the trick. Builder Stone replied that he was unable to do it because his partner has passed away. Zhuangzi sighed, "after the death of Huizi ,.. , I have no one to talk to."

III Zhuangzi on death

Little is known to us about the historical figure of Zhuangzi. What we know is he roughly lived in the 4th century BC in the Warring States period of China. He was born in Song, a relatively less competitive state in the Warring States period. Some believes that Zhuangzi died at the same year when Song was conquered. Others argues that he lived longer than that. Regardless, Zhuangzi spent his life in a chaotic social situation full of death, poverty and wars. This set the basic tone of Zhuangzi's philosophy. In Chinese culture, Zhuangzi is famous for his argument of Wandering Round and About and Equalizing Things, which are also the names of the first two chapters in the book Zhuangzi. The idea of Equalizing Things is that everything is fundamentally the same and there is no difference between right or wrong, good or evil, beauty or ugliness. Everything is unified and constantly evolving into its opposite side. In his own words:

“‘Bi’, ‘that,’ comes from *shi* , ‘this,’ and this follows from that.” This is the doctrine of the parallel birth of “this” and “that.” Even so, born together they die together. Dying together they are born together. If they are both okay, they are both not okay. If they are both not okay, they are both okay. If they are right in a way, they are wrong in a way. If they are wrong in a way, they are right in a way.”(2)

With the metaphysics picture of Equalizing Things, Wandering Round and About is the ideal lifestyle of Zhuangzi: an absolute freedom without any constraints.

Zhuangzi's understanding on death is in line with his idea of Equalizing Things and his attitude on death is in line with the lifestyle of Wandering Round and About. His argument after his wife's death has in a sense blurred the boundary between life and death. Zhuangzi did not deny the difference between life and death, yet he viewed them as merely different forms of existence. Zhuangzi believes that before everything, there was just “mixed-up bustle and confusion”. Something changed and life come into existence. Another change happened and everything is back into the original form of “mixed-up bustle and confusion”. In Zhuangzi's view, “it's just like the round of the four seasons” (18). He further elaborated that in Chapter 6:

“Death and life are ordained, just as we have the constant succession of night and day; — in both cases from Heaven. Men have no power to do anything in

reference to them; — such is the constitution of things.”

Zhuangzi here has stripped death out of the social meanings attached to it and view death in its bare and simplest form. Generations after generations, people are used to look at death in its disguise. Layers and layers of customs and taboos have been added to death such that people tend to forget or ignore the facts in death. For example, as Zhuangzi bluntly pointed out in his own deathbed, that corpses will rot and dissolve regardless of how extravagant the funeral and the burial is. Human beings cannot alter the fact and facts of death in any sense no matter what value we attached to death or what ceremony we conduct. Zhuangzi’s seemingly awkward words and actions on his own deathbed and in his wife’s funeral can be understand as his effort to tear apart from the values, traditions and the default perspective of death.

Zhuangzi has a deep distrust in our default perspectives. A famous allegory in the book Zhuangzi describes how ridiculous one’s perspective could be: a group of monkeys are first offered with three fruits in the morning and four at night and all monkeys got angry. But when they are instead offered with four fruits in the morning the three at night, all monkeys are pleased though nothing substantial changed here. It is true that one would always occupy perspectives and therefore constrained with the limitation of our perspectives. Yet the default and the most common perspective is the most dangerous one: It is easy for people to forget that they occupy such perspectives and to take the limitations of such perspectives for granted. Zhuangzi believed that some of the most useful knowledges requires breaking out of the default perspectives.

His understanding of the death is one examples of breaking out of the default perspective. In default, death is always associated with sorrow and pain. Zhuangzi, on the contrary, switched his perspective and found comfort in the fact that his wife has returned to the origin on life. By jumping out of the constraints of the default perspective, Zhuangzi’s view on death is more transcending and helps relieving the sorrow of losing loved ones. His idea is closely related to the social conditions at that time. Constant wars between states brought about chaos, poverty and death for common people. With the default perspective, one could be stuck in the idea that life was nothing be suffering. Zhuangzi’s perspective, on the other hand, helps ease the pain.

Zhuangzi also has a deep distrust in values and traditions. He followed the rather-radically skeptical view against values and traditions in Dao De Jing and believed that one should always resist the “great lie”:

“When the great Dao declined, the doctrines of *ren* and *yi* arose...When “knowledge” and “wisdom” emerge, the great lie (大偽)then begins...When [families] are not in harmony, there will be advocacy of filial piety and deep love to children. When a country is in disordered, there will be the praise of loyal ministers.” (18)

The idea is that concepts of virtue and value are often developed in difficult times, and therefore inevitably root from specific worldviews at that time. As worldviews can be corrupted or misguided, the concepts developed therefrom will be corrupted and misguided as well. In a word, the narratives of values and traditions can be oppressive by design.

As we could tell from the text, Zhuangzi's argument on death has extracted death and funeral from the value system. This is in contrary to Confucius, who attached significant moral meaning to funeral and death. For Confucius, the death of one's parent is the most significant moral event one could encounter in life. It turns out the Zhuangzi's worry in value and tradition was not in vain. The Confucian way of funeral, as well as the value of filial piety attached, turned out to be oppressive in Chinese history: people are forced to host extravagant funerals even at the cost of selling oneself as slaves to get the money; prolonged mourning is forced where ordinary life is prohibited, and people who disobey could be thrown into jail. As proven in history, there are practical meaning and insights in Zhuangzi's detachment of death from values and traditions.

Zhuangzi did not self-controversially set up another set of default perspective or values and traditions in substitution to the current ones. So, in Zhuangzi's world in the absence of standard, what should we trust? The solution he gave is to trust nature: to trust what you actually find happening in the world. And by following the nature, one could possess the ideal position of Wandering Round and About. Coming back to our problem of Zhuangzi on death, a universal step-by-step guideline for how one should feel or how one should act when facing death is straightly against Zhuangzi's philosophy. Obviously, Zhuangzi would not forbid grieving for death and order everyone to singing and drumming. Nor would Zhuangzi enforce a purely rational and anti-sentimental attitude towards death.

Zhuangzi values life highly. He once told a story:

"I've heard Chu has a sacred turtle. It's been dead three thousand years and the king keeps it wrapped and boxed and stored up in his ancestral hall. Now, would that turtle rather have its bones treasured in death, or be alive dragging its tail in the mud?" (17)

Zhuangzi's own answer is "I'll keep my tail in the mud". This is in contrast to what a Confucianist Mengzi advocated:

"Life is something I desire; righteousness is also something I desire. If I cannot have both, I will forsake life and select righteousness. Life is something I desire, but there is something I desire more than life." (Mengzi 6A10)

Zhuangzi, for sure, would not place any values or virtues before life as Mengzi did, since values and virtues are all "big lies" to Zhuangzi. It is unlikely that, for Zhuangzi, there exists anything more valuable and cherishable the life itself such that it is worth dying for. It is true that Zhuangzi views death as a natural change. But that does not mean for Zhuangzi, life and death are equivalent.

Therefore, death, the loss of life, is naturally associated with pain, especially when closed ones passed away. This is what Zhuangzi felt at first when his wife passed away. This is also what Zhuangzi felt at Huizi's grave. Huizi is an important character in the book Zhuangzi. He was always arguing with Zhuangzi, trying to prove he himself is the smarter one, and of course always failed. Yet he is probably the closest friend of Zhuangzi. After Huizi's death, Zhuangzi

compared himself to Builder Stone who can no longer perform a dangerous trick after his partner Plaster Monkey's death. He sighed: "I have no one to talk to". The pain of losing loved ones largely comes from the habitual moments when one would spontaneously turn to someone only to realize that he/she will never be there again. "We do not die alone. Rather, our dead take us out when they go. This is the problem of death."³ Zhuangzi would not deny such feelings: from a rational point of view, it is true that death is merely a natural change; yet such natural change as itself can be painful when it happens on the ones we love. Both arguments are in line with his guideline of following the nature. Having a rational understanding of death is not meant for denying, rejecting or completely resolving the pain and grief associated with death. Yet such understanding could help relieving the pain, just as what Zhuangzi did in his wife's funeral. Zhuangzi's understanding of death helps build a graceful and moderate mindset in facing death that avoids violently self-harming agony. That might be why Zhuangzi's mourning for Huizi is gentle and moderate despite their deep attachment.

In conclusion, though Zhuangzi's views on death seem strange and self-contradicting at first glance, we have shown that his views are self-consistent and reside in harmony within his philosophical system. Death, in its essence, is a natural process. Yet we evitable feel its pain and loss. The former helps relieving the latter. Appreciating both sides of Zhuangzi's arguments on death could not only help with our understanding of Zhuangzi's philosophy, but also equip us with the courage and knowledge to face death in our own life,

³ OLBERDING, AMY. "Other People Die and That is the Problem." *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Early Chinese Ethics and Political Philosophy* (2019): 205.