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Confrontations with Death: A Zhuangzian Approach to Mortality*

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Abstract

Since the culture surrounding death in the West is shrouded in fear and anxiety, it is necessary to illuminate the realities of living and what we presume to be its antithesis, death, with notions outside of our normative thinking. This paper works to reframe the subject of death when one is considering: 1) the death of a loved one, 2) one's own death, and 3) the option of self-immolation. I believe an understanding of Dao supplies one with the peace necessary to celebrate death as one might celebrate living. I argue that seeing and living in accord with the virtues of Daoism engenders acceptance of realities beyond our control, which could result in the prevention of severe existential dread and overwhelming suicidal ideation.

Introduction

The work of this paper is merely to discuss the Daoist conception of death in a way that allows new conclusions to be drawn on the subject. When observing Western traditions and normative ideas surrounding death, a great deal of anxiety and separation is often found. The fear of loss and death is a stress that manifests not only in the individual, but in the structural components of our culture and society. Similarly, rooted fears and insecurities about living can compel others to obsess over or long for death, often to fatal ends. The Zhuangzi addresses the source of such dread about living and dying and offers, by example, a means to free one's mind from such thinking. This project is as much personal as it is academic.

This paper will focus on three points related to our feelings about death: 1) how do we manage the death of a loved one, 2) how do we cope with our own mortality and, 3) how do we grapple with the reality of suicide and suicidal ideation. I will address these respectively, using relevant examples from the Inner Chapters of the Zhuangzi translated by Brook Ziporyn, "The Concept of Zhen in the Zhuangzi" by Kim-chong Chong, "Emotions That Do Not Move: Zhuangzi and Stoics on Self-Emerging Feelings" by David Machek, and passages from the Dao De Jing to contrast common Western perspectives of death and life. When discussing Daoism and attempting to make any sort of philosophical claim, there seems an unavoidable element of intentionality that defies the underlying message of spontaneity (wu wei) addressed in the Zhuangzi and in this paper. For this reason, goal-oriented and coercive language has been removed from this project.

The Death of Loved Ones

In chapter three, Zhuangzi tells us a story of his own death. His friend, Qin Yi, cried out a total of three times before immediately leaving the funeral. Yi is then questioned by a disciple, who doubts Yi's commitment to Zhuangzi after his brief display of grief. Qin Yi offers that a greater show would be unnatural given the relationship between death and Dao, "When it came time to arrive, the master did just what the time required. When it came time to go, he followed along with

** For Kellie and Josh, who live.*

the flow” (Zhuangzi, 22-23). This simply means that death is a necessary part of life, coming to each of us in time. Grief, as a part of this, requires no particular effort or show.

This is framed more clearly in the description of how things often regarded as opposed to each other are happening simultaneously due to their place in the Dao. Ziporyn translates this phenomenon in chapter six as “the Singularity” (Zhuangzi, 44), suggesting earlier in the text that this approach allows for an understanding of all things as one within the Dao. It is explained that while the terms we use to relay an understanding of events and ideas seem to be in opposition to each other (heaven and earth, affirmation and negation, fragmentation and destruction, existence and non-existence), they “open into each other, connecting to form a oneness” (Zhuangzi, 13), meaning that without one there would not be the other. For this reason, we can understand them as mutually constitutive.

This idea of oneness is crucial to understand Qin Yi’s point that Lao Dan did what was required of him at the time that it was expected. As stated in chapter two, “When ‘this’ and ‘that’ — right and wrong — are no longer coupled as opposites — that is called the Course as Axis, the axis of all courses” (Zhuangzi, 12), and again in chapter five, “Seeing what is one and the same to all things, nothing is ever felt to be lost” (Zhuangzi, 33). Dao is everything and our understanding of this fact will determine the peace we make with all aspects of life and what we once considered its antithesis.

In the story of Ziji, Ziyu, Zili, and Zilai, four people become fast friends over their understanding of Dao and the harmony they have with it. When they are faced with each other’s mortality, they graciously accept this fate and discuss the transformative properties of such a process. While both Ziyu and Zilai fall terminally ill and handle it with grace and reverence for the changes occurring within their body, the relevant feature for this section is the response of Zili when he visits Zilai. Zilai’s family has surrounded him, weeping hysterically and worrying about the fate of their loved one, but Zili interrupts them and demands they give him room. Zili says, “Ach! Away with you! Do not disturb his transformation!”, then turns his attention to Zilai and states, “How great is the Process of Creation-Transformation! What will it make you become; where will it send you? Will it make you into a mouse’s liver? Or perhaps an insect’s arm?” (Zhuangzi, 45) The response to the death of a loved one should be that of acceptance and celebration, both for the life they lived and for the continuation of them within Dao. They are not gone, but simply transformed.

The Inevitability of Our Own Death

The conversation about the death of loved ones deepens when we take into consideration what the Zhuangzi says about our own deaths. This is where a clear understanding of what the Genuine Human Being is (and other examples of this concept, such as the Consummate Person, or when considering the Chinese, zhen) allows us to hear and understand how we should be striving for a character free of turmoil and fear regarding our lives and the certainty of death.

Zhuangzi writes at the end of the Inner Chapters about the Genuine Human Being specifically, although other examples of the same concept appear earlier. In chapter six, he writes:

The Genuine Human Beings of old did not revolt against their inadequacies, did not aspire to completeness, did not plan their affairs in advance. In this way, they could be wrong or they could be right, but without regret and without self-satisfaction. And thus they could ascend the heights without fear, submerge into the depths without getting drenched, enter the flames without feeling hot. (Zhuangzi, 40)

Simply put, those that were considered Genuine Human Beings did nothing to alter the Course. There was no emphasis on the self that needed developing, improvement, or goal-setting. They put no positive value on being correct and felt no shame from being wrong. When they lived like this, they could navigate and maneuver through the ups and downs of life without being swept away with the banalities and sufferings of living.

According to the Zhuangzi, human beings are inclined towards value judgments, preferences, or emotions regarding one thing or another to make decisions, but the Genuine Human Being does not impose these. They are conditions reserved for the human but should not affect the heavenly. As Chong puts it, “Zhuangzi expresses the general principle that for the true person heaven and human [action] do not overcome one another. This connotes the maintenance of a harmonious balance between human beings and nature” (Chong, 325). In other words, the Genuine Human Being still feels and exists as human, but does not interrupt the natural flow of events or disrupt the notion of the “Singularity”. When considering life and death, Zhuangzi says this of the Genuine Human Being: they “understood nothing about delighting in being alive or hating death. They emerged without delight, submerged again without resistance” (Zhuangzi, 40). Chong points out that this connotes wuwei, or non-action, as this emerging and submerging will occur without any sort of interference (Chong, 325). Non-action describes the state of affairs for the Genuine Human Being; without this essential knowledge of nature the Genuine Human Being could not be.

Zhuangzi gives us the framework for such a person, telling us that “The Course gives him the appearance, Heaven gives him this form...,” and follows with a complete description of how exactly someone can be considered both human and heavenly in accord with the Dao. He says:

Affirming some things as right and negating others as wrong are what I call the characteristic inclinations. What I call being free of them means not allowing likes and dislikes to damage you internally, instead making it your constant practice to follow along with the way each thing is of itself, going by whatever it affirms as right, without trying to add anything to the process of life. (Zhuangzi, 38)

We must be sure not to let these characteristic inclinations, or subjective considerations of what is good and bad, dictate mental, emotional, or physical health. While we may consider death a bad thing, and expend a great deal of energy on self-preservation, Zhuangzi offers that the strife we feel regarding such realities would be removed entirely if we accepted these feelings as part of the whole and not representative of objective truth. They are a product of our cognitions and respected as such because the human is still essential, but not heeded. It is only Dao, or the oneness of everything, that determines the reality of how things are. Death is not bad because we determine it to be; death is naturally a part of the Course. In one of the dialogues presented in the Zhuangzi, Confucius states, “Death and life, surviving and perishing, failure and success, poverty and wealth, superiority and inferiority, disgrace and honor, hunger and thirst, cold and heat — these are the transformations of events, the proceedings of fate” (Zhuangzi, 36). We could act out against this, try to prevent the fated comings and goings of Dao, but we only hurt ourselves in the process of such efforts.

The Consummate Person, the Spirit-Man, and the Sage are all conceptual tools used for the discussion of wuqing, or passionlessness, as Machek describes it in “Emotions that Do Not Move: Zhuangzi and Stoics on Self-Emerging Feelings.” What is generally understood as emotionlessness, Machek argues, is an etymological inaccuracy that does not fit with the overall interpretation of these sage-like characters within Daoism. He bases this part of his argument on the origin of the

word “emotion,” offering that its very inception, which was based on the Latin verb *movere*, has intended its use to mean quite literally, to move. He goes on to say that “Whenever the mind feels emotion, it must be moved by it, because emotions are conditions of the entire mind. There is no independent faculty of thinking that could remain detached from the emotions, and untouched by their impact” (Machek, 522).

With this understanding of the word and its intended use, it becomes difficult, arguably impossible, to discuss a sage-like person who has emotions yet is unmoved by them. What Machek suggests instead, is one who has these inclinations, but is not damaged by them. He describes the term “passions” as boundless, and uses it to represent what he believes are absent from these sage-like beings (Machek, 529). When considered within the context of the *Zhuangzi*, this description fits quite well. As *Zhuangzi* states, you must “Let yourself be jostled and shaken by the boundlessness — for that is how to be lodged securely in the boundlessness!” (*Zhuangzi*, 20). It is also important to note that this lack of passion has much to do with our acceptance of the insignificance of our current state as humans. It is frequently brought up throughout the *Zhuangzi* that our humanity is not to be confused as something superior to other aspects of *Dao*. We can see this in *Zili*’s remarks to *Zilai* about what he might be after he has died, in discussions of the Great Clump (the Course) which grants credit to *Dao* for the arbitrary assignment of our being, and later when we are told making any sort of demand of Creation-Transformation to be human again is as foolish as a sword asking to only be made if it can be Excalibur. We are told, “The Great Clump burdens me with a physical form, labors me with life, eases me with old age, rests me with death. So it is precisely because I consider my life good that I consider my death good,” followed by, “This human form is merely a circumstance that has been met with, just something stumbled into...” (*Zhuangzi*, 43), and finally:

Now, suppose a great master smith were casting metal. If the metal jumped up and said, ‘I insist on being nothing but an Excalibur!’ the smith would surely consider it to be an inauspicious chunk of metal. Now, if I, having happened to stumble into a human form, should insist, ‘Only a human! Only a human! Creation-Transformation would certainly consider me an inauspicious chunk of person. So now I look upon all heaven and earth as a great furnace, and Creation-Transformation as a great blacksmith — where could I go that would not be all right?’ (*Zhuangzi*, 46)

These three passages work together to demonstrate what our attitudes should be about our own existence and the changes that occur within it. They show us that the ego which dictates our self-importance is misguided and, when looked at from a broader perspective, not conducive to a life in harmony with *Dao*.

When we place such emphasis on a human form, we get lost in the endless possibilities supplied by the Great Clump, we become stuck in the expectations which have already been shown to be false and harmful. There is a finality to our conception of life, just as there is a finality to our conception of death, and it limits our understanding of nature. As *Zhuangzi* states, “If you regard what you have received as fully formed once and for all, unable to forget it, all the time it survives is just a vigil spent waiting for its end. In the process, you grind and lacerate yourself against all the things around you” (*Zhuangzi*, 11). This pain and suffering is avoided if we can situate ourselves in our own mind within *Dao*. Physically, we are already there; it is merely a question of our own considerations and inclinations.

The Question of Suicide

The lessons which relate to our anxieties about death are relevant to a discussion concerning our anxieties about living. In instances where one may feel a very specific sense of despair or dread that may cause one to consider suicide, one must lean even further into Dao and the behaviors of the Genuine Human Being. Our inclination may be to search for greater meaning or purpose in our lives, but a Daoist would suggest that this goes against a genuine or natural self. It is not nature that is absurd, it is the concepts we create to understand nature and living that are off. A Daoist would suggest that such efforts only deepen our struggle and lead us further from harmony.

Regarding the tools we use to affix meaning: language, Zhuangzi says, “What it refers to is peculiarly unfixed. So is there really anything it refers to? Or has nothing ever been referred to?” (Zhuangzi, 11). From this, we can see that our ability to rationalize and make sense of things is a way to confuse ourselves about the reality of nature.

Understanding harmony is common sense, and using common sense is acuity. On the other hand, trying to increase one’s quantum of life is certainly a bad omen, while allowing the heart-mind to use up the qi one has, is to overdo things. For something to be old while in its prime is called a departure from the way of things (dao). And whatever departs from the way of things will come to an untimely end. (Laozi, 55, pp. 163).

This suggests that when we attempt to live naturally, we set ourselves up for more suffering. Seeking the position of rational human being is not conducive to natural life in accord with Dao. We have a tendency in our “deliberate posturing” (Zhuangzi, 10), to diminish ourselves, or “to be old while in [our] prime.” Zhuangzi suggests that we are “held fast as if bound by cords, we continue along the same ruts. The mind is left on the verge of death, and nothing can restore its vitality” (Zhuangzi, 10). The mental gymnastics we utilize to make sense of things is surely the death of our mental health and a detriment to our becoming sage-like. As Zhuangzi suggests, we cannot hope to gain peace if we have not learned to embrace the life given, even when its duration and events are not wholly apparent to us from the beginning.

When considering the cook from Liang in the Zhuangzi, we can see the role of loss of Self and consciousness, or wuwei understood as non-action, in our ability to move through the trials of living. He is praised for his ability to cut meat perfectly, but he replies:

What I love is the Course, something that advances beyond mere skill. When I first started cutting up oxen, all I looked at for three years was oxen, and yet I was still unable to see all there was to see in an ox. But now I encounter it with the spirit rather than scrutinizing it with the eyes. My understanding consciousness, beholden to its specific purposes, comes to a halt, and thus the promptings of the spirit begin to flow. ... When what has no thickness enters into an empty space, it is vast and open, with more than enough room for the play of the blade. That is why my knife is still as sharp as if it had just come off the whetstone, even after nineteen years. Nevertheless, whenever I come to a clustered tangle, realizing that it is difficult to do anything about it, I instead restrain myself as if terrified, until my seeing comes to a complete halt. My activity slows, and the blade moves ever so slightly. Then all at once, I find the ox already dismembered at my feet like clumps of soil scattered on the ground. (Zhuangzi, 22-23)

The cook is not only losing Self to overcome the obstacles the gristly portions of the ox present, he is also moving the blade as the meat and bones of the ox permit. He is not forcing cuts, causing unnecessary harm to his knife by nicking it against these tougher spots. He does not advocate for his own skill, but merely gives credit to the Course for guiding his blade. In relation to suicide, the resistances and entanglements of living are not as debilitating or life-ending as they often feel in the moment. Sometimes it is merely a case of trusting a sense of spontaneity to maintain harmony with the Way, as opposed to our own thoughts fettered with fear and uncertainty. The cook still moves and acts, but without contrivance, which would mar the efforts put forth by branding them with intent. It is because he chooses to begin, persist, and end his task with a sort of dissociation from Self or consciousness and a reliance on the “promptings of the spirit” (Zhuangzi, 23), that he can perfectly cut meat and never dull his blade.

From a Daoist perspective, the ego, which helps define Self, must be removed for our mental states to be calmed and our physical bodies to be preserved against any harm we might inflict upon ourselves. When one accepts nature as it is, and moves away from the human delineations of good or bad and existence or non-existence, “He takes all that his consciousness knows and unifies it into a singularity, so his mind always gets through unslaughtered. His death will be just like choosing a day to climb off into the distance” (Zhuangzi, 34). One will not need to take one’s own life.

Conclusion

The primary implication of Daoism on all manner of death as it relates to us is that it simply matters no more and no less than any other part of our human experience. Since we arbitrarily assign value we create the oppositional understandings of things that eventually lead to suffering and unhappiness. The Genuine Human Being or any of the sage-like beings discussed throughout the Zhuangzi and the Dao De Jing are meant to be our guides or models for natural living and a measure of societal harmony (Laozi, 7, pp. 86). It is through their existence that we are meant to come to understand Dao, since it is not something which can be spoken and grasped.

Once we have achieved this state of being, we will know peace in relation to our existence and human feelings without being swept away by passions. We will not fear the death of loved ones or our own death, and we will not long for premature death because we understand that nature will bring it to us in due time. There will be no hardship that imbalances us or moves us from stability. Although we will still be free to experience such hardships, we will not be knocked from the Course and into suffering from them. We are to love the Course. In doing so, we will love every possible hardship, victory, death, birth, physical or mental ailment, prize, success, or loss the same, as they all make up the Singularity.

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