The Philosophies of Zhuangzi and Camus

Term paper, Chinese Philosophy

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1 Introduction

Ancient Eastern thought has been a source of inspiration for many Western philosophers. At the same time, some conclusions have been arrived at independently by Eastern and Western thinkers. In this paper, we present the main characteristics of the Daoist Zhuangzi and the Absurdist-Existentialist Camus and compare their views. While the background and circumstances of these two philosophers could not be more different, we find that their areas of investigation have considerable overlaps, and some of their conclusions also bear a resemblance. We suggest that a combination of these two schools – and of Western and Eastern thought, – might provide the individual with a better approach to life.

2 The Daoism of Zhuangzi

2.1 Historical Background

To understand the origin of the main schools of thought in China (Confucianism and Daoism, in particular), one must first look at the historical background of the time. This period is usually referred to as the *pre-Qin period in Chinese history*.

During the *Spring and Autumn Period* (770-476 BC), China had numerous states with a single central government lead by the *Zhou dynasty*. The Zhou's feudalism meant that the emperor's

power was based on land distributed among his relatives. Due to this blood-connection, the emphasis was on rituals instead of law (*rituals & music*): mutual trust was maintained and re-established through social practices.

After some generations, land started to get fragmented and relationships between landlords became too distant to matter. This eventually led to the fall of the Zhou and the beginning of the *Warring States period* (475-221 BC). The Warring States period brought about great social changes, and this, in turn, gave rise to several new schools of thought. Thus, this period is also referred to as *the Period of 100 Schools*. We can observe three main factors contributing to this flourishing philosophical scene.

The first factor is democratizing access to knowledge. During the Zhou rule, knowledge was occupied by the nobility, with common people having no access to it. After the breakdown of feudalism, many administrators lost their positions and thus started teaching to earn a living. Many schools of thoughts can be traced back to these individuals, and even to some former Zhou ministries.

The second factor is the lack of oppressive central power. Following feudalism, there was no central government to coordinate and restrict knowledge anymore. As a result, different states could host different people representing various schools of thought, who would often move between these states. This is the period of the *wandering intellectuals*.

Third, the numerous wars and frequent changes in the Warring States period was harsh on the individual. People started to look for ways to face suffering and also started reflecting on the meaning of life and the universe.

The first emperor of the Qin-dynasty (221 BC –), Qin Shihuang, having gained control over China, ordered the burning of books and murder of many independent thinkers. There was no room for free thinking anymore. Thus, this marked the end of an era of flourishing Chinese thought.

2.2 Daoist Thought

Confucianism and Daoism are the two most influential schools of thought in ancient China, laying the foundation for most subsequent philosophical investigations. The Confucian school

has a more pragmatic focus on social responsibility, rituals, and hierarchy. Daoism, on the other hand, has a more relativist, passive, naturalist, sometimes mystical approach.

The main two thinkers associated with Daoism are Laozi and Zhuangzi. The two foundational collections often associated with them are the *Daode Jing* and the *Zhuangzi*, respectively. However, one must avoid the mistake of thinking this school originates from only a few people. Just like the Bible, when viewed as the philosophical and cultural foundation of Western culture, these two works are also collections of passages from numerous writers spanning over generations. Similarly, just like the case with Jesus, the figures of Laozi and Zhuangzi we know today are probably idols roughly based on historical figures but exhibiting significant divergence. In fact, the mere existence of these two thinkers is questioned by some scholars.

Central to Daoism is the abstract concept of *the Dao*, often translated as *the Way*. While the term is highly abstract and loaded, we can conceptualize the *Dao* as being in harmony with the natural way, or ways, of being. Daoist thinkers tend to reduce questions of metaphysics and ethics to this concept. The other central term is *wu-wei*, that can be translated as inaction or action without intention, and it refers to being aligned with the natural disposition of things.

2.2.1 Wu-wei and Relativism

The nature of *wu-wei* and the relativism of Daoism is elegantly illustrated by the following section from Laozi's *Daode Jing*:

> *When the people of the world all know beauty as beauty,*
> *There arises the recognition of ugliness.*
> *When they all know the good as good, There arises the recognition of evil.*
> *Therefore:*
> *Being and non-being produce each other;*
> *Difficult and easy complete each other;*
> *Long and short contrast each other;*
> *High and low distinguish each other; [...]*
> *Therefore the sage manages affairs without action (wu-wei)*
> *And spreads doctrines without words.*
> *All things arise, and he does not turn away from them.*
> *He produces them, but does not take possession of them.*

In the first part of this text, we can catch a glimpse of the relativistic nature of Daoism. According to this claim, distinctions arise from the relation of things to other things. For instance, beauty as a concept is not inherent to any objects; it is applicable only if we can compare it to other objects. By such comparison, we can define an ordering relation between objects; essentially a scale, with *ugliness* and *beauty* at the two ends.

This logic can be applied to all concepts we use to structure our world through our human perception. Some action is *good* only insofar as we can relate it to something *bad*. Similarly, an object can be identified as a *table* only if we can contrast its *table-ness* to other objects' *non-table-ness*. These distinctions seem objective, only because they are deeply rooted in our language and perceptual system.

The goal of the sage is to overcome these distinctions and false dichotomies and see the world for what it really is. The sage achieves this by giving up selfish action – following *wu-wei* – and refraining from using words. Essentially, the sage observes the true nature of things – the *Dao* – and acts accordingly, without imposing flawed human views represented by words, social gain, or possession.

2.2.2 Radical Prespectivism

The following passage from *Zhuangzi* illustrates the stronger notion of perspectivism and subjectivism of Daoism:

> *Formerly, I, Zhuang Zhou, dreamt that I was a butterfly, a butterfly flying about, feeling that it was enjoying itself. I did not know that it was Zhou. Suddenly I awoke, and was myself again, the veritable Zhou. I did not know whether it had formerly been Zhou dreaming that he was a butterfly, or it was now a butterfly dreaming that it was Zhou. But between Zhou and a butterfly, there must be a difference. This is a case of what is called the Transformation of Things.*

While on the surface the preceding quote might seem like an entertaining yet pointless philosophical allegory, the famous butterfly story of Zhuangzi can give rise to a myriad different interpretations, each giving unique insights into existence.

The first idea we can gain from this story is *relativism* and *subjectivism*. In our daily lives, we are used to the thought that waking life is more *real* than dreaming life. What makes us so certain about this, though? What if the perspective of the butterfly dreaming that it was Zhuangzi has just as much validity as Zhuangzi dreaming he was a butterfly? This leads us to one of the central thoughts of the Zhuangzi: *perspective pluralism*. Simply put, this idea claims that all perspectives have equal validity, given that we have no objective perspective from which to judge them.

The other central idea we can catch a glimpse of in this story is that of *natural transformations* (the *Transformation of Things* above). According to the Daoist view of the world, our existential predicament is being inextricably tied into interweaving cycles of darkness and light, sadness and joy, living and dying. We are all embedded in the same natural process that makes us spontaneously emerge from undifferentiated matter – *birth* –, interact with our environment according to (or against) our natural tendencies – *life* –, and eventually return to undifferentiated form – *death*. The butterfly-dream can be interpreted as a metaphor of this: waking up is temporarily emerging from dreaming life, and falling asleep is transforming back.

Zhuangzi says, *"I did not know whether it had formerly been Zhou dreaming that he was a butterfly, or it was now a butterfly dreaming that it was Zhou."* The very act of raising a question like this is an example of a central idea of Zhuangzi: *wandering beyond*. The inner chapters of the *Zhuangzi* urge us to reconsider our usual concepts and distinctions and wander beyond the limits of familiarity. By questioning such basic assumptions as the one with the dream, one can detect and eradicate deeply rooted assumptions that define and limit how we see the world. By questioning social dogmas and preconceptions, one can have a life more true to one's natural tendencies, and one can peacefully accept the natural transformations. This state is described as being on the axis of changes and observing the transformations from a quasi-outside perspective, instead of being affected by them too much.

3 The Absurdism of Albert Camus

Albert Camus was a 20th-century French philosopher and Nobel Prize-winning author. He is often labeled an existentialist, a claim that he himself rejected, preferring the term *absurdism*. His defining philosophical work, *the Myth of Sisyphus*, compares existence to the ancient Greek

story of *Sisyphus*, who was condemned to repeatedly push a rock up a mountain, only to see it roll back down again and again, forever. Camus' main claim is that one should embrace this absurdity instead of escaping into *suicide* or false *hope* (which he called *philosophical suicide*).

3.1 Mortality and Reflection

The following section illustrates Camus' understanding of the reflecting mind.

> *I know another truism: it tells me that man is mortal. One can nevertheless count the minds that have deduced the extreme conclusions from it. It is essential to consider as a constant point of reference in this essay the regular hiatus between what we fancy we know and what we really know, practical assent and simulated ignorance which allows us to live with ideas which, if we truly put them to the test, ought to upset our whole life. Faced with this inextricable contradiction of the mind, we shall fully grasp the divorce separating us from our own creations. So long as the mind keeps silent in the motionless world of its hopes, everything is reflected and arranged in the unity of its nostalgia. But with its first move this world cracks and tumbles: an infinite number of shimmering fragments is offered to the understanding. We must despair of ever reconstructing the familiar, calm surface which would give us peace of heart.*

What sets man apart is not our mortality but our ability to deeply reflect on this mortality. Our normal state is that of ignorance and nostalgia: As we grow up, we learn to ignore the urgent yet unsolvable question of *death* and keep ourselves busy to distract our minds from reflecting on this. However, once we move – start reflecting –, this peaceful facade *cracks and tumbles*. This is the state of *the absurd*; a state where we can gain a deeper understanding of what cannot be understood, a state which always looms under the surface.

3.2 Separation from the World

According to Camus, the most fundamental desires of people are that of *unity* and *clarity*. These, however, remain forever out of reach.

> *I can negate everything of that part of me that lives on vague nostalgias, except this desire for unity, this longing to solve, this need for clarity and cohesion. [...] I don't know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I do not know that meaning and that it is impossible for me just now to know it. [...] And these two certainties – my appetite for the absolute and for unity and the impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle – I also know I cannot reconcile them.*

The source of Camus' absurd is our consciousness and self-awareness. These separate us from the rest of the world, breaking the unity and leaving us longing for reunion, something we know to be impossible.

> *If I were a tree among trees, a cat among animals, this life would have a meaning, or rather this problem would not arise, for I should belong to this world. I should be this world to which I am now opposed by my whole consciousness and my whole insistence upon familiarity. [...] And what constituted the basis of the conflict, of that break between the world and my mind, but the awareness of it?*

While Camus' assertions seem rather negative and might set the direction towards *nihilism*, this is not the conclusion he makes. In contrast, he claims that the fundamental lack of absolute meaning in the universe empowers us with a radical form of freedom. The *absurd man* embraces the absurd and subjective state he is in and creates his own purpose. He is free to choose his meaning and values, a responsibility akin to *God's*. This final conclusion bears a strong resemblance to other existentialist thinkers like Nietzche or Sartre.

4 Comparison of Daoism and Absurdism

The writings of Zhuangzi and Camus were produced centuries apart. Camus being directly or indirectly influenced by Eastern thinkers is rather unlikely. The two schools, however, have numerous overlaps in the fundamental questions they aim to investigate. While their conclusions and general sentiment are quite different, comparing them can offer us new insights.

4.1 Belonging to the World

Zhuangzi and Camus both agree that the natural state of existence is being aligned with and being a part of Nature, in its broadest sense. This is the original state, from which we diverged.

Zhuangzi, like other Daoist thinkers, believe that humans are corrupted by society, whose pressures and idiosyncracies separate us from the natural state, the *Dao*. Zhuangzi also believes that with conscious effort, unity can be re-acquired, or one can at least get closer to it. This is essentially the way of life endorsed by Daoists: Be in tune with the World around you, accept the *Natural Transformations* governed by the *Dao*, attain equanimity without giving up emotions.

Camus, on the other hand, claims that our separation from the World is a tragic yet irreversible state. Our consciousness and a self-awareness give us the ability to reflect on the World and our place in it, and this, in turn, prevents us from ever being re-united with it. One might flee to *hope* – reunion in the *afterlife*, for instance – or ignorance, but the way to live, endorsed by Camus, is to embrace this absurd state and bear the burden of our freedom.

4.2 Reason and Meaning

Both Zhuangzi and Camus are skeptical of reason and meaning. Zhuangzi's confusing, often seemingly paradoxical parables suggest an irrational element in the World surrounding us. With multiple perspectives equally acceptable, Zhuangzi gives up the notion of an absolute meaning we can get from the Universe. While, for Zhuangzi, this is the natural state of being, for Camus it is the tragedy of existence. While Zhuangzi suggests considering multiple perspectives without choosing a single one, Camus, on the other hand, encourages us to take the responsibility of defining our own, subjective meaning, without relying on absolutes.

4.3 Equivalence of Perspectives

As mentioned previously, a central point in Zhuangzi's thought is the equal validity of different, often contradicting perspectives, a kind of *radical relativism*. We can find similarities in Camus' thought in that, for him, all beliefs deriving objective meaning are equally wrong and self-deceptive. Both views have a curious self-contradiction built into them: applying these claims

to the claims themselves questions their own validity, or at least their universality.

4.4 The Absurdity of Being

Despite the differences between the two thinkers, one can not help but feel some similarity in the way they view the world. The inclination towards irrationality, subjectivity, and paradox in Zhuangzi's works suggest an absurd, somewhat ironic stance towards the world. One could suggest that Camus writes *absurd tragedy*, while Zhuangzi works with *absurd comedy*.

4.5 Reconciliation with Mortality

For Camus, mortality and our ability to reflect on it is the ultimate source of absurdity. This, along with our painful realization our irreversible separation from Nature (similar to the classic story of Adam and Eve), is precisely what constitutes the *absurd* nature of our world. Camus suggests to embrace this state, accept our mortality, and derive a kind of freedom from it.

Zhuangzi encourages us to realize that death is just one of the many *natural transformations*; it is the way things are. In a famous story, a contemporary of Zhuangzi finds him happily singing after his wife's death. When he requires an explanation, Zhuangzi replies:

> *When she first died, do you think I didn't grieve like anyone else? But I looked back to her beginning and the time before she was born. Not only the time before she was born, but the time before she had a body. Not only the time before she had a body, but the time before she had a spirit. In the midst of the jumble of wonder and mystery, a change took place and she had a spirit. Another change and she had a body. Another change and she was born. Now there's been another change and she's dead. It's just like the progression of the four seasons, spring, summer, fall, winter.*

That is, what for Camus is a tragedy we have no option but to accept, is the natural state of being for Zhuangzi. One could argue that the neutral stance Zhuangzi takes to such matters makes him more consistent in his philosophy; after all, if we question absolute values, what makes death a tragedy?

4.6 Living a Fulfilling Life

When it comes to living a fulfilling life, both philosophers state accepting our situation as the foundational step.

The life of Camus' *absurd man* is that of embracing the *Absurd*. The ultimate ideal is a *smiling Sisyphus* who chooses to enjoy his eternal damnation. The absurd man thus faces the immense responsibility of defining his own values in a world devoid of absolutes.

For Zhuangzi, the right way to live is to reserve judgment and learn to entertain different perspectives without falling prey to any of them. One must find his place at *the axis of the Dao*, where he is aligned with Nature, observing but unfettered. As one scholar interpreted:

> *Our existential predicament is being inextricably tied into interweaving cycles of darkness and light, sadness and joy, living and dying; we should achieve a tranquil appreciation of the inevitability of these experiences.*

5 Conclusion

As we have demonstrated in the preceding sections, the thoughts of Zhuangzi and Camus are rather different, yet they can form an interesting and valuable unity. By comparing and contrasting their perspectives on the central questions of meaning, objectivity, and the right way to live, one can form a more comprehensive approach to life, maybe even something we could call *absurdist daoism*.

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