

Chinese Philosophy - Homework 5.

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Text

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.

(Zhuangzi)

Comments

While on the surface it 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** (*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 (and vice versa).

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.

References

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy – Zhuangzi

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/zhuangzi>

Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy – Zhuangzi

<https://www.iep.utm.edu/zhuangzi>