

Suggesting Without Recommending: Relativism in the *Zhuangzi*

Alex Y. Tiempo

Cebu Normal University, Cebu City, the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

At first glance, one sees an apparent contradiction upon reading the title of this article. This is due to the fact that when one suggests, the implication is that one is at the same time pushing for a certain course of action or, perhaps, is trying to endorse some product. It would be quite absurd if one says “You do this” and then tell this same person “You do the opposite of what I tell you”. This notion of suggestion, nevertheless, is not to be equated with the way we understand the thoughts of the Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi whom one day dreamt that he was a butterfly and upon awaking no longer knew whether he was a person dreaming that he became a butterfly or vice versa, that he was a butterfly traveling in a dreamland as a man.

The *Zhuangzi* is a protean text which means there is certainly more than meets the eye in the entire text. Thus, to read the *Zhuangzi* from one point of view only or to interpret it according to a limited perspective is to altogether miss its entire message. For Zhuangzi, man fails to distinguish between reality as seen in nature and man’s way of describing it through language. Obviously, for him, the constant use of metaphors betrays a hidden thesis in which he accepts that man’s best guide or, should we say, the best chance of finding the *way* lies in the things surrounding him – practically anything that has already existed even before he came into this world.

Keywords: *Zhuangzi, nature, relativism, metaphor, Daoism*

INTRODUCTION

At the outset, the title of this article seems to imply an apparent contradiction: How can one suggest while at the same time reject it for its lack of merit? Implicitly, when one suggests, he or she likewise recommends a certain course of action or tells someone to buy a certain product. Most of the TV commercials or advertisements carry the same objective: to follow whatever is said by the endorser who is usually someone very popular – a celebrity, for instance. It would be quite absurd if one says one thing and does another. This reminds us of the usual warning that is written on every pack of cigarette which says: “Government Warning: Cigarette smoking is dangerous to your health”. It is quite ironic that while the government intends to discourage people from lighting a stick of cigarette due to its perceived health risks, it is at the same time trying to condone it by approving the licenses of cigarette manufacturers and sellers. Indeed, the terms “suggestion” and “recommendation” are almost identical to the extent that one always implies the other. Just as in logic we use the term *relative* to refer to those terms that suggest the presence of a

pair – e.g. the term “husband” calls to mind the idea of wife, the term “student” suggests teacher, the term “servant” suggests master, and so on – so too it is absurd to speak of something that is given as an option if it is not to be followed after all. One simply cannot be without the other.

METHODOLOGY

This research makes use of simple content analysis of the *Zhuangzi*, particularly the Inner Chapters. Zhuangzi (who is also known in the West as Chuang-Tzu) was a contemporary of the Confucian philosopher Mencius. As a philosophical text, the *Zhuangzi* aims at a holistic way of living through a denial of anything artificial – that is, as dictated by the conventions of society. Most of Zhuangzi’s works focus on nature which became the basis for his philosophy of life. For this Chinese philosopher, for instance, there are no opposites in life: smallness and bigness, life and death, young and old, near and far, light and darkness, etc. are just different ways of looking at things (Yuanxiang and

Yongjian, 2014). In the *Zhuangzi*, metaphors do abound as what can be gleaned from the following text: "Shallow water cannot support large ships." Indeed for *Zhuangzi*, nature contains the blueprints that one must follow.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The common notion of suggestion that is mentioned in the introduction above, nevertheless, is not to be equated with the way we understand the thoughts of the Chinese philosopher *Zhuangzi*. The basic and most obvious theme in the *Zhuangzi* is that it asks some questions about life and reality but, instead of giving direct answers, it would rather be contented with leaving the questions unanswered. One writer clearly emphasizes that as a protean text, the *Zhuangzi* cannot be limited to one perspective. The Inner Chapters may be the locus of the philosopher's message, but other passages are as equally important. There's certainly more than meets the eye in this famous text. Thus, to read the *Zhuangzi* from one point of view only or to interpret it according to a limited perspective is to altogether miss its entire message.

If there is enough justification to prove the foregoing statements, perhaps it is only safe to assume that the *Zhuangzi* is a text that is shrouded in relativism, though not necessarily in skepticism. To be a relativist is one thing, while to be a skeptic another. "A skeptical thesis holds that we cannot know anything; a relativist thesis holds that we can know, but that knowledge is relative to our (individual, cultural, and so on) perspective" (Raphals, 1994). The *Zhuangzi* text is an attempt to describe reality from the perspective of its author. One may not necessarily agree with what is written here for the narratives are mere suggestions.

That Butterfly Effect

Dreams have always been a favorite topic since biblical times – e.g. Joseph's dream about the sheaves of grain as well as about the sun, the moon, and stars (Gen. 37, 5-10). Every dream has a possible interpretation but *Zhuangzi*'s account of the butterfly seems to baffle the prospective interpreter. *Zhuangzi*'s famous dream goes this way: One day he dreamt that he was a butterfly flapping its wings around and when he was awake, he was surprised to see that nothing changed. He was still the old man that he had been. There was, however, one thing he

could not deny: he had no idea whether he was a person dreaming about his new status as a butterfly or that he was a butterfly suddenly transported to a dreamland where he was transformed into a human being. Nevertheless, the shift from man to butterfly or, vice versa, butterfly to man implies for *Zhuangzi* a kind of "conversion" from one form of existence to another (Yuanxiang and Yongjian, 2014).

In *Zhuangzi*'s point of view, butterflies are symbolic of, if not central to, any philosophical inquiry. Symbols are only representations of a more profound reality which is very hard to fathom. As one scholar notes, dreams are nothing but solitary acts, which means that they cannot be shared by the many (Tallis, 2009). To those who know, this perception about dreams means only one thing: that any knowledge derived from dreams is subject to doubt and so when one talks about doubts, Rene Descartes would not be far behind. Ultimately, therefore, *Zhuangzi*'s use of dreams in this sense would tantamount to skepticism. The fact that *Zhuangzi* never knew whether he was a man dreaming that he was a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming that he was a man only proves his skeptical side.

A Deterrent to Skepticism

If *Zhuangzi* were asked whether his philosophy is skeptical or not, he would certainly answer in the negative. His would-be a categorical answer since he has no doubt in mind about his ability to say something much about life and reality. He would only answer in the positive if he is unsure of his knowledge. It would be self-contradictory to attribute to him something which, in the first place, he did not subscribe to. One can certainly know some sort and if we ask *Zhuangzi* where such knowledge comes from, he would not hesitate to reveal to us its real source – nature. Indeed, according to him, there are lots of things we can learn from the nature of things. For instance, he uses the natural characteristics of birds, monkeys, horses, mountains, rivers, valleys, etc. to illustrate some element of wisdom that is found in them. For *Zhuangzi*, there is less effort required in imitating the ways of nature for the simple fact that these are readily seen in our everyday lives.

For each example that is derived from nature which he employs in his teachings, *Zhuangzi* seems to give us a definite message which is useful for

daily living. For instance, in the story of the seabird that stopped by the neighborhood of Lu, Zhuangzi's message is clear: nature has seen to it that what is quite normal to one being does not necessarily apply to others, especially if situations differ. (Kjelberg, 2007). This refers to the bird's refusal to eat the food that was served to him after a long journey. The reason is that the food is not good for him or, simply, he doesn't like the food that was given to him. Likewise, the story of the woodcarver's skill to integrate himself and his abilities to come up with a masterpiece implies the simple advice that we must be able to "match up nature with nature." (Kjelberg, 2007).

This tendency in the *Zhuangzi* to be "natural", of course, has some critics particularly Xunzi who claim that Zhuangzi is being so engrossed with anything natural which results in the latter's failure consider the social dimension of one's existence. (Kjelberg, 2007). We understand, nevertheless, that this reaction by Xunzi is borne out of his opposition to the Daoist principle which contradicts the Confucian and Mohist emphasis on social norms. Thus, we can sense some bias in such a comment made by Xunzi. In answer to Xunzi's criticism, Zhuangzi thinks there is something greater than mere social norms. And to this effect, he employs perspectivism to reveal the truth. Nevertheless, Zhuangzi's aim is not out to construct an entirely different new world order. Thus, according to him, one needs to dismantle old traditions to allow the presence of that which has always been there since the beginning – which is nothing but the *Dao* (Ivanhoe, 1993).

Yet instead of delving into the controversy between these two schools of thought, it would be more appropriate to recognize the fact that each has something important to say about life. Oftentimes, we experience disagreements with others whose views of life come into conflict with those of ours. However, one's affiliation with a certain group is not the real issue here. What is more urgent is the realization that regardless of which school of thought one belongs, it never takes away the fact that knowledge is possible. This is proof of the absurdity of skepticism as suggested by Zhuangzi. Having established the argument that Zhuangzi is not a skeptic, the next step is to present his relativist tendencies. This can be seen in his use of metaphors.

Zhuangzi's Use of Metaphors

Zhuangzi's narratives are loaded with metaphors to describe what life is all about. Some of the oft-quoted ones include the famous Peng bird flying over the cicada, where he describes the breadth of human knowledge which can go from north to south. The bird which is described as "big" is often taken to mean something that is "lofty" or of a higher value compared to the dove or any creature below it (Xinda, 2009). He likewise talks about the "metaphor of the pipes" of the earth (hollows and valleys through which the wind blows), humanity (hollow tubes that comprise the human body), and heaven which is known in Chinese literature as the "ten thousand destinations" (Raphals, 1994). Still, in one story entitled "The Happy Excursion", Zhuangzi talks of the difference or, rather, the common ground between a small and a very large bird (Yu-lan, 1947).

The big question relative to the preceding paragraph is: "Why does Zhuangzi use metaphors to describe reality?" This can be answered from the very definition of this figure of speech. A metaphor, according to Merriam Webster dictionary, is a word or phrase which points to any object in the material world or an idea and is used to substitute the actual thing referred to, suggesting a likeness or similarity between them. What this definition suggests is that the metaphor is used *in place of another*, which means that it is just a representation of what it signifies. If we are to use a synonym for the word, the closest would be the terms "substitute" or "surrogate". A teacher who is absent from her class may have a "substitute" who will take her place for the time being – i.e. while she is still away and until she returns to her job. An orphan may be provided a "surrogate" mother in the absence of the real one. And so on.

Having said the preceding, Zhuangzi's use of metaphors has some valid reasons. Central to Zhuangzi's teaching is the question concerning the correct *dao* or standard that must be used. Furthermore, "Zhuangzi doubts our ability to distinguish the way the world is from the human constructions we project upon it. In particular, he doubts our ability to capture nature effectively in language and thus questions the reliability of rational thought in figuring out what we ought to do." (Kjelberg, 2007). Thus, for Zhuangzi, the best recourse would be to use metaphors.

The use of metaphors, nonetheless, betrays an unpleasant truth: it has the tendency either to oversimplify or exaggerate a known phenomenon. For instance, to call a shrewd money lender a loan shark would be to downgrade his nature to that of an animal. If we call a thin person "a bag of bones," we are certainly exaggerating his true physical being. Either way, the effect is something negative, for it does not represent the object represented as it is. This tendency of "misrepresentation" is especially true in the Zhuangzi narratives which are nothing but attempts to capture fleeting reality. Indeed one cannot grasp any phenomenon as it is.

Given Zhuangzi's penchant for using metaphors, there is a strong likelihood for him to be relativistic in interpreting a particular phenomenon. Indeed his choice of images smacks of his background both as a teacher and as a student of the Daoist School. Had he lived in another time, he could have presented a different analogy depicting the essence of human knowledge.

Open-Ended Questions

One common criticism against Zhuangzi is that he seems to say a lot about the human situation but lacks the ability to make the best option for maximizing learning. One author says: "The Zhuangzi raises skeptical problems it does not solve. At best, it asserts that solutions are unnecessary but does not prove it." (Kjelberg, 2007). In other words, Zhuangzi seems to be content on asking questions but not to give answers. To this extent, he is on the side of Karl Jaspers who defines philosophy as a field where there are more questions than answers and where questions are more important than answers (Jaspers, 1954).

Given Zhuangzi's cultural background as a scholar, it is quite safe to say that he espouses the definition of what a true philosopher should be: one who considers that in life the wisest man is he who learns to accept that one cannot know everything in this world. Pythagoras says about wisdom in the following lines: "We can investigate wisdom, we can try to acquire wisdom, but of course we can never achieve complete wisdom or the totality of knowledge." (de Torre, 1980). A student may be able to read as many books as he likes and thereby acquire knowledge of so many things depending, of course, on the subject matter that he is interested in. A scholar may acquire as many doctorate degrees

(not through *honoris causa* but formal schooling) as he wants during his lifetime. Despite the knowledge, one accumulates after spending several years in school and after reading a thousand books, there are still so many things he needs to learn. One's diploma is not a guarantee of maximum learning for, in truth, there is still so much to learn and unlearn after college.

Socrates puts the matter so well when he said: "The more I know, the more I realize I know nothing" (Goodreads, 2019). This statement does not speak about skepticism but, on the contrary, about man's ability to know. Certainly, each one of us has some knowledge in our head yet such knowledge, no matter how much we brag of its depth, is only too little to be truly significant. It is, perhaps, along this line of thinking that Socrates may have something in common with Zhuangzi. Though the latter never actually admitted that our knowledge is limited, yet how he presents his arguments is enough proof of his tendency to be in cahoots with Socrates.

CONCLUSION

Zhuangzi's constant use of metaphors betrays a hidden thesis in which he accepts that man's best guide or, should we say, best chance of finding the way lies in the things surrounding him – the mountains, clouds, rivers, trees, birds, seas, rain, etc. – practically anything that has to do with nature and the environment. It is not to be found in a society whose constructs, or so it seems, are often the result of human conventions that are prone to be biased and artificial. To be natural according to the mold of Zhuangzi is to be closer to the truth which is but mysterious and grand. He who learns to abide by this principle shall never lose his way and so lead a happy and contented life.

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