Using Useless Words: Zhuang Zi on the Problem of Language[1]

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Abstract: Despite the seeming absence of a systematic discussion on the problem of language, we find occasional instances in the *Book of Zhuang Zi* where words became the very locus of Zhuang Zi's discourse. My initial sense is that the problem of language, for Zhuang Zi, may be framed as a problem concerning the nature of words. This paper examines those passages wherein Zhuang Zi offers his perspective on the value and nature of words, then tried to analyze them against the backdrop of his entire philosophy. For Zhuang Zi, the problem of language is framed in such a way that inquiries into the perplexities concerning that nature and use of words: words (1) produce distinctions that need to be transcended; (2) are inadequate to express the most intimate reality of things or The Way (the *Dao*); (3) are relative depending on the individual using it; (4) may be used in one's pursuit of the Way, but must eventually abandon it; and, (5) may be expressed in three forms: *yuyan*, *chongyan*, and *zhiyan*. Ultimately, we find that words for Zhuang Zi bear the paradox of being useful and useless at the same time.

Keywords: *Zhuang Zi, language, words, Daoism, Chinese Philosophy*

Introduction

Language is a quintessential part of our everyday lives. It allows us to communicate and interact with other human beings. It allows us to express our thoughts and feelings, whether spoken or written. Likewise, language is also used to transmit certain truths and knowledge about nature and the world we live in. For the Chinese, language bears a prominent place in the way they think. This is clearly exhibited by the fact that they equate "civilization," or *Wenhua,* with the cultivation of their written language.[2] Imagine, then, if someone were to tell you that words are insufficient to express and transmit reality—that language itself is always inadequate to represent the truth. This is a position strongly held by the *Dao Jia* (Daoist School), particularly by one of its prominent sages, Zhuang Zi.

Zhuang Zi (or Chuang Tzu) lived between c. 369 BCE and c. 286 BCE. Little is known about the life of this important sage except that he was from the "little state of Meng on the border between the present Shantung and Honan provinces, where he lived a hermit's life, but was nevertheless

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[2] The Chinese equivalent for the word "civilization" is *Wenhua.* "*Wen* literally signifies language, more specifically the written form. *Hua* on the other hand signifies development, a flowering. It can be said that while in essence, the world civilization for the West is urbanization, and for the Chinese it is the development and propagation of the written language." Alfredo P. Co, *The Blooming of a Hundred Flowers: Philosophy of Ancient China,* vol. I of *Across the Philosophical Silk Road: A Festschrift in Honor of Alfredo P. Co* (Manila: University of Santo Tomas Publishing House, 2009), 10.

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famous for his ideas and writings."[3] Han Dynasty's Grand Historian, Sima Qian, offers us a vivid picture of this man with a short anecdote: when Prince Wei of Chu heard of Zhuang Zi, he sent his messengers to the latter to bring him gifts and invite him to become prime minister. Zhuang Zi rebuked the messengers by saying that he would rather enjoy his own free will than to be a slave to the ruler.[4] Aside from these, accounts also mention that he and Meng Zi were contemporaries and that he was a good friend of Hui Shi.[5]

The Book of Zhuang Zi is the literature commonly attributed to Zhuang Zi. Fung Yu-lan states that this may have been compiled by Zhuang Zi's foremost commentator, Kuo Hsiang.[6] This book is a collection thirty-three chapters of parables and tales where "[m]any of his [Zhuang Zi] characters are ordinary people on the streets, in the mountains, and on the fields, who lived so closely to nature."[7]

In the above-mentioned book, Zhuang Zi discussed timeless issues of human concern. Topics revolved around the relativity and equality of things, critique of Confucianism and Mohism, meditation on life and death, and so on. In fact, the problem of language was not a central concern for him.[8] Despite the seeming absence of a systematic discussion on such problem, we find occasional instances in the *Book of Zhuang Zi* where words became the very locus of Zhuang Zi's discourse. My initial sense is that the problem of language, for Zhuang Zi, may be framed as a problem concerning the nature of words. This paper examines those passages wherein Zhuang Zi offers his perspective on the value and nature of words, then analyzes them against the backdrop of his entire philosophy.

Zhuang Zi on The Problem of Words

In the second chapter of the *Book of Zhuang Zi*, he tells us:

> Words are not just wind. Words have something to say. But if what they have to say is not fixed, then do they really say something? Or do they say nothing? People suppose that words are different from the peeps of baby birds, but is there any difference, or isn't there? What does the Way rely on, that we have true and false? What do words rely on, that we have right and wrong? How can the Way go away and not exist? How can words exist and not be acceptable? When the Way relies on little accomplishments and words rely on vain show, then we have the rights and wrongs of the Confucians and the Mohists. What one calls right, the other calls wrong; what one calls wrong, the other calls right. But if we want to right their wrongs and wrong their rights, then the best thing to use is clarity.[9]

It is evident from the passage that words, although they may convey something, are always in the state of flux because they depend on our notions of right and wrong. If this is so, how can words convey something? To demonstrate, one may exclaim that he is right and the other is wrong, and vice-versa. Here, Zhuang Zi forwards his criticism against Confucianism and Mohism. Kuo Hsiang remarks that these two schools of thought affirm the distinction between right and wrong, while denying that

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[3] Fung Yu-lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, trans. by, Derek Bodde (New York: The Free Press, 1948), 104.

[4] Cf. Co, *The Blooming of a Hundred Flowers*, 286. See also *Ibid.*

[5] Cf. Fung Yu-lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, 104. N.B. Meng Zi (Mencius), who lived between 372 B.C. and 238 B.C., was one of the major philosophers of the *Ru Jia* or the School of Literati. On the other hand, Hui Shi lived around 350 B.C.-260 B.C. He is affiliated with the *Ming Jia* of the School of Names.

[6] Fung Yu-lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, 104.

[7] Co, *The Blooming of a Hundred Flowers*, 287.

[8] Cf. *Ibid.*, 285.

[9] *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, trans. by Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 10.

there is no distinction between the two; hence, affirming what they deny and denying what they affirm demonstrates that there is really no distinction.[10] Note that one of Zhuang Zi's primary advocacy in the second chapter is "the equality of all things," which echoes his abhorrence for distinctions.

Chapter 13 of the *Book of Zhuang Zi* provides us with a more succinct yet complex take on language as conceived in the written form, i.e., books. The passage goes as follows:

> Men of the world who value the Way all turn to books. But books are nothing more than words. Words have value; what is of value in words is meaning. Meaning has something it is pursuing, but the thing that it is pursuing cannot be put into words and handed down. The world values words and hands down books, but although the world values them, I do not think them worth valuing. What the world takes to be value is not real value. What you can look at and see are forms and colors; what you can listen to and hear are names and sounds. What a pity!—that the men of the world should suppose that form and color, name and sound, are sufficient to convey the truth of a thing. It is because in the end, they are not sufficient to convey truth that "those who know do not speak, those who speak do not know." But how can the world understand this![11]

This is a very important selection as it clearly demonstrates Zhuang Zi's position on the inadequacy of words to express the truth and reality of the Way or the *Dao*. His criticism is hurled towards those who turn to the ancient classics in their search for the Way.[12] Remember that the Way, which is the principal philosophical concept of the Daoist school, itself is "unnamable".[13] Zhuang Zi points out that words, since they are empirical in nature i.e., they appeal to our senses, are not enough to present the truth and that those who persistently speak of the Way are the ones who are really ignorant of the truth. On the contrary, those who pursue the Way in silence—those who understand its ineffability are the ones who are indeed wise. In a later chapter, this is simply expressed as follows: "the sage practices the teaching that has no words."[14]

In Chapter 26, we find an interesting conversation between *Ming Jia* (School of Names) philosopher, Hui Zi (or Hui Shih), and Zhuang Zi himself:

> Huizi said to Zhuangzi, "Your words are useless!" Zhuangzi said, "A man has to understand the useless before you can talk to him about the useful. The earth is certainly vast and broad, though a man uses no more of it than the area he puts his feet on. If, however, you were to dig away all the earth from around his feet until you reached the Yellow Springs, then would the man still be able to make use of it?" "No, it would be useless," said Huizi. "It is obvious, then," said Zhuangzi, "that the useless has its use."[15]

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[10] Cf. Fung Yu-lan and Chuang Tzu, *Chuang-Tzu: A New Selected Translation with an Exposition of the Philosophy of Kuo Hsiang* (Berlin and Heidelberg: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Publishing Co., Ltd and Springer-Verlag, 2016), 12.

[11] *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, 106.

[12] In the subsequent passage, Zhuang Zi tells us the story of an old wheelwright who criticized the Duke for reading the literature written by the sages. Cf. *Ibid.*, 106-107.

[13] In the famous classic of the Daoists, Tao Te Ching (or Dao De Jing), it is said that "The Tao (Way) that can be told of is not the eternal Tao." Chinese scholar, Wing-Tsit Chan remarks that while other schools regard the Way as a moral truth, for the Daoists "it is the One, which is natural, eternal, spontaneous, nameless, and indescribable." Cf. Wing-Tsit Chan (trans. and comp.), *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), 136-139.

[14] This is from Chapter 22. *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, 177.

[15] *Ibid.*, 231.

The "usefulness of the useful" is one of the major motifs found in Zhuang Zi's philosophy. This short selection, among other parables that carries the same theme, provides us with his continuous abhorrence for distinctions. "Distinctions between the useful and the useless cannot and should not be made, for no correct basis for predication can be discovered."[16] Similarly, if someone beats you in an argument, does that mean he is right, and you are wrong? Or, if you beat him, does that entail you are right and he is wrong?[17] Our notions of "right" and "wrong"; "useful" and "useless" are shaped by our own perspectives hence, they are relative. Words, then, "are not static but always changing relative to their usage by individuals."[18]

Still from Chapter 26, we find a short but insightful section about words and their meaning:

> The fish trap exists because of the fish; once you've gotten the fish, you can forget the trap. The rabbit snare exists because of the rabbit; once you've gotten the rabbit, you can forget the snare. Words exist because of meaning; once you've gotten the meaning, you can forget the words. Where can I find a man who has forgotten words so I can have a word with him?[19]

Words are dependent upon meaning, as implied in the passage. Hence, once someone grasps the meaning of the word, one can leave the word behind. Bryan Van Norden relates this to Zhuang Zi's mysticism. He says that for mystics, like Zhuang Zi, words are not enough to express mystical knowledge. He acknowledges, nevertheless, the utility of words in attaining this kind of knowledge. In addition, he remarks "[w]ords can also gesture toward the Way, to help those struggling to grasp it, as long as they do not become fixated on these words."[20] In short, Zhuang Zi exhorts us to abandon our attachment to mundane words and focus ourselves towards the transcendental way.

As for our last example, this is taken from Chapter 27. Here Zhuang Zi gives us three types of words: *yuyan* (imputed words), *chongyang* (repeated words) and *zhiyan* (goblet words). For *yuyan* or "imputed words," Zhuang Zi tells us:

> are like persons brought in from outside for the purpose of exposition. A father does not act as go-between for his own son because the praises of the father would not be as effective as the praises of an outsider. It is the fault of other men, not mine, [that I must resort to such a device, for if I were to speak in my own words], then men would respond only to what agrees with their own views and reject what does not, would pronounce "right" what agrees with their own views and "wrong" what does not.[21]

On the other hand, *chongyan* or "repeated words":

> are intended to put an end to argument. They can do this because they are the words of the elders. If, however, one is ahead of others in age but does not have a grasp of the warp and woof, the root and branch of things, that is commensurate with his years, then he is not really ahead of others. An old man who is not in some way ahead of others has not grasped the Way of man, and if he has not grasped the Way of man, he deserves to be looked on as a mere stale remnant of the past.[22]

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[16] John S. Major, "The Efficacy of Uselessness: A Chuang-tzu Motif" in *Philosophy East and West* 25, no. 3 (July 1975): 268.

[17] Cf. *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, 17.

[18] Karyn L. Lai, *An Introduction to Chinese Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 166.

[19] *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, 233.

[20] Bryan W. Van Norden. *Introduction to Classical Chinese Philosophy* (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2011), 154.

[21] *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, 234.

[22] *Ibid.*

And lastly, *zhiyan* or "goblet words" are used to:

> harmonize all things in the Heavenly Equality, leave them to their endless changes, and so live out my years. As long as I do not say anything about them, they are a unity. But the unity and what I say about it have ceased to be a unity; what I say and the unity have ceased to be a unity.[23]

In a gist, "imputed words" are my words which I place in the tongue of other persons in order to avoid dividing the opinions of other men. "Repeated words" are words from the elders or wise old men that are used to stop a debate.[24] And, "goblet words" are words that go with the incessant flow and change of things, hence providing harmony in the world. Some have noted that these three were the literary/rhetorical devices used by Zhuang Zi in his book.[25] According to Shuen-fu Lin "[t]hese three modes of language are intimately related to Chuang Tzu's ideas about life, language, and the world he lived in."[26] He adds "[w]hile *yuyan* and *zhongyan* [*chongyan*] seem to be primarily concerned with the practical aspects of expression of ideas and of winning an argument in debate or disputation, *zhiyan*, the third rhetorical device, is concerned with the more philosophical aspect of Chuang Tzu's theory of language and self-expression."[27] Hence, let us further analyze this third rhetorical device of Zhuang Zi.

Shuen-fu Lin offers us a very compelling exegesis of the term *zhiyan*. Although this word has been interpreted in many ways, he emphasizes the relevance of two commonly used renderings of the term. Firstly, the word *zhi*, as far as the Daoists, are concerned, refers to a particular object i.e., "a goblet for urging wine on a guest." This goblet is designed to tip when full and remain balanced when empty. He sees this as a metaphor for the mind. Just as the goblet (mind) gets filled, it tips and loses its balance hence, one should empty the goblet right away. Similarly, "*Zhiyan*…is speech that is natural, unpremeditated, always responding to the changing situations in the flow of discourse, and always returning the mind to its original state of emptiness as soon as a speech act is completed."[28] Secondly, the word *Zhi* for Shuen-fun Lin is a parodic rendering of another character pronounced as *zhi* which means "uneven, irregular, and random." Thus, *zhiyan* may be taken as "irregular and random words." He quips that while some of Zhuang Zi's fables and anecdotes follow the structure of *yuyan* and *chongyan*, discursive passages, which represent the random comments made by the "implied author" (to borrow a term from Wayne Booth) on the stories, are the first and clearest examples of *zhiyan*."[29] He draws a connection between these two interpretations by saying that *zhi* in the second sense "is the necessary result of the uniquely Taoist ideal way of speech as embodied in the metaphor of the "goblet words" [*zhi* in the first sense]."[30]

One could see the importance of *zhiyan* in Zhuang Zi's take on language. The spontaneity, randomness, naturalness of *zhiyan* made him exclaim "[i]f there were no goblet words coming forth

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[23] *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, 234.

[24] Burton Watson notes that another rendering for this type would be *zhongyan* or "weighty words." *Ibid.* (see note 1).

[25] *Ibid.* (see note 1).

[26] Shuen-fu Lin, "Chuang Tzu" in *Masterworks of Asian Literature in Comparative Perspective : A Guide for Teaching*, ed. by Barbara Stone Miller (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1994), 248.

[27] *Ibid.*, 253.

[28] *Ibid.*, 254.

[29] *Ibid.*

[30] *Ibid.*, 255.

day after day to harmonize all by the Heavenly Equality, then how could I survive for long?"[31] Therefore, it can be said, that in attempting to express the Way through words, one must remember *zhiyan*.

Conclusion

From these selections alone, one may realize the place of language in Zhuang Zi's philosophy. For him, words (or language in general) (1) produce distinctions that needs to be transcended; (2) are inadequate to express the most intimate reality of things or The Way (the Dao); (3) are relative depending on the individual using them; (4) may be used in one's pursuit of the Way, but must eventually abandon it; and (5) may be expressed in three forms: *yuyan*, *chongyan*, and *zhiyan*.

One can surmise the somewhat contradicting claims of Zhuang Zi on language. Sometimes, he acknowledges its usefulness. Likewise, at some point, he calls for its abandonment due to its inadequacy. Despite these conflicting claims, he is perhaps clear about one thing: that language needs to be transcended. In fact, one should not be bothered by these paradoxes as one must learn how to find usefulness in uselessness and uselessness in usefulness—a very ideal coming from Zhuang Zi's philosophy. Indeed, his take on language may be summed up by his question: "[w]here can I find a man who has forgotten words so I can have a word with him?"[32]

[31] *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, 235.
[32] *Ibid.*, 233.

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