Zhuangzi

Liu & Kupperman

Opening Passages

- The opening paragraphs of Chapter 1 of the Seven Inner Chapters has several different animals: a fish that changes into a bird, a cicada, and a turtle-dove
- The cicada and turtle-dove are incredulous about this fish-bird and its need to fly so high
- From their perspective, there is no need to travel 90,000 miles up

Themes

- Anti-realism
- Ethical Behavior
- Life and Death

What's The Point of This Story?

a) There are many possible perspectives from which to view the world and it may be difficult, if not impossible, to claim that there is a final truth to any one perspective
b) Because one's perspective may be incomplete and at best partially true, then one ought not act with arrogant assurance that one is right
c) In addition, one ought to keep one's mind open to other perspectives and learn from them
d) Finally, one ought to be tolerant of views different than one's own because they may have a better or more useful perspective on the world
Realism

- **Realism**: the position that there is a fact of the matter to things in the world
  1. This reality or fact of the matter is independent of minds
  2. There is some truth to the way things are and this can be discovered by looking at how the world is
  3. There is one and only one true description of the world

- Zhuangzi advances metaphysical anti-realism, of a certain sort

Types of Anti-realism (Liu)

- Liu reviews several types of anti-realism that philosophers have attributed to Zhuangzi
  1. Hard skepticism/perspectivism
  2. Soft skepticism
  3. Therapeutic skepticism
  4. Anti-rationalism

Hard and Soft Skepticism

1. Hard skepticism/perspectivism
   - There is no mind-independent reality
   - All views of reality are dependent on minds, relative to those minds, and reflect a certain perspective
   - There is no truth to the way the world is independent of the concepts and perspectives of perceivers

2. Soft skepticism
   - The world may in fact be a certain way, but human minds are not capable of grasping the truth of how things are (like the *dao* )
   - Humans are incapable of using language and concepts to talk about the *dao*

Therapeutic Skepticism and Anti-rationalism

3. Therapeutic skepticism
   - Some interpreters see Zhuangzi as not really a skeptic but instead employing the skeptical method to enlighten people about the *dao*
   - One might be able to come to know certain things but one cannot be certain that one does know

4. Anti-rationalism
   - Anti-rationalism is the idea that reasoning skills will never provide one with knowledge
   - But, some people's knowledge and skills are superior to others
   - Reality can be experienced in spontaneity
Liu's Suggestion for Zhuangzi

- Liu suggests that Zhuangzi held the following three theses:
  
  A) **Realism**: There is a reality that exists outside our conceptual constructions and independently of our minds, and this is Dao.
  
  B) **Conceptual Relativism**: All thought is constrained by our conceptual constructions and judgments about the world reflect our perspective.
  
  C) **Knowledge Skepticism**: We can never have knowledge of the Dao or describe it using language. There is no semantic truth.

Arguments for Conceptual Relativism

1. Relativity of Preferences

   - B&H (402): Man sleeping in a damp place....

2. Relativity of Perspectives

   - B&H (398): That's it, that's not it....

Relativity of Preferences (Liu)

"1. Our judgments depend on our natural/physical compositions...."

"2. Different compositions generate different perspectives.

"3. Therefore, all judgments are made in accordance with a particular perspective.

"4. Therefore, there cannot be universal judgments among agents with different compositions." (158-9)

- For there to be an objective truth, there needs to be some standard for our judgments of good/bad that is itself objective. But, our preferences for one thing rather than another depend upon our unique perspective. There is no objective truth by which we can make judgments.

Relativity of Perspectives

"1. Without the opposition of a set of competing concepts, there cannot be any judgment made with either one within the set of opposites.

"2. Two opposite concepts are mutually dependent; one cannot be employed without the assumption of the other.

"3. Therefore, for there to be a judgment made with one of the opposing concepts, there would have to be another judgment made with the opposite concept.

"4. Therefore, no judgment can be made without an opposition; no judgment is universally and absolutely true." (160-1)

- For us to reach the truth, then we need to conceive of that truth independently of and without influence from any other conceptual schemes. But, we cannot make judgments about the truth or falsity of various claims without understanding the conceptual scheme in which those claims arise and on which those claims are dependent. There is no claim that is independent of one's perspective or conceptual scheme.
Grasping for Knowledge

- If all of our attempts to understand and know our world are relative to our perspectives, then how can we ever know the transcendent truth of *Dao*?
  - We might be able to justify our perspectival beliefs and say we have knowledge
  - But, can we ever justify our beliefs in some transcendent truth?
- Two notions of truth
  1. **Metaphysical truth**: truth is identical with reality, the real, or the ultimate state of things
  2. **Semantic truth**: truth is a property of statements

Arguments for Knowledge Skepticism

- Arguments from Dreams
  - B&H (403): Who banquets [parties] in a dream....
- Impossibility of Settling Debates
  - B&H (403): arguing over alternatives

Arguments from Dreams

"1. Our dreams seem to us as real as when we are awake.
"2. When we are dreaming, we never know that it was just a dream.
"3. Therefore, when we think we are awake, we could also be dreaming.
"4. Therefore, we can never be sure of our judgment that we are awake." (161)

- Our best justifications for us having knowledge about the way things are may be nothing but a dream

Impossibility of Settling Debates

"1. Different judgments of truth are necessarily relative to different perspectives.
"2. Therefore, no two people with different perspectives can determine which judgment is true.
"3. If a third party makes a verdict favoring one side, her judgment of truth is also relative to her perspective.
"4. If a third party disagrees with both sides, then she is merely proposing a third judgment based on a third perspective.
"5. Even if an agreement is reached among different perspectives, that agreement itself is simply relative to that particular perspective of agreement.
"6. Therefore, no third party can truly determine which side of the debate is right.
"7. Therefore, it is impossible to ever settle a debate." (162)
Are All Perspectives Equally True?

- It looks like Zhuangzi wants to argue that we can never know the truth because our judgments are relative to our perspectives
- We can never have perspective-free judgments
- But, are all perspectives equally true? Is there anything false?
  - At least one thing is false: the notion that one's perspective is the only correct perspective
  - At the same time, Zhuangzi wants to deny that there is no truth
  - Truth is the synthesis of all perspectives or transcends all perspectives

Transcending Perspectives

- Zhuangzi thought that the Truth was not relative to perspectives
- So, if all one can have is the "truth" of one's perspective, then no one can have the truth. There are no perspectival truths.
- So, perspectives are not all equally true. Perspectives are equally false.
- For Zhuangzi, the real truth is beyond human conception and beyond the only truth humans know, i.e., semantic truth.
- Truth of *Dao* cannot be labeled or characterized as true or false
  - *Dao* cannot be confirmed or denied, knowledge of the *Dao* is basically impossible for humans

Lau Tzu and Zhuangzi

- Both Lau Tzu and Zhuangzi thought language, names, and concepts carve up our world and understanding of *Dao*
- But, Lau Tzu tried to explain and illuminate the mind-independent *Dao*
- While Zhuangzi tried to argue that it is impossible for human knowledge and language to correctly explain the *Dao*
- Zhuangzi did not argue for the truth of his own view, to have done so would have contradicted his own teachings
- Zhuangzi was both a realist with respect to *Dao* and a relativist (knowledge skeptic) with respect to knowledge of the *Dao*

Spontaneity and Living Life

- Recognizing that one's perspective is simply one's perspective is therapeutic and liberating
- One's perspective, nor humanity's perspective, need not be abandoned
  - Rather, one should realize that one's perspective is part of a larger, ever-changing flow of existence
- Attitude of spontaneity Zhuangzi advocates is not doing something on a whim or chillin' and "going with the flow"
- Instead, spontaneity is a focused and mindful awareness of the tangle of life and the ability to calmly, cautiously, and intentionally release the tangle
  - Example of Cook Ting (B&H, 406-7)
Living Ethically

- On the one hand, it appears that Zhuangzi is arguing against moral behavior or the emphasis placed on people to act ethically
- Confucious's emphasis on proper behavior and the rites is an example where naturalness and spontaneity are subordinated to ethical behavior
- It looks like Zhuangzi is against a certain attitude—the attempt to structure one's behavior to fit moral norms
- Zhuangzi instead emphasizes a naturalness in action that naturally conforms to morality
  - Too much emphasis on moral behavior can be damaging (10 suns example)
  - Instead, balance is the sign of the true person: "Someone in whom neither Heaven nor man is victor over the other, this is what is meant by the True Man." (422)

Zhuangzi's Practical Guidelines (Liu)

1. **Be useless**: to be useless is to hide one's abilities and skills, and to avoid drawing attention to oneself. Those who are "useless" survive a turbulent world better than those who are constantly recruited into service

2. **Accept fate**: the notion of fate is not one of determination by divine forces. Rather, the idea is that once one accepts that one will not strive to force the world into one's image, then one should accept what is offered and what occurs

3. **Seek Dao and calm balance**: prepare oneself in the way of dao through mental preparation. First, forget the teachings of morality, rites, music, etc. Forget one's bondage to the human categories of existence. Accept one's life with calmness and understanding

Life and Death

- Death is a new stage of life and should be accepted with indifference
  - This calm acceptance is also true of physical deformities
- Life and death are just another change, like seasons transitioning one to another
- The challenge is to put death (and life) into perspective
  - When seen from a more expansive perspective, death is just another natural process
  - Just as we celebrate birth, we also should celebrate death

Ignorance of the Death State (Liu)

"1. When we are alive, we don't know what death is like.
"2. We fear death because it is a state different from life.
"3. But for all we know, this different state could be better than our present state.
"4. To fear an unknown state, which could be better, is not rational.
"5. Therefore, we should not fear death." (175)
First Assumption in Life/Death Argument

- Zhuangzi makes two assumptions in his stance toward life and death.
  1. There is a mode of existence which does not begin with life or end with death.
     - Zhuangzi does not necessarily hold a Western conception of an afterlife where personal identity is maintained.
     - The afterlife may be nothing other than our existence as dust, inanimate matter, or chemical energy used to sustain other living organisms.
     - Life and death should be considered equally valuable since there is some form of continued existence.
     - Life is the transition of energy of one form into energy of a living form.
     - Death is the transition of energy from a living form into another form.

Second Assumption in Life/Death Argument

2. Fear of death marks a love of life and a fear of losing what one loves.
   - Loving life assumes a love of self and body.
   - If we didn't care for our self or body, then death would not be feared.
   - "It seems ... that for [Zhuangzi] the ultimate test is to be able to look directly at the facts of one's own physical decomposition without horror, to accept one's dissolution as part of the universal process of transformation." Graham (in Liu, 177)

Zhuangzi and the Self

- Taking a neutral stance toward life and death requires relinquishing love of self, personal identity, and bodily identity.
  - It also requires relinquishing attachment to others and loving relationships.
- For Zhuangzi, the ideal person's identity is the group, humanity, or all of existence.
- Since there is no stable self, one's freedom is gained from recognizing one's connection to all things.