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What May We Still Learn from *Zhuangzi*?

Phronēsis or the Question of Knowledge

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Abstract: The complaint of the inadequacy of language is a universal phenomenon in philosophical traditions in both China and the West. However, those who negate language often speak more, not less, to refer to what is supposed to be inexpressible, and Zhuangzi is the best representative of such an “ironic pattern” among all the ancient Chinese philosophers. By reading several passages in the book *Zhuangzi* in comparison with Western philosophers, notably Wittgenstein and Aristotle, this essay explores the concepts of understanding and knowledge in *Zhuangzi* and their implications for humanistic studies today.

Keywords: Dismissal of language; Zhuangzi; Wittgenstein; Plato; Aristotle, H-G Gadamer; *Epistēmē* and *phronēsis*; Hermeneutics; Interpretive plurality and validity

How to understand words that express meaning is not just a linguistic problem, but also a philosophical problem concerning language and communication. In the Chinese tradition, there is a tendency towards the idea that meaning always reaches beyond the limited space of words that express the meaning. For example, the *Book of Changes*, one of the ancient Confucian classics, is described as a book that “names the small but draws on big categories; it points to the far but expresses indirectly; its language takes a detour but reaches its target, it sets out the matter fully but has something hidden in it” (其稱名也小，其取類也大；其旨遠，其辭文；其言曲而中，其事肆而隱).¹ Mencius, the second master in the Confucian tradition, also says: “He who speaks of the near but points to the far is good with words” (言近而旨遠者，善

¹ Ruan Yuan 阮元, “Zhouyi Zhengyi·Xici xia,” 周易正義·繫辭下 in *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏 (Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 1980), 89. All translations of Chinese in this essay are mine.

言也).¹ These all articulate the traditional view that words may be limited, but meaning is not; and the emphasis on the boundless meaning beyond the bounds of language gradually helps to form the predominant idea in Chinese literature and literary criticism that it is better to indirectly imply or suggest than to spell out every detail in a literary text or poem. In the *Literary Mind or the Carving of Dragons*, the great critic Liu Xie privileged *xing* (興) as a metaphorical, indirect, but more effective device than *bi* (比) as explicit comparison when he says, “*bi* is clear to the view while *xing* has something hidden behind” (比顯而興隱).² What is hidden promises more in a sort of mystery or imaginative possibility than what is shown clearly to the reader or the viewer. In the preface to *Ranking of Poets*, Zhong Rong also says: “When the text ends but the meaning still lingers, that is *xing*” (文已盡而意有餘，興也).³ The use of indirect and suggestive language means to express more, not less, and is thus a major principle in Chinese aesthetics prevailing in literature, painting, and literary and art criticisms.

As a Confucian philosopher, Mencius recognized the inadequacy of language, but he did not negate the functionality of language. The Daoists, however, went much further. When Laozi was asked to write a book to expound his Daoist teachings, the first thing he said at the very beginning of his book, *Laozi* or *Dao de jing*, was a disclaimer that writing such a book is totally useless: “The *dao* that can be spoken of is not the constant *dao*; the name that can be named is not the constant name” (道可道，非常道。名可名，非常名).⁴ Zhuangzi, the other great Daoist philosopher, is even more radical in the negation of language, though ironically, the language he used to negate language is more expressive and poetic and rhetorically richer than any other ancient Chinese philosopher. “Heaven and earth have great beauty but do not speak, the four seasons have clear regulations but do not argue, and the ten thousand things have their ready reasons but do not explain” (天地有大美而不言，四時有明法而不

¹ Jiao Xun 焦循, “Mengzi zhengyi·Jinxinzhangu xia,” 孟子正義·盡心章句下 in *Zhuzi jicheng* 諸子集成 (Zhonghua shuju, 1986), 594.

² Liu Xie 劉勰, and Fan Wenlan 范文瀾, *Wenxin diaolong zhu* 文心雕龍注 (Renmin wenxue chubanshe 人民文學出版社, 1958), 601.

³ Zhong Rong 鍾嶸, and Chen Yanjie 陳延傑, *Shipin zhu* 詩品注 (Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1980), 2.

⁴ Wang Bi 王弼, “Laozi zhu·Diyizhang,” 老子注·第一章 in *Zhuzi jicheng*, 1.

議，萬物有成理而不說), says Zhuangzi.¹ Nature, time, and all the things present in nature and time operate and function without speaking or the use of language, and it was not just the Daoists that had such a dream of achieving perfection without language, but even Confucius once entertained that dream as well. “The Master said: ‘I will not speak’” (子曰: “予欲無言”), at one point Confucius declared. His student Zigong panicked and asked: “If you give up speaking, what could we the youngsters have to pass on” (子如不言，則小子何述焉)? Confucius then replied with a rhetorical question: “Does Heaven ever speak? Yet the four seasons run their course, and a hundred things rise and grow. Does Heaven ever speak”(天何言哉? 四時行焉，百物生焉，天何言哉)?² Doesn’t this sound very much the same as Zhuangzi’s words quoted above? In fact, as Ludwig Wittgenstein remarks, “All philosophy is ‘Critique of language’” (*Sprachkritik*).³ Complaint about the inadequacy of language or mistrust of verbal expressions is universal, as we find it not only in the Chinese philosophical tradition, but in that of the West as well. In his commentary on the first line of *Laozi*, “the *dao* that can be spoken of is not the constant *dao*,” Qian Zhongshu cited numerous textual evidences from both Chinese and Western traditions to corroborate the universality of this hermeneutic problem. In his 7th philosophical epistle, for example, Plato dismissed language, especially the written form. “No intelligent man will ever be so bold as to put into language those things which his reason has contemplated, especially into a form that is unalterable,” says Plato. “Names, I maintain, are in no case stable.”⁴ Having quoted these words, Qian Zhongshu remarked that “this may almost be translated to annotate *Laozi*” (幾可以譯注《老子》也).⁵

Let us look more closely at the philosophers’ dismissal of language when they contrast nature and human understanding. When Zhuangzi says that “Heaven

¹ Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩, “Zhuangzi jishi·Zhubeiyou,” 莊子集釋·知北游 in *Zhuzi jicheng*, 321.

² Liu Baonan 劉寶楠, “Lunyu zhengyi·Yanghuo,” 論語正義·陽貨 in *Zhuzi jicheng*, 379.

³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), 4.0031, 63.

⁴ Plato, “Letters: VII,” in *Plato, The Collected Dialogues, including the Letters*, trans. L. A. Post, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton University Press, 1961), 342b, 1590.

⁵ Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書, *Guanzhui pian* 管錐編 (Zhonghua shuju, 1986), 410.

and earth have great beauty but do not speak,” he acknowledges the reality of natural beauty, the four seasons’ temporal and sequential changes, and the presence of all things, all of which exist in the physical world without the involvement of language or human subjectivity. Human beings, however, depend on language for communication and action, and that creates a uniquely human problem. Just as Laozi wrote a book but declared the futility of writing a book, Zhuangzi acknowledged that human beings need to use language, but he ultimately denied its usefulness. People value words, and words are indeed of some value, Zhuangzi admitted, but “what is valuable in words is meaning, and there is something that meaning follows. That which meaning follows cannot be transmitted in language” (語之所貴者，意也。意有所隨，意之所隨者，不可以言傳也). For Zhuangzi, the true meaning, the *dao*, is unsayable and cannot be transmitted in language, so it should be kept silent, but people fail to understand this, as they only reach the level of sensuous perception:

What can be seen are shapes and colors; what can be heard are names and sounds. How sad that people in the world thought they could get the true condition through shapes, colors, names and sounds! As the true condition cannot be fully attained through shapes, colors, names and sounds, those who know will not speak, and those who speak do not know, but how can people in the world understand this!

故視而可見者，形與色也；聽而可聞者，名與聲也。悲夫！
世人以形色名聲為足以得彼之情！夫形色名聲果不足以得
彼之情，則知者不言，言者不知，而世豈識之哉！¹

After these words, Zhuangzi followed with the famous story of the Wheelwright Bian (輪扁), who audaciously told Duke Huan (桓公), who was reading a book, that what his lordship was reading was “nothing but the dregs of the ancients” (古人之糟魄). The Duke was not pleased and demanded an explanation, and the Wheelwright replied from his own perspective and based on his lived experience,

¹ Guo Qingfan, “Zhuangzi·Tiandao,” 莊子集釋·天道 in *Zhuazi jicheng*, 217.

saying that the art of making wheels is a perfect coordination of the hand and the mind, “what my hand does is in correspondence with what I have in my mind” (得之於手，而應於心), but that is impossible to put in words and teach to others. “There is some knack in this, though I cannot put it in words. I cannot make my son understand it, neither can my son get it from me” (口不能言，有數存焉於其間。臣不能以喻臣之子，臣之子亦不能受之於臣), says the Wheelwright. And then he concluded: “The ancients and what they could not pass on to posterity are all gone, so what you are reading, my lord, is nothing but the dregs of the ancients” (古之人與其不可傳也，死矣。然則君之所讀者，古人之糟魄已夫)!¹ The making of a perfect wheel is an art, an individual and creative activity, different each time from the next; apparently the Duke was reduced to silence by Wheelwright Bian’s explanation.

In some ways this may remind us of Wittgenstein’s radical negation of language in his early work, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, in which the philosopher also emphasized the necessity of silence. The whole meaning of his book, says Wittgenstein, “could be summed up somewhat as follows: What can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.”² Such emphasis on silence is repeated in the middle of the book and reconfirmed at the very end: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.”³ Indeed, between the two philosophers, there are some intriguing and uncanny similarities. Zhuangzi equates understanding with the obtaining of meaning and therefore the forgetting of words, which are just tools to get meaning: “A fish trap exists for the fish, once you’ve got the fish, forget the trap. A snare exists for the hare, once you’ve got the hare, forget the snare. Word exists for the meaning, once you’ve got the meaning, forget the word” (筌者所以在魚，得魚而忘筌。蹄者所以在兔，得兔而忘蹄。言者所以在意，得意而忘言).⁴ Likewise, Wittgenstein also equates understanding with throwing away the propositions as tools when he says, “My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out

¹ Guo, *Zhuji jicheng*, 217-18.

² Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 27.

³ Wittgenstein, *ibid.*, 7, 189.

⁴ Guo Qingfan, “Zhuangzi-Waiwu,” 莊子集釋·外物 in *Zhuji jicheng*, 407.

through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it).¹ Words, language, or propositions in a philosophical argument all prove to be dispensable.

Here, however, the similarities end between Wittgenstein and Zhuangzi's conceptualizations of words or language. The natural language people use every day may have words with different meanings, and different words may have roughly the same meaning; the lack of clarity and precision often leads to vagueness and misunderstanding. "Thus there easily arise the most fundamental confusions (of which the whole of philosophy is full)," says Wittgenstein.² In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein claims that the business of philosophy is to "make clear and delimit sharply the thoughts which otherwise are, as it were, opaque and blurred."³ Because all that is said in a natural language, including philosophy itself, tends to be opaque and blurred, so the only thing that can be said with precision, the "totality of true propositions," according to Wittgenstein, is "the totality of the natural sciences."⁴ Philosophy is not a natural science, so philosophy is also unsayable and must be kept silent. He puts it clearly: "The right method of philosophy would be this. To say nothing except what can be said, i.e. the propositions of natural science, i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy."⁵ That is indeed a most unambiguous negation of language and all that is said in language, and that negation manifests itself in the form of *Tractatus*, a small book that reads more like a mathematical treatise than a well laid-out philosophical argument. Reading the *Tractatus* requires a dispassionate, mathematically savvy mind, but for most readers, especially those of us still valuing the artistic and the poetic, to put it honestly, the unrelenting scientism in this book, the absolute privileging of natural sciences as the only truth of human endeavor, is somewhat off-putting and ultimately fails to convince despite its huge significance for modern Anglo-American analytical philosophy.

In this respect, Zhuangzi is completely different from Wittgenstein, because,

¹ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.54, 189.

² Wittgenstein, *ibid.*, 3.324, 55.

³ Wittgenstein, *ibid.*, 4.112, 77.

⁴ Wittgenstein, *ibid.*, 4.11, 75.

⁵ Wittgenstein, *ibid.*, 6.53, 189.

as we mentioned earlier, his language is highly literary and poetic with brilliant metaphors, impressive allegories and fascinating stories, and reading *Zhuangzi* is a delightful experience of intellectual exercise and aesthetic pleasure. Even his argument of the negation of language is so beautifully expressed that we enjoy the language that argues against its own usefulness. The story of the Wheelwright Bian and his comment on Duke Huan's reading may serve as a good example. Among the ancient Chinese philosophers, Zhuangzi best represents what I have called the "ironic pattern," namely that philosophers, mystics, and all those who negate language tend to use more language, not less, to point to what is supposed to be inexpressible.¹ While denying the usefulness of language, Zhuangzi used language all the time and used it most brilliantly. Is this self-contradictory? Apparently Huizi thought so, for he is a philosopher of the School of Names, and, in the book of *Zhuangzi*, he is both a friend to Zhuangzi and a rival. In the following interesting exchange between the two philosophers, Huizi tried to point out that contradiction, and Zhuangzi justified his use of words with the consciousness of their uselessness:

Huizi tells Zhuangzi: "Your words are also useless." Zhuangzi says: "You need to know what is useless and then you may talk about its use. One cannot say that heaven and earth are not wide and expansive, but what is useful for a man is just the spot to hold his feet. And yet, if digging away the rest till the Yellow Stream underground, is it still useful?" Huizi says, "It's useless." Zhuangzi says, "Then the usefulness of what is useless also becomes clear."

惠子謂莊子曰：子言无用。莊子曰：知无用，而可以言用焉。天地非不廣且大也，人之所用容足耳。然則廁足而墊之，致黃泉，人尚有用乎？惠子曰：无用。莊子曰：然則

¹ Zhang Longxi, *The Tao and the Logos: Literary Hermeneutics, East and West* (Duke University Press, 1992), 38.

无用之為用也亦明矣。¹

The dialectic reversal is significant here: knowing that words are of no use gives one the license, as it were, to use words freely without falling in the trap of language's "fundamental confusions." Different from Wittgenstein, then, Zhuangzi used words with all their rhetorical prowess and brilliance. Of course, using language against its usual confusion, Zhuangzi is constantly saying things that seem to be counterintuitive and puzzling, thus destabilizing our received notions and accustomed views. There is a wonderful metatextual description of Zhuangzi's language and style in the book of *Zhuangzi* itself:

With seemingly unreal and nonsensical arguments, wild and absurd words, and expressions with neither provenance nor borders, he seems to indulge himself without tending toward any side. He is not intent on making what he thinks visible. Because the people of the world are so muddled and confused in his view that it is impossible to talk seriously with them. He thus uses flexible words to express the boundless, weighty words to convey a sense of veracity, and words with implicit meanings to make a wider impact. He wanders alone with the spirit of heaven and earth and never looks down on any of the creatures in the world. He does not judge the right or wrong of others, so he can live with the common crowd in the world. Though grand and unusual, his book speaks in various ways and does no harm. Though varied and uneven, his expressions are funny, provocative, and worth reading.

以謬悠之說，荒唐之言，无端崖之辭，時恣縱而不儻。不以綺見之也。以天下為沈濁，不可與莊語。以卮言為曼衍，以重言為真，以寓言為廣。獨與天地精神往來，而不敖倪

¹ Guo Qingfan, "Zhuangzi·Waiwu," 莊子集釋·外物 in *Zhuazi jicheng*, 403.

於萬物。不譴是非，以與世俗處。其書雖瓌瑋，而連狎無傷也。其辭雖參差，而諷詭可觀。¹

So, we are forewarned that reading *Zhuangzi* is not going to be easy, for the arguments he presents seem “unusual and nonsensical,” the words “wild and absurd,” and he refused to “talk seriously,” because most of us are so “muddled and confused” in our mind that we would have a hard time understanding what he has to say. There are many passages in the book that we may find difficult to understand if we stick to our conventional views. In the following passage, for example, Zhuangzi seems deliberately to lead us to some preposterous statements:

Nothing under heaven is bigger than the tip of an autumn hair, and Mount Tai is small; no one lives longer than the baby that died in infancy, and Penzu died young. Heaven and earth live together with me, and ten thousand things join me as one.
天下莫大於秋豪之末，而太山為小；莫壽乎殤子，而彭祖為夭。天地與我並生，而萬物與我為一。²

When an animal starts to grow hair in autumn, the new hair is extremely fine, but Zhuangzi says that nothing is bigger than the tip of such fine hair. Mount Tai is a big mountain in north China, but Zhuangzi says that it is small. A baby dies in infancy and doesn't live a long life, but Zhuangzi says no one lives longer than such a baby. Penzu is a mythological figure who allegedly lived for 800 years, but Zhuangzi says that he died young. These words are truly “wild and absurd” because they are counter-intuitive and do not make sense in our conventional understanding. How could the tip of new hair be the biggest thing under heaven, and how could Mount Tai be considered small? To anyone in the right mind, these comparisons do not make sense. Zhuangzi, however, precisely does not compare these things in this chapter on “Equalizing All Things” (齊物論) and his point is that we should treat all things as they are, and that they are all self-sufficient, of just the size or temporal duration to be what they are. As Wang Xianqian explains by quoting the 7th-century Daoist Cheng Xuanying (成玄英)

¹ Guo Qingfan, “Zhuangzi·Tianxia,” 莊子集釋·天下 in *Zhuzi jicheng*, 474-75.

² Guo Qingfan, “Zhuangzi·Qiwulun,” 莊子集釋·齊物論 in *Zhuzi jicheng*, 39.

of the Tang dynasty, the great *dao* or great benevolence “nurtures all things and loves all without any particular consideration” (亭毒群品，汎愛無心).¹ It is precisely with such an all-embracing spirit of love and equality that Zhuangzi announced with great pride that “Heaven and earth live together with me, and the ten thousand things join me as one.”

We may find another “seemingly unreal and nonsensical argument” in the following famous debate between Zhuangzi and Huizi on the validity of knowledge, in which many of us may not find Zhuangzi’s claim to knowledge convincing:

Zhuangzi and Huizi are strolling on the bridge over the Hao River. “Out there a shoal of white minnows is swimming freely and leisurely,” says Zhuangzi. “That’s what the fish’s happiness is.” “Well, you are not a fish, how do you know about fish’s happiness?” Huizi contends. “You are not me; how do you know that I do not know about fish’s happiness?” retorts Zhuangzi. “I am not you, so I certainly do not know about you,” Huizi replies. “But you are certainly not a fish, and that makes the case complete that you do not know what fish’s happiness is.” “Shall we go back to where we started?” says Zhuangzi. “When you said, ‘how do you know about fish’s happiness?’ you asked me because you already knew that I knew it. I knew it above the Hao River.”

莊子與惠子遊於濠梁之上。莊子曰：“儵魚出遊從容，是魚樂也。”惠子曰：“子非魚，安知魚之樂？”莊子曰：“子非我，安知我不知魚之樂？”惠子曰：“我非子，固不知子矣；子固非魚也，子之不知魚之樂全矣。”莊子曰：“請循其本。子曰‘汝安知魚樂’云者，既已知吾知之而問我，我知之濠上也。”²

This may well be a mental experiment on the question of understanding and

¹ Wang Xianqian 王先謙, “Zhuangzi jishijie·Qiwulun,” in *Zhuzi jicheng*, 13.

² Guo Qingfan, “Zhuangzi·Qiu shui,” 莊子集釋·秋水 in *Zhuzi jicheng*, 267-268.

knowledge, and from a formal logical point of view, Huizi appears to have won the debate by challenging Zhuangzi on his own terms: if Huizi does not know Zhuangzi because the two are not the same, then, by the same token, Zhuangzi could not know the happiness of a fish because he is not a fish. Huizi sounds rather convincing; while Zhuangzi replied that he knew the fish's happiness "above the Hao River."

A. C. Graham, the Sinologist and translator of the "Inner Chapters" of *Zhuangzi*, puts emphasis on the relative validity of knowledge, arguing that "all knowing is relative to viewpoint," namely, acquired at a particular locale in one's lived world, related to the circumscribed whole of one's "concrete situation."¹ That is of course true of human knowledge of any kind, but Graham seems to consider Zhuangzi's claim to knowledge somewhat weak, because in commenting on this famous debate about the happiness of fish, Graham says that Zhuangzi is "making fun of [Huizi] for being too logical," and that Zhuangzi can offer "no answer to 'How do you know?'" except a clarification of the viewpoint from which you know."² And yet, the "fish's happiness" is a passage of the book *Zhuangzi*, in which Huizi serves as a foil to Zhuangzi's argument and is invariably outwitted, so that should make us beware of the complexity of interpretation. We must take Zhuangzi's answer seriously and understand that the emphasis on the situatedness or circumstantiality of knowledge in his answer is not making fun of Huizi's logic at all, but asserting the validity of knowledge, which Huizi fails to grasp. Standing on the bridge over the Hao River and watching the free and graceful movement of fish in the water, Zhuangzi claims to know that fish are happy. That knowledge is certainly not based on identity, but how much of our knowledge is based on identity? One does not have to be a fish to know about fish's happiness, and empathetic understanding can be an important part of human knowledge. Here we see a significant difference between Zhuangzi and Wittgenstein. Zhuangzi speaks of knowledge that cannot be spoken clearly and cannot be transmitted through language, but that does not negate the truth-

¹ A.C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Arguments in Ancient China* (Open Court, 1989), 81.

² Graham, *ibid.*, 80, 81.

fulness of such knowledge. Wheelwright Bian's "knack" for making a perfect wheel is certainly knowledge, and very valuable knowledge at that, but that knowledge is not the same knowledge Huizi had in mind.

That may remind us of the different concepts of knowledge Aristotle talked about in his *Nichomachean Ethics*. Aristotle differentiates scientific knowledge (*epistēmē*) from practical knowledge (*phronēsis*) that cannot be expressed or proven based on logical and mathematical precision. Aristotle says: "all scientific knowledge is held to be teachable, and what is scientifically knowable is capable of being learned. All teaching is based on what is already known."¹ Wheelwright Bian's knowledge is obviously different from such teachable scientific knowledge, and so is Zhuangzi's knowledge about the happiness of fish swimming in the Hao River. This becomes very important in our time because science and technology predominate in almost every aspect of our lives, but we must realize that truth in life is not exhausted by the "propositions of natural sciences." This is the main point Hans-Georg Gadamer made in his great philosophical defense of the humanities, the monumental *Truth and Method*, in which he puts great emphasis on art and aesthetics as important for human life beyond what is knowable and teachable by scientific method. When he announced that he knew the happiness of the fish "above the Hao River," Zhuangzi appears to have articulated a concept of knowledge completely embedded in historicity and aided by a sort of empathetic imagination, with its claim to truth based on the specific ways in which the knowing subject and the known object are interconnected rather than on the abstract universality of mental faculties. Perhaps this is what Aristotle calls practical knowledge in his distinction between *phronēsis* and *epistēmē*, or practical and theoretical knowledge, a distinction "which cannot be reduced," as Gadamer argues, "to that between the true and the probable. Practical knowledge, *phronesis*, is another kind of knowledge."² Reading *Zhuangzi*, we realize, may still give us something valuable, insightful, and relevant in our time.

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¹ Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. Martin Ostwald (Bobbs-Merrill, 1962)1139b, 150.

² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., English translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (Crossroad, 1989), 21.