Uncertainty, Detachment, and Zhuang Zhou's Butterfly

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Abstract: In this paper, I will focus on the metaphysical discussions in Burton Watson's translation of *Zhuangzi,* especially Chapter 2 and the butterfly dream. There seems to be a narrative strand in Chapter 2 that goes from showing that distinctions are fallacious to saying that there must be some distinction between the butterfly and Zhuang Zhou in the butterfly dream passage. What emerges is a metaphysical picture that is, in various ways, analogous to Zhuangzi's ideas about emotional detachment. A similar attitude is evident in Zhuangzi's ideas about emotions, whereby it is only natural to be affected by first order emotions, but at the same time, they must be controlled to some extent. Just as Zhuangzi suggests that it is possible to both have and not have distinctions at the same time, you can have emotions and be in a state of not having them at the same time. In this paper, I will examine the analogy between these two metaphysical portraits.

In *Zhuangzi*, there are many metaphysical discussions that seem paradoxical. In particular, the butterfly dream passage from Chapter 2 displays a certain metaphysical discussion of this kind. Throughout *Zhuangzi*, we can see parallels between Zhuangzi's views on moral psychology and his metaphysical views. In this paper, I will focus on Zhaungzi's metaphysical claims, particularly the butterfly dream. The narrative of Chapter 2 develops by showing that distinctions are fallacious and never fixed, to claiming that there must be some distinction between the butterfly and Zhuang Zhou by the end of the chapter. This apparent tension reveals metaphysical viewpoint that is, in various ways, analogous to Zhuangzi's ideas about emotional detachment. This metaphysical picture seems to parallel and perhaps even underlie Zhuangzi's assertions about emotional detachment, whereby one can both be and not be affected by emotions at the same time.

First, I will explicate the butterfly dream passage and discuss how it illuminates a metaphysical picture. Chapter 2 ends with a passage about Zhuang Zhou's dream. According to this passage, Zhuang Zhou dreams that he is a butterfly, during which he "knows" he is a butterfly, fully immersed in just being a butterfly. At this point, he is unmistakably a butterfly. Then, he wakes up to suddenly find himself to be unmistakably Zhuang Zhou. Now at *this* point, he is not sure if he was Zhuang Zhou all along having merely dreamt of being

a butterfly, or if the *butterfly* is now dreaming that he is Zhuang Zhou. There are two equally real subjective entities at play, namely, the "I" (or the self) as Zhuang Zhou and the "I" as the butterfly. We will call these two *subjective identities*. An identity statement says what something is (what its essence is), e.g., "I am a butterfly". We already start to see a certain metaphysical picture. The key concept here seems to be that while one is fully immersed in one subjective state, one can be "certain" that one is that thing. The awakening from "fully being" the butterfly to finding himself as Zhuang Zhou is symbolic of the transformation from not knowing to *knowing* that one does not know one's own identity.

So far, this seems like a skeptical account on what this "awakening" is—from ignorant bliss to dire uncertainty. The "I" as the butterfly seems epistemologically better off than the "I" as Zhuang Zhou, since the former was not aware of the uncertainty of identity because its ignorance allowed it to be wholly itself without doubt. However, we will see that this interpretation is incomplete, as it does not take into account the last line of the passage, which reads: "this is called the Transformation of Things."[1] There seems to be something very important about the idea of transformation that this aforementioned interpretation fails to capture. I will now go on to explain how the idea of the self undergoing transformation becomes a key idea in helping us understand Zhuangzi's notion of detachment, the psychological state wherein you

can both be and not be affected by your emotions and desires at the same time.

One puzzling feature about Zhuangzi's account of detachment is that he describes it as a state in which we are both affected and not affected by emotions at the same time. Indeed, at the end of Chapter 5 of the *Zhuangzi,* Zhuangzi himself stipulates: "When I talk about having no feelings, I mean that a man doesn't allow likes or dislikes to get in and do him harm. He just lets things be the way they are and doesn't try to help life along."[2] He thus maintains that we inevitably feel *first order* emotions and desires such as likes and dislikes, but the state of detachment has to do with our minds not being affected by these in a way that would affect the mind's calm, as Nivison describes in his article, «Hsun Tzu and Chuang Tzu».[3]

This state of detachment is exemplified by the passage about Zhuangzi's wife's death. Huizi asks how Zhuangzi can be so calm and joyful knowing that his wife has died. Zhuangzi explains that he did in fact grieve like anyone else would when she first died, but soon realized that it was just a matter of *transformation* and so there is no use in being bothered by it.[4] In other words, once we realize that one's death is just a matter of transformation into a different state simply unknown to us, it suddenly becomes absurd to lament it. Further, Zhuangzi presents us with a rhetorical question in Chapter 2: "How do we know that loving life is not a delusion? How do I know that in hating

death I am not like a man who, having left home in his youth, has forgotten the way back?"[5] That is, there is no good reason to fear death *precisely because* we do not know what this transformation amounts to. There is no way to know that life is not just a dream or a delusion, as illustrated in the butterfly dream passage. Zhuangzi claims that therefore there is no good reason to favor one particular state over the other, and that we favor the one that we are currently in simply because we happen to be in it. Life and death are only a matter of transformation—and we will see that a transformation is not the loss of any fixed thing. Transformation is not a matter of going from one fixed thing to another. When something transforms into another thing, it is not the case that the former thing simply ceases to exist and is entirely replaced by the latter thing into which it transforms. There is something constant across both that unifies the two states and separates them. I will return to this notion later when I present a third dimension of interpretation of the butterfly dream passage.

We can directly apply this concept of transformation to the notions of life and death. Earlier in Chapter 2, Zhuangzi makes the point that there is no good reason to fear death merely because it is unknown. We can see the positive implications of the idea of transformation in Chapter 6. Mengsun Cai's mother dies, but he "wailed without shedding any tears, he did not grieve in his heart, and he conducted the funeral without any look

of sorrow."[6] The fictional Confucius, who in this case is expounding Zhuangzi's views, says that Mengsun is advanced beyond ordinary understanding to the point that he does not know why he lives or dies, why he should keep going or fall behind. He has realized that in undergoing many changes, he is not sure what this "I" or self is any longer. Therefore, "Mengsun alone has waked up."[7] The ventriloquized Confucius continues, saying that we go around saying that "I" do this and "I" do that, but there is no real way to know "that this 'I' we talk about has any 'I' to it."[8] Confucius continues: "you dream you're a bird… you dream that you're a fish…but now when you tell me about it, I don't know whether you are awake or whether you are dreaming." This is a clear restatement of the idea presented in the butterfly dream passage, and how it pertains to the fear of death. That is, we cannot even know if what we call "life" or "living" is just a dream, and therefore we cannot know whether or not death is simply a transformation process of waking up into another subjective state. This is parallel to Zhuang Zhou dreaming that he was a butterfly and then waking to find himself as unmistakably Zhuang Zhou. Life is but one subjective state—so why should we ardently prefer one subjective state over another?

We see this equation life and death as subjective states elsewhere in Chapter 6 as well. The four masters who instantly become friends say that they will be friends with one who can look upon "non-being as his head, on life as his back, and on death as his rump."[9]

That is, these seemingly very distinct states are but different parts of one and the same thing. Going from life to death is but going from one state of being to another, from one perspective to another, as we see in the butterfly passage. So there is nothing fixed that is lost in the process of transformation. There is no real fixed distinction between all these notions. So while we are alive, or to go by the butterfly analogy, while we are still absorbed in the subjective identity of the butterfly, there is no good reason to fear the other state, namely death, which if it is anything at all can only be another subjective identity. Just as Zhuang Zhou was fully immersed in his existence as a butterfly, we too can be fully immersed in our subjective state of living and not be troubled by the other subjective state of death. This transformation to death, this waking up into another subjective state, is nothing to be feared. We therefore see, in this case, that the one who is awakened by being made aware that he does not know of his identity is in fact better off in dealing with the fear of death than one who does not yet know that he does not know. Those who do not know that they don't know are still "dreaming and haven't woken up yet."[10] They still do not see that the distinction between life and death is unclear, as these can be viewed as different parts of the same thing. In fact, the uncertainty of the self *is* the one thing these subjective identities have in common. In that sense, the two ostensibly distinct subjective identities can be viewed as the same thing. This is

parallel to the uncertainty reached about identity in the butterfly dream passage. And therefore, those not awakened to this uncertainty are still susceptible to the woes that come from the fear of death. They still dwell and cling onto life, as if it were something completely opposed to and distinct from death.

At this point, the butterfly dream passage seems to provide a metaphysical justification for not fearing death. The existence of the two equally real subjective identities shows that not as much is at stake as one might think when we transform from one subjective state to another. In other words, this new interpretation helps us understand the idea of detachment insofar as we can be completely aware of and attentive to the consequences and vexing emotions pertaining to certain things in life, but at the same time prevent them from disturbing our tranquility. This is achieved through a recognition of the uncertainty of the self, which is something shared among all subjective states and thus never lost. The uncertainty recognized in one subjective identity suggests that all subjective states must also be uncertain, whether or not the self in each identity is aware of it. That is, an awareness of uncertainty is advantageous, to overcome the fear of death at the meta-level. That is, to realize that the distinction between life and death is nothing fixed and that there is an overarching constancy (the uncertainty of the self) throughout all subjective identities. However, this insight still leaves us with the puzzling

view, which Nivison and Stace note, that the mind or the self can be affected and not affected by first order emotions at the same time.

Nivison describes the state of mind of detachment as a second order posture of the mind. It is more enduring than the first order operations of the mind, since the mind stands apart from the things around it as well as the first order operations and thus it does not allow these stimuli to affect its calm and peace.[11] Stace makes explicit this account on detachment, whereby it is a state of mind that co-exists with first order operations or emotions of the mind, can be described as one of having "no self." And this disappearing or losing of one's self involves the experience of being at harmony with the rest of the universe. This account of detachment accurately characterizes that of Zhuangzi as well. Stace discerns a puzzling feature of this account of detachment. He states that: "the man who has achieved [detachment] has desires, the ordinary natural desires of other men, and he satisfies these desires too, as much as is right and proper, yet at the same time his self, his ego, is not involved or entangled in them."[12] Stace then further clarifies the puzzle beautifully: "How can a man have desires and act, while his inner self is wholly unmoved by these desires, unaffected, impersonal, uninvolved, in a word, detached, as if somehow he had the desires but they were not his desires?"[13] Indeed, this would be a very confounding notion if we were committed to the notion that the self was a singular entity that is

constant, always fully aware of itself and not comprised of transformation into multiple mutually exclusive subjective states. Let us look back at *Zhuangzi* to appreciate how he thinks this could be possible.

I will now explore ways in which the butterfly dream can illuminate a certain metaphysical view that can aid our understanding of this paradoxical notion of detachment. To do so, I will put forward another interpretation of the butterfly dream passage, one that synthesizes the first two, which considered uncertainty and transformation. Let us carefully examine the metaphysical implications that can be drawn from the butterfly passage. As I mentioned earlier, there are two equally real subjective states at play, namely, the "I" as Zhuang Zhou and the "I" as the butterfly. Given the discourse of Chapter 2 up to the butterfly dream passage, the implication seems to be that we can never truly know whether we are in fact the human beings we believe ourselves to be or a butterfly dreaming that *it* is a human. Yet the "I-ness" applies equally to both, which suggests that there is a unifying "I" or self that transcends these two distinct subjective identities that seems to undermine this apparent distinction after all. But this "I-ness" is not a single specific content; it is rather attachable to any content at all, and thus its nature is the very uncertainty of identity. We simply cannot know if we are one or the other of the two subjective identities. But we are told at the very end that there must be *some* distinction between the butterfly

and Zhuang Zhou.[14] What is therefore interesting here is that our very *uncertainty* yields a new distinction, namely, that of Zhuang Zhou's awareness of the other consciousness of the butterfly. The very idea of our uncertainty about our consciousness in a particular subjective identity actually gives rise to a new distinction within our own consciousness of our own difference from the consciousness of another subjective identity. That is, *we cannot help but make this distinction; it is an inevitable consequence of this uncertainty.*

This notion becomes key in understanding how we can understand the reading of "no self" that Stace affirms. According to Zhuangzi, there is not any *one* self, and that is precisely why the amorphous self is capable of not being fixed to any one thing. That is, we cannot identify a single "I" as any specific thing. This was already hinted at in the passage refer to earlier from Chapter 6 that reads: "I do this, I do that—but how do we know that this 'I' we talk about has any 'I' to it?"[15] Further, we see constant references to idea of "losing oneself" throughout the text. Indeed, Chapter 2 begins with Ziqi saying that he has lost himself.[16] This is followed by a discussion of what the "sound of wind" is,[17] as an analogy of the self. The truth is, the wind makes many sounds, and there is no one definite "sound" that can be named and identified as "the sound of the wind." And whatever sound the wind makes, when it has passed on, the hollows it went through are empty again. This analogy is concluded with the rhetorical question,

"but who does the sounding?"[18] Where does this sound reside? What is it that caused the sound? What is the sound after all? Indeed, it is not one thing that does the sounding of all the vicissitudes of sounds that wind makes. The same can be said about the self—we cannot identify the self as any specific thing. It is a multifaceted entity whose existence cannot be identified or pointed out as one single entity. It is later clarified that the sounds of the wind or the "music from empty holes" represent the first order emotions that we have, such as "joy, anger, grief, delight, worry, regret, fickleness,"[19] etc. The self acts as a kind of pivotal axis at the center of all these emotions, these subjective states, that is thus both involved in them and not stirred by them at the same time. The self is thereby not absorbed in any one thing. Later in the chapter, Zhuangzi says that the state in which seeming distinctions and changes no longer find their opposites is called "the *hinge* of the Way."[20] The translation "hinge" is a bit misleading for the original character in the text: 枢, which has a closer meaning to what we would call an "axis" or "pivot." The self is like the still axis of a spinning top. The things that rotate around the self are constantly changing, and yet the self is able to be unmoved in the center and yet also be in accordance with all the changes, "[riding] the changes."[21] And this is precisely what Zhuangzi means by the self being tied to first order emotions, the various things and changes that go around the pivotal

self, and yet also stable and unmoved, like the central axis of a spinning top.

This conception of the self is very similar to the notion evident in the butterfly dream. In the butterfly dream, it is the uncertainty about one's subjective identity that brings about a new distinction of the butterfly's consciousness. We have a distinction and non-distinction at the same time, centered and strung together by a pivotal self, a self as an empty center that serves as a pivot of various subjective states. By just being something at all, Zhuang Zhou already necessarily has to bring about a distinction. In the process of awakening to uncertainty, one becomes a "thing."[22] Indeed, just by being called a thing, you are already introducing a distinction between that thing that you are and whatever the thing you are is not. Transformation is not a matter of going from one fixed thing to another. When something transforms into another thing, it is not the case that the former thing is just replaced by the latter thing into which it transforms. Just as there is always the common unifying factor that is the self or "I" between the butterfly and Zhuang Zhou, there is always a unifying pivotal self in every change or transformation, but in order to participate in these distinct and mutually exclusive states, this constant self must be an emptied self, a self that has no specific contents, a self that has been "lost" or uncertain of its identity.[23] It is this emptiness that allows us to contrast

these states and even be aware of their difference in the first place.

Therefore, every change or transformation implies the making of a distinction, but the experience of a transformation qua transformation also involves being aware of what lies on the other side of this distinction. But by being aware of it, the self also necessarily inhabits the other identity, such that the self that is transformed is no longer certain about its identity.[24] And that uncertainty is precisely what allows it to be equally at home in these two opposed states. Hence the transformation is never complete or fixed, and the two things X and Y that are distinguished can also be simultaneously considered as aspects of the same thing, devoid of distinction. For in order for there to be distinction, there must also necessarily be non-distinction between the distinguished items, such as the transcending self that identifies itself with both of the mutually exclusive subjective identities. For there to be a transformation from or distinction of one thing to another, there needs to be a constant element between these two things. We need both the initial ignorant state of being the butterfly, along with the later state of uncertainty about identity to undergo the transformation.

Zhuangzi's butterfly dream illuminates his fascinating metaphysical view of distinction and transformation, whereby uncertainty of the self is common to both subjective identities, giving rise

to a new distinction within the consciousness of Zhuang Zhou between his own consciousness and the consciousness of the butterfly. We see a very similar notion in Zhuangzi's account of detachment where we are to both have and not have first order emotions at the same time. There is a common paradox here, wherein the self takes a pivotal role in the first order emotions and desires while also being an unchanging constant,[25] an axis if you will, at the center of all these emotions and changes. It is the unchanging constant that allows for change, and it is likewise the constant that allows for distinction. Indeed, this paradoxical thought is what Zhaungzi means by having and not having emotions when he describes being on two roads at the same time.[26] Once we see life and death as aspects of a common transformation, we see that there is no tragedy in losing life, since the very distinction between life and death rests upon constancy. That is, this a distinction is brought about *precisely by* a profound uncertainty.

Notes:

1. See page 44 in Watson's translation.
2. See page 71 in Watson's translation.
3. See page 135 in Nivison's article, «Hsun Tzu and Chuang Tzu.»
4. See page 115 in Watson's translation.
5. See page 42 in Watson's translation.
6. See page 84 in Watson's translation.
7. See page 84 in Watson's translation.
8. See page 85 in Watson's translation.
9. See page 80 in Watson's translation.
10. See page 84 in Watson's translation.
11. See pages 135-136 in Nivison's article, «Hsun Tzu and Chuang Tzu.»
12. See page 25 in Stace's article, «Oriental Conceptions of Detachment and Enlightenment.»
13. See page 26 in Stace's article.
14. See page 44 in Watson's translation.
15. See page 85 in Watson's translation.
16. See page 31 in Watson's translation.
17. See page 32 in Watson's translation.
18. See page 32 in Watson's translation.
19. See page 33 in Watson's translation.
20. See page 35 in Watson's translation.
21. See page 26 in Watson's translation.
22. See page 84 in Watson's translation.
23. See page 31 in Watson's translation.
24. See page 35 in Watson's translation.
25. See page 26 in Watson's translation.
26. See page 36 in Watson's translation.

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