DIOGENES

Zhuangzi's Ethics: A Reading of "In the Human World"

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Abstract
This brief essay aims to interpret the fourth chapter "In the Human World" of *Zhuangzi* by analyzing the seven fables in philosophical terms. The seven fables can be divided into two groups: the first three are concerned with how to be useful (*youyong zhi yong* 有用之用); the following four with "the use of the useless" (*wuyong zhi yong* 无用之用). From those two groups of fables, two different ways of life are identified in relation to the world. Zhuangzi's choice between them can be revealed in light of his art of speaking.

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As we know, "In the Human World" (*renjian shi,* 人间世) is the fourth chapter of *Zhuangzi*. From ancient times till today, many scholars saw this chapter as the key to understanding *Zhuangzi* and his book. In this chapter, Zhuangzi tells eight fables. Apart from the last fable, the one with Jieyu, the Madman of Chu (*Chukuang Jieyu,* 楚狂接舆), the remaining seven fables can be divided into two groups: the first three on the one hand, and the following four on the other. The first group is concerned with "political life", so to speak, exploring the question of how to be useful (*you yong zhi yong* 有用之用) in the human world; the second group is centered around the theme of "the use of the useless"(*wuyong zhi yong* 无用之用).

The first group consists of three conversations. The first conversation takes place between Confucius and Yanhui 颜回. Confucius advises Yanhui not to assist the ruler of Wei卫rashly, for should he do so, "cleverness" (*zhi* 知) and "fame" (*ming* 名) would result, and Yanhui was ignorant of their great danger. Both fame and cleverness are usually criticized by Zhuangzi, because fame undermines real "virtuosity and cleverness comes forth from conflict" (*de dang hu ming zhichu hu zheng,* 德荡乎名，知出乎争).

However, most politicians use fame and cleverness as tools in political conflicts, without realizing that by doing so, they put civilians and even themselves in fatal danger. For example,

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Confucius told Yanhui that even the sages Yao 尧 and Yu 禹 could not resist the bad influences of fame and cleverness when they pursued ideal politics. To be specific, in the name of humanity and righteousness, Yao and Yu restlessly attacked the ministates Congzhi丛枝, Xuao胥敖and Youhu有扈, forcing civilians into the misery of war.

The second conversion is carried out between Confucius and Zigao, the Duke of She (*She Gong Zigao,* 叶公子高). Zigao was about to be sent to Qi 齐 on a diplomatic mission. He was terribly worried about it, since if he couldn't accomplish his task, he would face the death penalty. So he asked Confucius for advice. Confucius told him that there are two constraints in the world: one is "fate" (*ming* 命), the mandated limitations, and the other is "responsibility" (*yi*, 义), doing what is fitting for one's position. With these constraints, there was no way for Zigao to escape and no time for him to worry. Besides, Confucius pointed out to Zigao that, being a messenger, Zigao should "pass on the actual words of the ruler without exaggeration" (*chuan qi chang qing, wu chuan qi yi yan,* 传其常情，无传其溢言).

The third conversation is about the predicament of Yanhe (颜阖). Yanhe was going to be the mentor of a crown prince with a tyrannical character, the son of Duke Ling of Wei (*Wei Ling Gong taizi*, 卫灵公太子). He was afraid of the hardship of serving such a prince, so he turned to Qu Boyu 蘧伯玉 for help. Qu Boyu suggested that he should not defy the prince. However, this didn't mean that Yanhe should give the prince unquestioned obedience. On the one hand, Yanhe should be "compromising in appearance and peaceful in mind" (形莫若就，心莫若和); on the other hand, he should "neither let the appearance sway his heart, nor let his peacefulness hurt the prince's pride" (*jiu buy yu ru, he bu yu chu,* 就不欲入，和不欲出). In other words, the point was to protect oneself without being a conformist, so as to win the prince's heart when the right time came.

From the first group of fables, it is obvious that the spirit of *Zhuangzi*'s ethics is not to retire from the world and live a monastic life. On the contrary, despite the difficulty and the great danger of living in the human world, Zhuangzi encourages us to take up our responsibility in the face of our fate, for fate and responsibility cannot be avoided anywhere in this world. What we can do is to "rest at" (*an yu,* 安于) what is allotted to us and do what we ought to do with great care.

The first group of fables is concerned with the usefulness in the human world, while the second group is meant to make us comprehend "the use of the useless". In the second group, the four fables mainly focus on useless trees or useless people. It is precisely because they were useless in the human world that they could "live out their lives without violent death" (*zhong qi tian nian,* 终其天年). On the contrary, those valuable hence useful trees were usually cut down in the middle of their growth by axes and saws.

From those two groups of fables, we can identify two ways of life in relation to the world: one is "engaging in the world" (*rushi,* 入世), and the other is "retiring from the world" (*chushi,* 出世). There arises the following question: which way does Zhuangzi himself endorse? If Zhuangzi endorses the first way, why does he explore the value of the useless in the second group of fables? If Zhuangzi is in favor of the second way, it seems to be strange for him to conclude the chapter with the song of Jieyu, for the message of this song is similar to that of the first group of fables.

What is Zhuangzi trying to say here? Certain people, the handicapped, for instance, are born to be useless; hence, they seem to have no place in this world. But this uselessness turns out to be of great use, for they avoid being exploited and harmed due to their very uselessness. Then again, most people are allotted a position where they must be useful in one way or another. It is neither possible nor respectable for them to escape. So which way of life should we take?

Actually, Zhuangzi does not endorse any single way. What he does with the two groups of fables is to construct multiple layers of speaking. His unique art of speaking involves talking about a subject "in different layers" (*chong yan,* 重言). When Zhuangzi tells a story, or a group of stories, readers may think they can draw a conclusion from it; yet then he immediately tells another group

of stories, deconstructing the conclusion of the first group and replacing it with another. When readers think this time the conclusion must be final, Zhuangzi forces them to dismiss this stand once again.

However, this peculiar art of speaking does not imply relativism or perspectivism. The conclusions of each group of stories do not cancel each other out. Rather, they add on to and complete one another. There is no single truth one can hang on to, but there are layers of truth.

Moreover, Zhuangzi's way of speaking can be compared to a "ring" (*yuanhuan,* 圆环), a figure without finality. Zhuangzi moves from one point to the next, but unlike Hegel's account, no point in this ring is higher or lower than another. The ring has no endpoint to which every other point leads. This open-endedness should be the case, since in Zhuangzi's view, Dao cannot be exhausted by means of language. Thus, the game can go on and on. For those eager to pin it down, Zhuangzi always has a 'But' waiting ahead.

Reference

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