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A Comparative Study on the Theme of Death
in the *Phaedo* and *Zhuangzi*

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Where Have All the Souls Gone?:
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INTRODUCTION

Death, the inevitable fate of every living creature on earth, is considered by most people to be dreadful, detestable and difficult to comprehend. Ever since primordial times, humans have been struggling to resolve the mystery of death, and to search desperately, but vainly, for a means to escape it. Yet in spite of the great efforts human beings have made in their search to understand the nature of death, it retains its elusive mystery: humans have never reached a generally accepted conclusion on what exactly takes place upon the death of human beings.

It is no wonder, therefore, that the contemplation of death has been a constant theme in philosophical and literary works. Among the classics of ancient Greece and early China, respectively, the *Phaedo* and *Zhuangzi* are noted for their particularly deep understanding of the fundamental reality that confronts all human beings.¹ The two philosophers, Plato and Zhuangzi, are trying each in

¹ Roger T. Ames argues that coming to terms with death is a central concern of Zhuangzi. See Ames, "Death as Transformation in Classical Daoism," in *Death and Philosophy*, ed. Jeff Malpas and Robert C. Solomon (London, New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 62. According to David Gallop's introduction to his translation of the *Phaedo*, this work offers an exploration of the nature of death and the question of life after death. See Gallop, trans. *Plato: "Phaedo"* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. viii; Ferit Guven proposes that the characterization of philosophy as the practice for dying and death by Socrates in the *Phaedo* determines the subsequent attempts to think philosophy, as well as to think philosophically, about the theme of death in western intellectual history. See Ferit Guven, *Madness and Death in*

his unique way to probe these questions: What is the nature of death? How should we react to it? How should our conception of and attitude toward death inform our lives?² In this paper I give an account of the views of death reflected in the two works as well as describe how such views are presented in each. In addition, I will examine the ways in which these two ways of looking at death resemble and differ from each other, with the hope that such a comparative study can both deepen the understanding of the theme of death in the two texts and shed some light on the difference between the larger philosophical frameworks in which such views are rooted.

In spite of the huge differences between the Platonic and Zhuangzian philosophies, the *Phaedo* and *Zhuangzi* do share some similarities in their treatment of death: both offer a subversion of the commonly accepted understanding of death and a rejection of what they consider the unwarranted fear of and aversion to death. In addition, both texts reflect the view that life and death are mutually generative.

What underlies the same attitude toward embracing death, though, is far from being the same understanding. The *Phaedo* actually posits the *reverse* of the life–death dichotomy. Death is presented as the ultimate goal that philosophers are determined to pursue throughout their lives, and death is thus prized over life. In contrast, *Zhuangzi* generally reflects a neutralization of the life–death dichotomy. Neither death nor life should be prioritized, for they are considered to be equal stages of the same cosmological process.

What's more, a psycho-physical duality appears to be inherent in the arguments of the *Phaedo*. Such a body–soul duality is not explicitly revealed in the *Zhuangzi*. In fact, strenuous labor is needed in order to find any implicit evidence in the *Zhuangzi* supporting the existence of a spiritual being that remains conscious and intelligent after death.

Finally, “form” is recognized as the ultimate reality in Platonic metaphysics, and the soul is said to correlate to the form; thus the soul is considered to be superior to the body, whose sensual perceptions can never gain full access to the soul, or form. But in the philosophy of Zhuangzi, the Dao,

Philosophy (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), p. 13.

² These questions are also summarized by P. J. Ivanhoe in his discussion on the theme of death in the *Analects*. See Ivanhoe, “Death and Dying in the *Analects*,” in *Confucian Spirituality*, ed. Tu Weiming and Mary E. Tucker (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2003), p. 222.

which is the ultimate cosmic principle, endows human beings equally with both immaterial spirit and bodily form, both of which should be properly nourished and taken care of.

This difference in the understanding of the nature of death inevitably exposes dissimilar views on how to live a good life. It is implied in the *Phaedo* that life has a soteriological purpose: as a preparation for death, and that it should be lived with abstinence and be devoted to the pursuit of truth and wisdom. But it is posited in the *Zhuangzi* that life is as enjoyable as death. A good life is simply one that responds to and resonates with the Dao, a life free from the encumbrances of both earthly worries and cares and the fear of the imminence of death.

PART I: JUSTIFICATION FOR THE PHILOSOPHER'S READINESS TO DIE: THE MYTH OF THE IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL IN THE *PHAEDO*

The dramatic discussion presented in the *Phaedo* on the theme of death occurs in the context of the imminence of Socrates's death. At the beginning of the dialogue, Socrates, by sending a message urging Evenus to follow him immediately to death, calls attention to the proposition that "philosophers should be willing to die lightly." (62c–d)³ Such a proposition was rejected, though, by his interlocutors, and their attitude forced Socrates to defend himself against the charge of choosing to abandon his duties to his political community and his friends and leaving the gods, his guardians.

Socrates initiated his defense by offering a definition of death as "the separation of the soul from the body," (64c)⁴ a premise unanimously accepted by his interlocutors that thus became the ground on which Socrates proceeded with his argument. The implications of this definition are significant in that it reveals two important features of the soul: (1) because the soul can be separated from the material body we can infer the independent existence of the soul; (2) from the fact that the

³ Gallop, *Plato, "Phaedo,"* p. 7.

⁴ Gallop, *Plato: "Phaedo,"* p. 9.

separation of the soul from the body causes death, we can infer that the soul is the life principle, that which animates the body when the two are united.⁵

This consensus on the psycho-physical duality and the definition of death sets the basis of the discussion to follow. As Ahrens Dorf points out, “This agreement marks a crucial and lasting change in the entire context within which the philosopher’s readiness to die is discussed.”⁶ It allows Socrates to justify his readiness for death based on the superiority of the soul over its body, instead of arguing against his duty to his friends, his political community, and the gods, his rulers.⁷

Having acquired the consent of his interlocutors on these two points, Socrates put forward the notion of the absolute — absolute justice, beauty, goodness — that which can not be sensuously perceived and the knowledge of which can only be obtained through the intellect with the least interference of the senses or the bodily organs. The body is represented as a hindrance to the philosopher’s pursuit of truth not only because of its inability to capture the essential absolutes, but also because of its engagement in such follies as lusts, desires, fears and fantasies, which distract the soul from its pursuit of truth and wisdom. (66b–d)⁸ Thus pure knowledge is not obtainable during the human lifetime, when the soul is still united with the body. The nearest we can come to such knowledge arrives through the soul’s assembling and gathering itself “away from every part of the body, alone by itself.”⁹ These are the reasons that the philosophers, those who are in pursuit of truth and wisdom, occupied themselves throughout their lifetimes with preparation for death and dying, and why they could rejoice rather than repine at the approach of death.

⁵ Ryan Topping argues that the soul as a principle of life or animation of the physical body is inherent in Socrates’s argument that the opposites, life and death, generate each other. See Topping, *Two Concepts of the Soul in Plato’s “Phaedo”* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc., 2007), p. 22.

⁶ Peter J. Ahrens Dorf, *The Death of Socrates and the Life of Philosophy: An Interpretation of Plato’s “Phaedo,”* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 39.

⁷ Ahrens Dorf, *Death of Socrates*, p. 39.

⁸ It is worth noticing that here the soul is depicted as the locus of the intellect, the power of rational thinking and reasoning. The desiring soul and the spirited soul, which are denoted in the *Republic* as the second and third parts of the soul, are relegated to the body in the *Phaedo*.

⁹ Gallop, *Plato: “Phaedo,”* p. 13.

The validity of Socrates's proposition is anchored in the belief that the existence of the soul continues after death: if the soul were as perishable as the body, there wouldn't be any rational ground for the philosopher's embrace of death. As Socrates's interlocutor Cebes points out in the dialogue: "but what you say about the soul is the subject of much disbelief: people fear that when it's been separated from the body, it may no longer exist anywhere."¹⁰ Therefore, in order to legitimate his idea of the philosopher's attitude toward death and dying, and to justify his own readiness for death, Socrates must prove to his interlocutors the immortality of the soul.

This switches the dialogue from a discussion of death to its real topic, Socrates's argument for the immortality of the soul in terms of its pre-existence and post-existence. Four arguments are presented as proofs for the immortality of the soul: (1) the principle of generation from opposites, (2) learning as recollection, (3) the analogy between the soul and the form, and (4) the principle that forms never admit their opposites.

Before putting forward the first argument, Socrates introduced the ancient belief that souls go to Hades upon the death of human beings and reenter this world when they are born again. (70c–d)¹¹ This myth, however, was buttressed by logical argument: Socrates first employed *reductio ad absurdum* to prove that the opposites must produce each other and then deduced from this general rule that life and death, being opposites, should be mutually generative. And from the visible disintegration of the body, he inferred that the soul must remain existent to ensure the process of revival. (70d–72e)¹²

Proof of the pre-existence of the soul is presented as an argument for learning as recollection. This argument is logically based on the theory of forms. To illustrate that what is called learning is actually the recollection of previously possessed knowledge, Socrates first put forward the notion of absolute equality, which, he argued, is superior to the various forms of material equals, and the knowledge of which renders the sensuous perception of equal objects possible. Since human beings are able to sensually perceive the material equals immediately after birth, they must have acquired

¹⁰ Gallop, *Plato: "Phaedo,"* p. 16.

¹¹ Gallop, *Plato: "Phaedo,"* p. 17.

¹² Gallop, *Plato: "Phaedo,"* pp. 17–21.

the knowledge of the ideal equal at a certain time before birth. (72e–77c)¹³ This again implies that the soul not only exists before joining the body, but also has intelligence.

To further prove the existence of the soul after death, Socrates appealed to the notion of the simple and the compound, of which the latter is subject to dispersion and dissolution while the former, being unchanging, is not. He argued that the form, as the essence of true existence, belongs to the realm of the simple, changeless one; and the soul, sharing with the form its character of invisibility, belongs to the same realm, since what is visible to the eye is changeable, and what is invisible, changeless. Based on his analogy between the soul and the form, he concludes:

... [S]oul is most similar to what is divine, immortal, intelligible, uniform, indissoluble, unvarying, and constant in relation to itself; whereas body, in its turn, is most similar to what is human, mortal, multiform, non-intelligible, dissoluble, and never constant in relation to itself.¹⁴

After expounding these doctrines, Socrates encouraged his interlocutors to raise objections, in the spirit of the dialectic. Thereupon Simmias and Cebes proposed their analogies respectively. Simmias compared the relationship between the soul and the body to that between harmony (the invisible) and the musical instrument (the visible), with the existence of the former depending on that of the latter. Cebes compared the soul and body to the tailor and the cloaks he made. The tailor, though being able to survive several of the cloaks, will eventually perish.

In face of the objections raised by Simmias and Cebes, Socrates warned his interlocutors against the mistrust of logical arguments, and recounted his experience of pursuing truth along the path of natural philosophy and moral philosophy. Then he put forward his fourth argument, that the soul, as the life principle, never admits its opposite, death, in the same way as snow never admits hot and fire never admits cold. (84c–106d)

Although in the end Socrates persuaded his interlocutors into accepting the immortality of

¹³ Gallop, *Plato: "Phaedo,"* pp. 21–27.

¹⁴ Gallop, *Plato: "Phaedo,"* pp. 31–32.

the soul, his arguments are ultimately inadequate, as many critics have noticed.¹⁵ Robert L. Patterson points out that among the four arguments, two of them apply to the soul of any living being, and the fourth argument leads to the unacceptable conclusion that nothing ever really dies. What's more, depiction of the soul as a single entity relegates the passions and desires to the body, which contradicts the definition of the soul in the *Republic* as being composed of the intelligence and the spirited parts. Finally, all these arguments are presented in terms of probabilities instead of certainty.¹⁶ Ann Hartle proposes that the *Phaedo* exhibits a contrast between the certainty in action and uncertainty in theoretical proposition, assurance in the goodness of arguing itself and restraint in the arguments having been raised.¹⁷ Hartle argues that Socrates himself is fully aware of the weaknesses in his arguments and in deliberately and secretly unweaving his arguments, he manages to overrule the emotion of fear in both himself and in his interlocutors for their common good, his being to face death calmly and theirs being the trust of arguing and the continuation of the philosophical practice in this life.¹⁸

The inadequacy of the arguments also lies in the fact that the features of the soul revealed in the arguments are all universal. No distinction is made between the soul of the good and the evil person or even between the soul of a human being and that of an animal. Such a tendency actually seriously undermines Socrates' justification for the philosopher's way of life, for if all souls could attain an imperishable status upon death, what kind of life one chooses to live wouldn't matter at all. As it turns out, to make up for the inadequacy of the arguments, Socrates had to apply to myth to justify his claims. As David White puts it "the *Phaedo* is a series of attempts to demonstrate rationally the immortality of the soul — followed by a concluding myth."¹⁹

¹⁵ See A. E. Taylor, *Plato: The Man and His Work* (Cleveland and New York: Meridian-World, 1956), p. 184; Ann Hartle, *Death and the Disinterested Spectator: An Inquiry into the Nature of Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), pp. 19–20.

¹⁶ Robert L. Patterson, *Plato on Immortality* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1965).

¹⁷ Hartle, *Death and the Disinterested Spectator*, pp. 31, 72.

¹⁸ Hartle, *Death and the Disinterested Spectator*, pp. 38, 57.

¹⁹ David A. White, *Myth and Metaphysics in Plato's "Phaedo"* (Cranbury, N.J.: Associated University Presses, 1989), p. 31.

Socrates twice mentioned the fate of the various souls upon death. After raising the third proof for the immortality of the soul, Socrates introduced the destinies of souls in terms of the theory of incarnation: he classified them into three types: the souls of philosophers who aim at the separation of the body and the soul, which ascend to the gods; the souls of the those who have practiced tyranny and injustice, which will be reincarnated into fierce, vulgar animals; the souls of those who have practiced the virtue of temperance yet without philosophical contemplation, which will be reincarnated into gentle social animals. (81e–82c)²⁰ In the final statement, of an eschatological myth, he recounts the destinies of different people in terms of their rewards and punishments from the gods. The philosophers are distinguished from those who lived either incurably wicked lives or decent but unremarkable lives in that their souls, having been purified by moral and intellectual pursuits, will be eternally freed from corporeality and enjoy limitless happiness and bliss. (114c)²¹

PART II ANECDOTES ON DEATH IN THE *ZHUANGZI*

It is worth noticing that among the thirty-three chapters of the compendium bearing the title *Zhuangzi*, only the first seven can be attributed to a single writer generally agreed to be the historical Zhuangzi. The outer and miscellaneous chapters, supposedly written by the followers of Zhuangzi, are classified into three groups by Liu Xiaogan: those written by the transmitters of Zhuangzi, the school of anarchists, and the school of Huang-Lao, the latter two of which clearly diverge from the basic thoughts of Zhuangzi. Even the chapters written by the transmitters, who basically expound or expand the themes raised in the inner chapters, are sometimes incongruous or even contradictory to the spirit of Zhuangzi reflected in the inner chapters.²² Therefore in discussing the theme of death in the *Zhuangzi*, special care is needed in selecting and handling materials. In this paper, materials from the outer and miscellaneous chapters, if they are consistent with and supportive of the basic

²⁰ Gallop, *Plato: "Phaedo,"* pp. 33–34.

²¹ It should be noted that such a description resembles what the Indian philosophical systems propose as the state of Moksa, in which the souls of the enlightened are liberated from the endless cycles of rebirth and attain eternal bliss.

²² See Liu Xiaogan, *Classifying the "Zhuangzi" Chapters* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1994), pp. 87–89.

philosophy of Zhuangzi, will be analyzed in the same way as those from the inner chapters. Materials conveying inconsistent messages or messages not conveyed in the inner chapters, on the other hand, will be pointed out and treated as divergent from the basic philosophy of Zhuangzi within the same school.

A. TRANSCENDING THE LIFE–DEATH DEMARCATION

The *Zhuangzi* is noted for the description of the supreme men²³ who possess, among many features,²⁴ a distinctive characteristic: insusceptibility to physical hurt and death.

至人神矣：大澤焚而不能熱，河、漢涸而不能寒，疾雷破山、風振海而不能驚。若然者，乘雲氣，騎日月，而遊乎四海之外。死生無變於己，而況利害之端乎！(Wang, p. 80)

The ultimate man is spirituous,... If the great marshes were set on fire, he would not feel hot. If the rivers turned to ice, he would not feel cold. If violent thunder split the mountains, he would not be injured. If whirlwinds lashed the seas, he would not be frightened. Such being the case, he rides the clouds, mounts the sun and moon, and wanders beyond the four seas. Since not even life and death have any transforming effect upon him, how much less do benefit and harm?²⁵

²³ These *true men* 真人 can be considered the sages of the Zhuangzian version. The fact that the extended description of these people occurs at the beginning of the chapter entitled "Great and Venerable Teachers" reveals that they are intended to be exemplary teachers for the readers to exalt and follow.

²⁴ These people are described as the embodiment of true knowledge. They willingly surrender to Heaven, never trying to go against the Dao. They joyfully accept whatever situation Dao and Heaven bring them into. See Wang Shumin, *Zhuangzi jiaoquan* (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 2007), pp. 203–213.

²⁵ Victor Mair, *Wandering on the Way: Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu* (New York: Bantam Books, 1994), p. 21.

古之真人，不知說生，不知惡死。(Wang, p. 207)

The True Man of old knew neither fondness for life nor aversion to death.²⁶

Death does not have any impact on the supreme men, mainly for the reason that they have transcended the demarcation between life and death. The artificial distinctions between life and death, benefit and harm, wealth and poverty, nobleness and baseness, which are highly valued in the world of ordinary people, are not able to disturb the equanimity of their minds. Such concepts never enter their inner self, the core or essence of their being, as is indicated in the passage below:

死生存亡，窮達貧富，賢與不肖，毀譽、饑渴、寒暑，是事之變，命之行也，而知不能規乎其始者也。故不足以滑和，不可入於靈府。(Wang, p. 190)

Life and death, preservation and loss, failure and success, poverty and wealth, worthiness and unworthiness, slander and praise, hunger and thirst, cold and heat — these are all the transformations of affairs and the operation of destiny. Day and night they alternate before us, but human knowledge is incapable of perceiving their source. Therefore we should not let them disturb our equanimity, nor should we let them enter our numinous treasury.²⁷

If, as many interpreters have noticed, the purpose of the *Zhuangzi* is to be therapeutic — to transform the fixed minds of its readers and change their course of action;²⁸ and if the supreme men are intended as role models for ordinary people to look up to, then we would expect the readers of the

²⁶ Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, p. 52.

²⁷ Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, p. 48.

²⁸ Eric Schwitzgebel, “Zhuangzi’s Attitude toward Language and His Skepticism,” and Lee H. Yearley, “Zhuangzi’s Understanding of Skillfulness and the Ultimate Spiritual State,” in *Essays on Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics in the “Zhuangzi,”* ed. Paul Kjellberg and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), pp. 68–96, 169.

Zhuangzi to adopt the same attitude toward death. Such a state of mind, however, seems to be beyond the imagination of the common readers. Anyway, the distinction between life and death seems to be the most insurmountable one among all the "artificial distinctions that the text loves to discredit."²⁹ What the text needs to do, then, is first to cause its readers to question their stereotyped view of death. The story of Lady Li serves exactly this purpose:

予惡乎知說生之非惑邪！予惡乎知惡死之非弱喪而不知歸者邪！麗之姬，艾封人之子也。晉國之始得之，涕泣沾襟；及其至於王所，與王同筐床，食芻豢，而後悔其泣也。予惡乎知夫死者不悔其始之蘄生乎！（Wang, p.87）

How do I 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? Lady Li was the daughter of the border guard of Ai. When she was first taken captive and brought to the state of Jin, she wept until tears drenched the collar of her robe. But later, when she went to live in the palace of the ruler, shared his couch with him, and ate the delicious meats of his table, she wondered why she had ever wept. How do I know that the dead do not wonder why they ever longed for life?³⁰

For those who wish to find the answer to the question, what is the nature of death, in the *Zhuangzi*, this passage can be more disturbing than reassuring. In fact, the rhetorical questions immediately preceding and following the anecdote of Lady Li add to the text a strong agnostic tone — all the writer seems to suggest is: "I don't know if death is better than life or worse." However, the analogy between Lady Li's sadness over her captivity and people's fear of death does achieve some effect: it helps the readers to realize that the desire for life and hatred of death may be caused sheerly by their ignorance of what is to come after death — for those who have habitually clung to life in this

²⁹ Paul Goldin, "A Mind-body Problem in the *Zhuangzi*?" in *Hiding the World in the World: Uneven Discourses on the "Zhuangzi*," ed. Scott Cook (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), p. 227.

³⁰ Burton Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), p. 47.

world, the world after death is surely intimidating — like the unknown situation in the state of Jin for Lady Li. However, it is very possible that what death offers is a much more promising future than life — like the happy life Lady Li enjoys at the palace of the king of Jin. If people detest death out of their fear of the unknown world facing them upon death, then such fear is ungrounded — what is unknown may not necessarily be as dreadful as they imagine.

Like many other anecdotes and rhetorical questions in chapters one and two of the *Zhuangzi*, the purpose of this passage is mainly to achieve a shocking effect: making the readers aware of the existence of perspectives greater than theirs, and causing them to reconsider the legitimacy of the beliefs that they have been long accustomed to. Like warm-up questions and exercises, this anecdote opens the otherwise closed minds of the readers, shaking off their certitude, and making them ready for a completely fresh scenario on death to be put forward elsewhere in the text. At the same time, the skeptical attitude³¹ dissolves, rather than reverses, the binary opposition between life and death, by leaving the possibilities open. The outer chapter, “Zhile” 至樂,³² however, treats death in a different manner. Consider the anecdote of Zhuangzi’s conversation with the skull.

髑髏曰：“死，無君於上，無臣於下，亦無四時之事，從然以天地為春秋，雖南面王樂，不能過也。” (Wang, p. 647)

“When you’re dead,” said the skull, “there’s no ruler above you and no subjects below you. There are no affairs of the four seasons; instead, time passes leisurely as it does for

³¹ Lee Yearley argues that posing questions without resolving them is essential to Zhuangzi’s skepticism. See Yearley, “The Perfected Person in the Radical Chuang-tzu” in *Experimental Essays on Chuang-tzu*, ed. Victor H. Mair (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983), p. 127.

³² Xiaogan Liu proposes that “Zhile” is one of the chapters written by the “transmitters of Zhuangzi” to explain and expand the major topics covered in the inner chapters. See Liu, *Classifying the “Zhuangzi” Chapters*, pp. 99–100.

heaven and earth. Not even the joys of being a south-facing king can surpass those of death."³³

From the skull's perspective, death is a state of supreme joy and endless bliss, completely free of the worries, cares, labors and social constraints of human life. Apparently, in composing such a story, the followers of Zhuangzi have taken one step further to assume that what death offers is definitely a more promising future than life. The attitude toward loving death and hating life, though, apparently goes against the skeptical spirit in the inner chapters.

B. DEATH AS TRANSFORMATION

For the exemplary people depicted in the *Zhuangzi*, what death brings about is not sorrow and bitterness, but amazement and awe. In conjuring up what changes might take place upon the death of the human body, the masters fully appreciate the miraculous power exhibited in the life–death process. Consider the anecdote that takes place at events showing the imminence of Master Lai's death:

俄而子來有病，喘喘然將死，其妻子環而泣之。子犁往問之曰：“叱！避！無怛化！”倚其戶與之語曰：“偉哉造物！又將奚以汝為？將奚以汝適？以汝為鼠肝乎？以汝為蟲臂乎？” (Wang, p. 244)

Suddenly Master Lai grew ill. Gasping and wheezing, he lay at the point of death. His wife and children gathered round in a circle and began to cry. Master Li, who had come to ask how he was, said, "Shoo! Get back! Don't disturb the process of change!" Then he leaned against the doorway and talked to Master Lai. "How marvelous the

³³ Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, p. 170.

Creator is! What is he going to make of you next? Where is he going to send you? Will he make you into a rat's liver? Will he make you into a bug's arm?"³⁴

In swatting down the crying wife and children, Master Li brings up one of the most important themes in the *Zhuangzi*: the idea of *hua* 化, transformation.³⁵ For these “masters,” death is the starting point of a process of transformation from one bodily form into another.³⁶ Human bodies do not simply disintegrate and perish upon death. Instead, they transform into some other forms of life — most likely animal bodies — as in the case of Master Lai. A similar process of miraculous transformation from one organism to another is described, in great detail, in the chapter of “Zhile” 至樂, in which the originative germs of life, *ji* 幾, are described as being able to develop into various life forms under favorable natural conditions, and simple low-level organisms are able to produce complex high-level organisms, with human beings at the top of the chain, which in turn returns to the originative germs upon death and thus rejoins the endless cycle of life.³⁷

Death is not sad, if we understand it as another change that brings us back to the beginning state where no sign of life exists at all. Like the four seasons that proceed on in succession, life and death are equal stages in the endless cycle of changes. What underlies this cycle and determines the destiny of each individual form of life, is implicitly indicated elsewhere in the *Zhuangzi* to be Heaven, the great creator, or the Dao, the basic cosmological principle nothing in the world can resist.³⁸ As Master Li exclaims at the deathbed of Master Lai, “How marvelous the Creator is! What is he going to make of you next?”

34 Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, p. 85

35 *Zhuangzi* is noted for proclaiming that change is the only thing that is constant. The famous story of Zhuang Zhou dreaming of himself turning into a butterfly is a good illustration of this theme. The butterfly, an insect subject to metamorphosis, is itself a symbol of transformation.

36 The theme of death as transformation is such a recurrent one in *Zhuangzi* that the word 化 is found to be used interchangeably with *si* 死 or *wang* 亡 (to die), to indicate the notion of death.

37 Wang, *Zhuangzi jiaoquan*, p. 655.

38 The irresistibility of Heaven's rule is also reflected in the following sentence: 且夫物不勝天久矣 (But nothing can ever win against Heaven — that's the way it's always been). See Wang, *Zhuangzi jiaoquan*, p. 240.

Apparently, the mechanism of this miraculous "creator" is not known to us humans: we are left with endless wonder and surprise at its marvelous work. Aware of the futility of the struggle to fight against the force of Heaven and amazed at the marvelous work of the creator, these Masters readily accept and joyfully embrace any stage or form of life the "creator" brings them to:

夫大塊載我以形，勞我以生，佚我以老，息我以死。故善吾生者，乃所以善吾死也。(Wang, p. 221)

The Great Clod burdens me with form, labors me with life, eases me in old age, and rests me in death. So if I think well of my life, for the same reason I must think well of my death.³⁹

浸假而化予之左臂以為雞，予因以求時夜；浸假而化予之右臂以為彈，予因以求鴉炙；浸假而化予之尻以為輪，以神為馬，予因以乘之，豈更駕哉！且夫得者時也，失者順也，安時而處順，哀樂不能入也。此古之所謂縣解也，而不能自解者，物有結之。(Wang, p. 239)

Suppose my left arm is transformed into a rooster; I would comply and keep track of the time of night. Suppose my right arm is transformed into a crossbow; I would comply and look for an owl to roast. Suppose my buttocks are transformed into wheels and my spirit into a horse; I would comply and ride — why would I ever need a car? Moreover, what we obtain, we obtain because it is the right time; what we lose, we lose because we must follow [the flow of Nature]. If we are at peace with our time and dwell in the flow, sorrow and joy cannot enter us. This is what the ancients called

³⁹ Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, p. 80.

unencumbered. Those who are unable to release themselves are tied down by objects.⁴⁰

In order to fully grasp the nature of death, one has to release himself from the *Jie* 結, entanglement of things, so as to view the cycling of life from a larger perspective, the perspective of the Dao, which does not make any discrimination between life and death, human life and other forms of life, as is indicated in the phrase “From the point of view of the Way, things have no nobility or meanness”.⁴¹

Perceiving death from Heaven’s perspective also helps to understand it as part of the natural process:

死生，命也，其有夜旦之常，天也。(Wang, p. 221)

Life and death are destined. Their constant alternation, like that of day and night, is due to heaven.⁴²

This analogy effectively neutralizes the demarcation between life and death. Like day and night, they follow each other in succession, the end of one becoming the starting point of the other. Like the two edges of the same sword, they mutually define each other, with the existence of one dependent upon that of the other. As Roger T. Ames points out, “Like ‘up and down’ or ‘left and right’, life and death are correlative categories which depend upon each other for explanation.”⁴³

This Heavenly perspective enables the Zhuangzian sages to wander freely and at ease wherever the “creator” takes him, rather than cling tightly to the human form of life. Thus Master Lai

40 Translation by Paul Goldin (“A Mind–body Problem in the *Zhuangzi*?” p. 228).

41 Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, p. 179.

42 Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, p. 53

43 Ames, “Death as Transformation,” p. 59.

reflects: "So now I think of heaven and earth as a great furnace, and the Creator as a skilled smith. Where could he send me that would not be all right?"⁴⁴

C, QI 氣, WHAT UNDERLIES THE BODILY TRANSFORMATION

Another term that is often used to describe the transformation from life to death is *bian* 變. "Zhile" 至樂 records an anecdote about the dialogue between Zhuangzi and his friend Huizi. When Huizi scolded Zhuangzi for not showing any signs of sorrow upon the death of his wife, Zhuangzi retorted by expounding on the nature of death in terms of the notion of change.⁴⁵

察其始而本無生，非徒無生也，而本無形，非徒無形也，而本無氣。雜乎芒芴之間，變而有氣，氣變而有形，形變而有生，今又變而之死，是相與為春夏秋冬四時行也。(Wang, p. 643)

But I reflected on her beginning and realized that originally she was unborn. Not only was she unborn, originally she had no form. Not only did she have no form, originally she had no vital breath. Intermingling with nebulousness and blurriness, a transformation occurred and there was vital breath; the vital breath was transformed and there was form; the form was transformed and there was birth; now there has been another transformation and she is dead.⁴⁶

This passage also brings up an important concept, *qi* 氣, which is regarded here as the basis of

44 Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, p. 85

45 Change is greatly valued in the philosophical system of Zhuangzi. In the "Qiwu lun" 齐物论, which is generally regarded as the theoretical core of Zhuangzian philosophy, there is a tendency toward refusing to grant an ontological status to any single entity or ultimate principle. The world is considered a fluctuation that constantly changes, without any starting or ending point. In holding that nothing is constant except change, Zhuangzi actually assigns change an ultimate ontological status.

46 Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, p. 169.

the physiological aspect of life.⁴⁷ *Qi* is fluid and constantly changing. It is the fundamental cosmological product born out of the “nebulousness and blurriness,” which in turn gives birth to life and the bodily forms. The understanding of life and death in terms of this primordial stuff of *qi* is even more clearly demonstrated in the following passage from “Zhi beiyou” 知北遊, knowledge wanders north.⁴⁸

生也死之徒，死也生之始，孰知其紀！人之生，氣之聚也，聚則為生，散則為死。若死生為徒，吾又何患！故萬物一也，是其所美者為神奇，其所惡者為臭腐；臭腐復化為神奇，神奇復化為臭腐。故曰：‘通天下一氣耳。’ 聖人故貴一。(Wang, p. 807)

For life is the disciple of death and death is the beginning of life. Who knows their regulator? Human life is the coalescence of vital breath. When it coalesces there is life; when it dissipates there is death. Since life and death are disciples of each other, how should I be troubled by them? Thus the myriad things are a unity. What makes the one beautiful is its spirit and wonder; what makes the other loathsome is its stench and putrefaction. But stench and putrefaction evolve into spirit and wonder, and spirit and wonder evolve once again into stench and putrefaction. Therefore it is said, “A unitary vital breath pervades all under heaven.” Hence the sage values unity.⁴⁹

This passage can be taken as a footnote to the life–death transformation passages occurring in the inner chapters. It offers a rather conventional interpretation of Zhuangzi’s mystical assertion that

⁴⁷ The original meaning of *qi* was mist, or the vapor rising from a sacrificial offering. Shuowen explains it as vapors of the clouds, which points to the formless powers of the universe. The familiar wind–air–breath association also seems to be derived from this denotative meaning. See the discussion by Benjamin I. Schwartz, in *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 179–184.

⁴⁸ This chapter is classified by Xiaogan Liu into the group that explains and expounds on the inner chapters. See Liu, *Classifying the Zhuangzi Chapters*, p. 89.

⁴⁹ Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, p. 212.

life and death are unified, and that myriad things are identical: everything is made of the same *qi*; life and death are nothing but the condensation and dissipation of the *qi*. The notion that *qi* is the essential material source out of which all the myriad things between heaven and earth are made renders it more on the physical side in the psycho-physical spectrum.⁵⁰ Ontologically, such a notion seems to resemble the material monism, which attributes the source of the multiple phenomenal world to one single material atom. However, such a materialistic view apparently goes against the spirit of both Zhuangzi and his followers. Consider the following passage from the same chapter of "Zhi beiyou" 知北遊:

夫昭昭生於冥冥，有倫生於無形，精神生於道，形本生於精，而萬物以形相生...

Luminosity is produced from darkness,
Differentiation is produced from formlessness,
Essence is produced from the Way,
Basic form is produced from essence,
And the myriad things produce each other through their forms....⁵¹

This passage, like the famous *Daodejing* verse,⁵² attributes the origin of the world to the formless, invisible and ineffable Dao. In the cosmological hierarchy depicted here, the ultimate, absolute principle of Dao produces *jingshen* 精神, the refined *qi*, which in turn engenders the basic form, through which the myriad living creatures are begotten. As what bridges the formless,

⁵⁰ For an extended discussion on the notion of *qi*, see Joseph A. Adler. "Varieties of Spiritual Experience: Shen in Neo-Confucian Discourse" in *Confucian Spirituality*, vol. 2, ed. Tu Wei-ming and Mary Evelyn Tucker (New York: Crossroad, 2004).

⁵¹ Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, p. 215.

⁵² It is stated in the *Daodejing* chapter 42: "The Way gave birth to the One. The One gave birth to the Two. The Two gave birth to the Three. And the Three gave birth to the ten thousand things." See Robert G. Henricks, trans., *Lao-Tzu Te-Tao Ching* (New York: The Random House Publishing Group, 1989), p. 106.

immaterial Dao and the multiple sentient and insentient beings, the concept of *qi* or *jingshen* must contain physical, as well as mental, spiritual and numinous aspects. Anyway, according to the traditional Chinese cosmological view, what fills the space between Heaven and Earth includes not only various material things, but also various intelligent, spiritual and numinous beings. The following passage from *Liji* 禮記 is a good illustration of the spiritual aspect of *qi*, in contrast with the bodily material that returns to the earth and decays.

延陵季子：“骨肉歸復于土，命也。若魂氣則無不之也...”⁵³

Destined it is that his bones and flesh should return to the earth. As for his soul-breath, it goes everywhere, everywhere.⁵⁴

Qi occurs in the inner chapters altogether fourteen times, indicating that Zhuangzi himself must have been very familiar with this concept. It is used in the inner chapters to refer to the basic cosmological material that flows around between Heaven and Earth,⁵⁵ as well as the vital material-energy dwelling inside the body, whose proper order is essential to one's physical health.⁵⁶ Although Zhuangzi never indicates that *qi* is the primordial element of which all things in the universe are composed and the movement of which causes life and death, he does consider the *qi* inside our body to be more akin to the Dao than the sense organs or heart-mind.

回曰：“敢問心齋。”仲尼曰：“一若志，無聽之以耳而聽之以心，無聽之以心

53 Sun Xidan 孫希旦, *Liji jijie* 禮記集解 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1989), p. 294.

54 Translation is by Ying-Shih Yü. See Yü, “O Soul, Come Back!: A Study in the Changing Conceptions of the Soul and Afterlife in Pre-Buddhist China,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, vol. 47 (1987), p. 373.

55 An example of this appears in “Da zongshi” 大宗師: 遊乎天地之一氣, to wander with the unitary *qi* of Heaven and Earth. See Wang, *Zhuangzi jiaoquan*, p. 248.

56 An example of this appears also in “Da zongshi” 大宗師: 陰陽之氣有沴，其心閒而無事, which translates to: “his *qi* of yin and yang is disordered, but in his heart, it is still safe and sound.” See Wang, *Zhuangzi jiaoquan*, p. 239.

而聽之以氣。聽止於耳，心止於符。氣也者，虛而待物者也。唯道集虛。虛者，心齋也。(Wang, p. 130)

"I venture to ask what 'fasting of the mind' is," said Hui. "Maintaining the unity of your will," said Confucius, "listen but with your primal breath. The ears are limited to listening, the mind is limited to tallying. The primal breath, however, awaits things empty. It is only through the Way that one can gather emptiness, and emptiness is the fasting of the mind."⁵⁷

Unlike Mencius, who considers the heart to be a heavenly-endowed organ that thinks, and the greater part that masters all other sense organs,⁵⁸ Zhuangzi displays a distrust for the heart-mind. As A. C. Graham points out, "he recommends us to educate the spontaneous energies rather than use the heart to think, name, categorize and conceive ends and principles of action."⁵⁹ From the discussions above, it can be safely concluded that the reason Zhuangzi encourages the use of *qi* is that he considers it to be the finest stuff in a human body that resonates with the cosmological essence that fills everything in the universe. *Qi* neither contrives nor manipulates; it only corresponds to and flows with the Dao.

PART III PLATONIC AND ZHUANGZIAN DEATH, A COMPARISON

A. THE BODY-SOUL PROBLEM

1) *The Psycho-Physical Duality in the "Phaedo"*

As has been discussed in part I, Socrates' discussion on death is based on a commonly accepted premise of the psycho-physical duality. In addition, the binary opposition between life and death in *Phaedo* is rooted in the body-soul dichotomy. The soul is presented as a life principle and the locus of

⁵⁷ Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, p. 32.

⁵⁸ See D. C. Lau, trans., *Mencius: A Bilingual Edition* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press 2003), pp. 258–259.

⁵⁹ A. C. Graham, "*Chuang-tzu*": *The Inner Chapters* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc, 2001), p. 7.

consciousness, reason and intellect. In contrast, emotions, material desires and sensuous perceptions are considered to belong to the sphere of the body. The soul, being invisible, intelligent, divine and immortal, is our true self. It is superior to the body, which is false, transient and delusory. However, when being united with the inferior body, the soul inevitably becomes entrapped and contaminated by the latter. Thus the philosopher's life is characterized by his soul ruling over his body, as well as an endeavor to bring his soul back to its own sphere.

2) *Is There a Body–Soul Dualism in the Zhuangzi?*

The issue of whether the *Zhuangzi* admits a notion similar to the Platonic soul and whether a body–soul dichotomy exists in the *Zhuangzi* is a very complicated one. For one thing, in the compendium of *Zhuangzi* there are a group of vaguely defined concepts closely related to the Platonic notion of psycho-physical duality, including *shen* 身 *xin* 心 *jing* 精 *shen* 神 *xing* 形 *qi* 氣 *hun* 魂 *po* 魄. All these concepts are also frequently used in many other texts contemporary to the *Zhuangzi*, with their connotations possibly slightly varied from text to text. For another, modern scholarly opinions diverge greatly on this issue. Traditionally, many scholars of early Chinese thought hold that the body–mind dualism simply does not exist in the *Zhuangzi*.⁶⁰ This dominant view point, however, is rejected by Paul Goldin in his “A Mind–Body Problem in the *Zhuangzi*,” which points out that there are several cases in the text suggesting the existence of an “immaterial soul” standing aloof and remaining unaffected by bodily transformations and the recycling at the material level that takes place after the death of the human body. Goldin further proposes that *Zhuangzi*, along with *Xunzi* and *Mozi*, are “subscribed intuitively to ‘folk psychology,’” which takes it for granted that the mental world has its own existence “fundamentally separate from the physical world.”⁶¹

60 Chris Jochim argues that it's inappropriate to apply the western notion of the self and the body–mind dualism in the analysis of *Zhuangzi*. See Chris Jochim, “Just Say No to ‘No Self’ in *Zhuangzi*,” in *Wandering at Ease in the Zhuangzi*, ed. Roger T. Ames (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), p. 53. See also Paul Goldin's discussion on how Graham and Fingarette have influenced western scholarship by proposing not to impose the western concept of body–mind dualism onto early Chinese thinkers. See Goldin, “A Mind–body Problem in the *Zhuangzi*,” pp. 232–234.

61 Goldin, “A Mind–body Problem in the *Zhuangzi*,” p. 236. Goldin's proposition is buttressed by a recent article by Edward Slingerland. See Slingerland, “Body and Mind in Early China: An Integrated Humanities–Science Approach,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 81 (2013), pp. 6–55.

Goldin's proposition that the classical thinkers shared a belief in the mental entity existing independent of the physical body finds some resonance in Ying-Shih Yü's study on the concept of the soul in pre-Buddhist China. Yü's study indicates that around the time the text of *Zuozhuan* 左傳, *Zuo Commentaries to the Annals of Spring and Autumn* was written, there were commonly accepted concepts of 魂 *hun*-soul and 魄 *po*-soul, as separate entities joining the body from outside, in charge of intelligence and mental activities, the separation of which from the body brings about death.⁶² Both Goldin's and Yü's studies indicate that the existence of certain forms of intelligence and will power after death was widely accepted among the Chinese thinkers in Warring States period. As a life principle, the *hun-po* 魂魄 is quite similar to the function of the soul in the *Phaedo*, whose union with the body sustains life and whose separation from the body leads to death. More textual evidence is needed, however, to fully understand the body/mind problem in the *Zhuangzi* and to see to what extent it shares the fourth century B.C. concept of the "soul."

The concept of *hun* 魂, heavenly soul, occurs five times in *Zhuangzi*, once in the inner chapters and four times in the outer chapters. These mentions are used either in contrast with the concept of *xing* 形, bodily form, or *shen* 身, body,⁶³ in parallel with the concept of *xin* 心, heart-mind, or *shen* 神, spirit,⁶⁴ or in combination with the concept of *po* 魄, earthly soul.⁶⁵ This indicates that the *Zhuangzi* does share the idea of a spiritual being in contrast with the bodily form, and that such an idea is denoted by different terms, be it *hun* 魂, *shen* 神, *xin* 心, or *lingfu* 靈府.

Further investigation shows that the *Zhuangzi* seems to approve the notion of a spiritual entity dwelling in the body, whose status of being remains unaffected by the life and death of the body — a *Zhuangzian* version of the ghost in the body. Firstly, the passage below suggests the existence of something that enlivens the body, and departs from it upon death.

62 Yü, "O Soul, Come Back!," pp. 370–371, 378–380.

63 An example of this occurs in the chapter "Qiwu lun" 齊物論: 其寐也魂交, 其覺也形開.

64 Examples of this occur in the chapter of "Zaiyou" 在宥: 解心釋神, 莫然無魂; "Keyi" 刻意: 其寢不夢, 其覺無憂; 其神純粹, 其魂不罷 and "Tiandao" 天道: 其鬼不崇, 其魂不疲, 一心定而萬物服.

65 An example of this occurs in the chapter "Zhi beiyou" 知北遊: 魂魄將往, 乃身從之, 乃大歸乎.

適見純子食於其死母者，少焉眴若，皆棄之而走。不見己焉爾，不得類焉爾。所愛其母者，非愛其形也，愛使其形者也。(Wang, p. 190)

I happened to see some little pigs suckling at their dead mother. After a short while, they all abandoned her and ran away hastily. It was because they no longer saw themselves in her and because they no longer sensed her to be their kind. What they loved about their mother was not her physical form but that which animated her form.⁶⁶

This story occurs in the context in which Confucius, as the mouthpiece of Zhuangzi, explains to the Lord of Lu that the deformity at the physical level does not affect one's *de* 德, the essential self-defining characteristic. Obviously, the message conveyed here is that keeping intact one's body is not as important as keeping intact what enlivens the body.

The *Zhuangzi* also distinguishes the death of the *xing* 形, body, and that of the *xin* 心, heartmind, considering the latter to be more dreadful than the former.

夫哀莫大於心死，而人死亦次之。(Wang, p. 772)

Now, there is no greater sadness than the death of the mind — the death of the person is secondary.⁶⁷

一受其成形，不亡以待盡。…人謂之不死，奚益？其形化，其心與之然，可不謂大哀乎？(Wang, p. 53)

Once we have received our complete physical form, we remain conscious of it while

66 Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, p. 47. For more on the mind-body duality in this passage, see Slingerland, "Body and Mind in Early China," pp. 32–33.

67 Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, p. 201.

we await extinction.... There are those who say that at least we are not dead, but what's the good of it? Our physical form decays and with it the mind likewise.⁶⁸

These two passages suggest that *xin* 心 does have certain numinous aspects, instead of simply being a bodily organ performing emotional and mental functions,⁶⁹ because as a bodily organ or faculty, it would die or stop working with the death of the body, and therefore it would be pointless to distinguish between the death of heart-mind and that of the body. The following passage in which Confucius comments on a mutilated sage also suggests that the *xin* 心 of the sage actually attains the ability to transcend life and death at a physical level.

“...其用心也，獨若之何？”仲尼曰：“死生亦大矣，而不得與之變，雖天地覆墜，亦將不與之遺。...” “...而況官天地，府萬物，直寓六骸，象耳目，一知之所知，而心未嘗死者乎！” (Wang, pp. 171–174)

“... What is special about the way he uses his mind?” “Life and death are of great moment,” said Confucius, “but he is able to avoid their transformations. Though Heaven may collapse and earth overturn, he would not be lost in their wake...” “...how much more so should one who takes heaven and earth as his palace and the myriad things as his treasury, his trunk and limbs as a mere lodging, his senses as phenomena; who treats as a whole all that knowledge knows; and whose mind never dies!⁷⁰

The *xin* 心 of the sage, which never dies, to a certain extent resembles the immortal Platonic

68 Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, p. 14.

69 This observation contradicts the proposition of Chris Jochim that *xin* 心 is an organ of thought and feeling, not a distinct entity with a strictly mental or spiritual nature. See Jochim, “Just Say No to ‘No Self’ in *Zhuangzi*,” p. 50. Jochim’s conception of the *xin* 心, however, is very akin to the Mencian version of heart–mind as a superior bodily faculty that thinks, as opposed to such inferior faculties as the sight and hearing.

70 Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, pp. 43–44.

soul. However, as the two previous passages indicate, the 心 heart-minds of ordinary people are indeed subject to death. What's more, they may even die before the death of the body in which they dwell. This differs a lot from Socrates's account of the soul in the *Phaedo*. Although in the myth of Hades, the souls of the philosophers are differentiated from the souls of those who practiced wicked deeds, all the souls, according to his arguments, are immortal.

Besides *xin* 心, the concepts of *jing* 精, *shen* 神 and *qi* 氣 that have been discussed in the previous sections all share certain features with the soul. But on the whole, the body–mind dualism is never explicitly indicated. Unlike the Platonic soul, which is denoted as an immaterial entity, all these concepts in *Zhuangzi* seem simultaneously to possess physical, mental and spiritual aspects.

In spite of the vagueness of terms related to the psychic aspects in the *Zhuangzi*, it does convey an affirmative message about the possibility of the continuous existence of a spiritual part that is independent from the body. It also shares with the *Phaedo* a common belief that the nurturing of this psychic part of a person is much more important than caring for the body — both during one's lifetime and after death. As a matter of fact, one of the seven inner chapters, “Dechong fu” 德充符, is replete with stories about virtually adorable people who are physically crippled, deformed or disfigured. These stories clearly indicate the priority of caring for the spiritual essence over that for the bodily forms. If during the lifetime the body is to be relegated to the secondary position, how much more so it would be upon death, when “what enlivens the body” has departed from it! In fact both the figure of *Zhuangzi* and Socrates depicted in the two texts show minimal concern for the handling of their bodies after death: When his disciples wished to give *Zhuangzi* a sumptuous burial, *Zhuangzi* discouraged them, saying “I shall have heaven and earth for my inner and outer coffins, the sun and moon for my paired jades, the stars and constellations for my round and irregular pearls, and the myriad things for my mortuary gifts. Won't the preparations for my burial be quite adequate? What could be added to them?” His disciples, being unable to accept the idea of leaving the body of their master exposed in the field, said that they were afraid that the crows and the kites would eat him. *Zhuangzi* rejected them, saying “Above, I'd be eaten by the crows and the kites; below, I'd be eaten by mole crickets and ants. Why show your partiality by snatching me away from those and giving me to

these?"⁷¹ Similarly, when Crito asked Socrates, before the latter was to drink the poison, in what fashion they should bury him, Socrates said, "However you wish." (115c)⁷² He then warned his friends not to identify him with the dead body and be distressed at whatever way the body was treated, for the true self of him, his soul, would ascend to the gods and "never be away from his friends if they can catch him." (115c–e)⁷³

B. THE FORM AND THE DAO, REASON AND INTUITION: THE RESPECTIVE GOALS AND THE MEANS TO REACH THEM IN THE *PHAEDO* AND *ZHUANGZI*

As has been discussed in the first part of this paper, Socrates' advocacy for the philosophical way of life is deeply rooted in the theory of the form and the belief in rational argument as the effective means to reach knowledge of the ultimate truth. Ontologically, the formless, invisible and absent form is the ultimate reality and the underlying cause for things in the physical sphere.⁷⁴ Epistemologically, the soul, as the locus of our intellect and rational power, renders it possible for us to access this reality, since they share the same features of being invisible, intelligible and changeless. The theory of the form also implies a system of binary opposition that puts the metaphysical above the physical, the immaterial above the corporeal, reason above passion, intelligence above senses, and on top of all, the soul above the body. "When the soul and the body are present in the same thing, nature ordains that the one shall serve and be ruled, whereas the other shall rule and be master."⁷⁵

Logical argument also plays an essential role in the *Phaedo*. Structurally speaking, dialectical arguments constitute the greater part of the discussions in the main body of the dialogue. Textually speaking, Socrates's digression into warning against misology — the development of mistrust against

⁷¹ Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, p. 332.

⁷² Gallop, *Plato: "Phaedo,"* p. 75

⁷³ Gallop, *Plato: "Phaedo,"* pp. 75–76.

⁷⁴ For more discussion on the theory of form, see Ferit Guven, *Madness and Death in Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), p. 18, and David Gallop's introduction to his translation of the *Phaedo* (Gallop, *Plato: "Phaedo,"* pp. x–xi).

⁷⁵ Gallop, *Plato: "Phaedo,"* p. 31.

argument when people are confronted with the situation in which logical and dialectical arguments seem to have failed to lead to consistent conclusions — from the arguments on the immortality of the soul a few hours before his execution clearly demonstrates his emphasis on logical argument as an essential part of philosophical practice, as well as his trust in the reasoning power as a means to obtain knowledge and wisdom.

The counterpart of the platonic form in Zhuangzi's philosophical system is the Dao. The Dao in the *Zhuangzi*, though very difficult to define, does share certain features with the form: being formless and invisible, they both constitute the ultimate ontological reality. But the Dao is also greatly different from the form in that it is mystical, ineffable and elusive:

夫道，有情有信，無為無形；可傳而不可受，可得而不可見；自本自根，未有天地，自古以固存；神鬼神帝，生天生地；在太極之先而不為高，在六極之下而不為深；先天地生而不為久，長於上古而不為老。

The Way has attributes and evidence, but it has no action and no form. It may be transmitted but cannot be received. It may be apprehended but cannot be seen. From the root, from the stock, before there was heaven and earth, for all eternity truly has it existed. It inspires demons and gods, gives birth to heaven and earth. It lies above the zenith but is not high; it lies beneath the nadir but is not deep. It is prior to heaven and earth, but is not ancient; it is senior to high antiquity, but it is not old.⁷⁶

It should be noted, though, that the construction of the Dao as the origin of the universe is not very consistent with the message in “Qiwu lun” 齊物論, the theoretical core of the inner chapters, which simply rejects the idea of any beginning for the world:

有始也者，有未始有始也者，有未始有夫未始有始也者。有有也者，有無也者，有未始有無也者，有未始有夫未始有無也者。

⁷⁶ Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, p. 55.

There is beginning. There is a time before beginning. There is a time before the time before beginning. There is being. There is nonbeing. There is a stage before nonbeing. There is a stage before the stage before nonbeing.⁷⁷

Given such an inconsistency, it seems better to consider the Dao as a cosmological principle of change than to regard it as an absolute entity. As the previous discussion indicates, change is the only thing considered to be constant in the *Zhuangzi*. The Dao itself is embodied in the constant flux of changes. This contrast between the form and the Dao points to a fundamental difference between the Platonic and Zhuangzian philosophy: the former is characterized by its endeavor to transcend the transient and destructible "becoming" in search for the eternal and unchanging "being," while the latter holds that the all-encompassing Dao is exhibited everywhere in the sensuous world, including the most mundane and seemingly contemptible things. This is best illustrated in the story of the dialogue between Zhuangzi and Dongguozi. "There is no place where the Dao is not present." Thus answers Zhuangzi to Dongguozi's inquiry about where the Dao is. When Dongguozi insists on Zhuangzi giving a specific example of the presence of the Dao, Zhuangzi gives a list of four possible places: the "ants," "panic grass," "tiles and shards" and "shit and piss," indicating the Dao can be present no matter how "low" a thing is.⁷⁸

If to gain full access to the form is the Platonic philosopher's pursuit, then to flow freely with the Dao should be the aim of the Zhuangzian sages. The Zhuangzian means to achieve its goals is also inevitably different from the Platonic means. While in the *Phaedo* Socrates encourages the employment of argument and reason to arrive at the ultimate truth, Zhuangzi holds that to settle the dispute between right and wrong through argumentation is fruitless and that any effort to employ the rational power to grasp the Dao is doomed to be futile. In fact, the text of *Zhuangzi* serves just to "paralyze the analytical or conceptual function and arouse intuitive or aesthetic function."⁷⁹ Thus it is

⁷⁷ Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, p. 18.

⁷⁸ Wang, *Zhuangzi jiaoquan*, p. 826.

⁷⁹ Robert E. Allinson, *"Chuang-Tzu" for Spiritual Transformation: An Analysis of the Inner Chapters* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 26.

not surprising that the *Zhuangzi* is replete with “antirational or nondiscursive” languages such as the paradox, story, parable, humor and play, the use of which, according to Mark Berkson, is an effective means to undermine binary oppositions.⁸⁰ Just as any system of binary opposition is ultimately inconsistent with the all-embracing Dao, which neither distinguishes, nor selects, any ordinary human knowledge rooted in evaluative and performative linguistic system or any ordinary human mind accustomed to distinguishing and scheming will never provide access to the Dao. The best way, therefore, should be to “slough off my limbs and trunk, dim my intelligence, depart from my form, leave knowledge behind, and become identical with the Transformational Thoroughfare.”⁸¹

Another point that should be noted is that on the surface, the epistemological grounds for the *Phaedo* and *Zhuangzi* seems to be contradictory: the *Phaedo* reveals a full embrace of knowledge while the *Zhuangzi* demonstrates a radical rejection of knowledge. Yet interestingly, what underlies this apparent contradiction is an implicit common belief that the ultimate knowledge is not obtainable through ordinary human life. For Socrates, pure knowledge concerns the sphere of the ultimate reality: the absent, invisible forms which are beyond the perception of the bodily organs and can only be attained upon death — when the soul frees itself from the yoke of the bodily weaknesses and the influences of the flawed senses. Zhuangzi makes a distinction between great knowledge and small knowledge — “Great knowledge is expansive; small knowledge is cramped.”⁸² From the assertion of the superiority of the great knowledge over small knowledge, we can infer that the knowledge that, according to Zhuangzi, should be left behind is such as the limited knowledge of the cicadas and little doves,⁸³ and the biased knowledge of the people, monkeys and loaches,⁸⁴ instead of

80 Mark Berkson, “Language: The Guest of Reality: Zhuangzi and Derrida on Language, Reality, and Skillfulness,” in *Essays on Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics in the “Zhuangzi,”* ed. Paul Kjellberg and P. J. Ivanhoe (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), p. 110.

81 Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, p. 64.

82 Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, p. 12.

83 The story of the two little birds who, with their limited perspective, cannot appreciate the world of the big Peng bird occurs at the beginning of the first chapter of the *Zhuangzi*. See Wang, *Zhuangzi jiaoquan*, p. 10.

84 The story of the loach’s, monkey’s and human being’s having different understandings about suitable places of dwelling occurs in the second chapter of the *Zhuangzi*. See Wang, *Zhuangzi jiaoquan*, p. 80.

the true knowledge possessed by the supreme man. While affirming that true knowledge is only possible with the supreme man, who has transcended the demarcation between life and death and possessed the all-encompassing perspective of the Dao, the *Zhuangzi* suggests that the chance for anybody entrapped in the limited human perspective to obtain the true knowledge seems to be rather slim. Furthermore, the overt skepticism about the availability of an absolutely correct position to settle a dispute among different arguers,⁸⁵ and the claim that the best thing to do is not to take any fixed position but to "rest at the center of the celestial potter's wheel,"⁸⁶ as well as the depiction of supreme men as mystic figures having transcended the human limitations and boundaries all clearly convey the message that it is impossible for any sentient beings to come into complete possession of the true knowledge of the supreme man.

C. RENUNCIATION AND AFFIRMATION — WHICH IS THE PROPER ATTITUDE TOWARD LIFE?

Socrates' view of death represents a rejection of the ordinary understanding — death to him is the victory of the soul over the body. What is commonly perceived as death is the death of the body but life for the soul — the release of the soul from the imprisonment and contamination of the body. Thus Socrates's version of death reverses the commonly accepted binary opposition: ordinary people love life and hate death, but philosophers reject life and embrace death. Such an attitude inevitably leads to a life of renunciation of the indulgences of the sensual desires and passions. True philosophers should continuously purify and nourish their souls by detaching them from the corporeal so that upon death the souls can obtain eternal liberation. "The soul of the philosopher, being pure and not slightly tainted by the body, will go to the pure and divine god."⁸⁷ The eschatological myth makes it clear that life is only a preparation for death — the rejection of sensuous pleasures in this life promises much reward in the future, that is, the attainment of eternal happiness and bliss for the soul.

In contrast, the Dao in the *Zhuangzi* represents an equalization rather than the reverse of the life–death dichotomy. Life and death are equal. So are the body and mind. The heart–mind dwelling

85 Wang, *Zhuangzi jiaoquan*, p. 91.

86 Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, p. 17.

87 Gallop, *Plato: "Phaedo."*

inside the body does not rule over it. Neither is it superior to the body. As the following passage shows: “The hundred bones, the nine orifices, and the six viscera are all complete within my body. With which am I most closely identified?”⁸⁸

Zhuangzi does not hate death. Neither is he attached to life. He holds that a long life is not necessary desirable, if such a life is not the free and flexible one characterized by responsiveness to the Dao.⁸⁹ What he values is a happy, buoyant and fulfilled life, not one that “strokes and jostles” with other things, one that is burdened with the contrived human schemes, concerns for earthly fame and success, and unnecessary worries about death and ill-fortune. Ironically, it is just the pursuits of these external goals that lead to the destruction of life. As Lisa Raphals puts it, Zhuangzi warns people against “engaging in self-destructive activities, such as seeking honor and rank, displaying knowledge and cleverness.”⁹⁰ Consider the story of Zhuangzi’s conversation with the skull:

“夫子貪生失理，而為此乎？將子有亡國之事，斧鉞之誅，而為此乎？將子有不善之行，愧遺父母妻子之醜，而為此乎？將子有凍餒之患，而為此乎？將子之春秋故及此乎？”

“Sir, was it because of your greed for life and loss of principles that you ended up like this? Or was it because you were involved in the affairs of a doomed state, and were executed with an axe, that you ended up like this? Or was it because you were involved in evil conduct, bringing shame on the reputation of your father, mother, wife and children, that you ended up like this? Or was it because you had the

88 Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, p. 14.

89 Zhuangzi’s seemingly ambiguous view on death has produced two strands of thought in the outer chapters: the chapter of “Zhile” 至樂 represents the tendency to prefer death to life; and the chapters such as “Rangwang” 讓王 and “Yufu” 漁父 show a general tendency toward preserving life. The latter group is attributed by Graham to the “Yangist school,” in spite of the fact that a number of anecdotes in “Rangwang” indicate just the opposite point of view.

90 Lisa Raphals, “Fatalism, Fate, and Stratagem in China and Greece,” in *Early China/Ancient Greece: Thinking through Comparisons*, ed. Steven Shankman and Stephen W. Durrant (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), p. 210.

misfortune to freeze or starve that you ended up like this? Or maybe your years just came to an end?"⁹¹

Among the five ways of death listed above, the only natural way of death — to die after living out the life span allotted by Heaven — comes at the end, suggesting that this is the most unlikely way for a common person to end his life. Most people die prematurely and unnaturally — and the greed for life is, after all, the primary cause for such unnatural death.

In contrast, the Zhuangzian sages live a different type of life. They enjoy life as much as they enjoy death. They try to nurture or preserve life not because they hold life to be dearer than death, but because they are willing to surrender wholly to the course of Heaven — to live out the life span allotted by Heaven instead of being cut off midway. They would rather ramble at ease with the Dao than get trapped in the pursuit of unnatural, artificial things that the ordinary world values greatly.

To conclude, Zhuangzi's message is this simple: get rid of encumbrance, submerge yourself in the flow of the Dao, enjoy every moment of your life where the Dao takes you, and accept your death with equanimity when the Dao brings you to this destiny. Accept calmly the situation that befalls you, including both external loss and gains, and bodily deformity and disorder. Don't let these external concerns interfere with your spiritual freedom or affect your appreciation of the miracle of the Dao.

Free from the anxiety and fear of death, unencumbered from the entanglements of external things, Zhuangzi is able to participate fully in the joy of life:

莊子釣於濮水，楚王使大夫二人往先焉，曰：“願以境內累矣！”莊子持竿不顧，曰：“吾聞楚有神龜，死已三千歲矣，王巾笥而藏之廟堂之上。此龜者，寧其死為留骨而貴乎，寧其生而曳尾於塗中乎？”二大夫曰：“寧生而曳尾塗中。”莊子曰：“往矣！吾將曳尾於塗中。”

Master Chuang was fishing in the P'u River. The king of Chu dispatched two high-ranking officials to go before him with this message: "I wish to encumber you with the

⁹¹ Translation by Paul Goldin ("A Mind-body Problem in the *Zhuangzi*," p. 227).

administration of my realm.” Without turning around, Master Chuang just kept holding on to his fishing rod and said, “I have heard that in Chu there is a sacred tortoise that has already been dead for three thousand years. The king stores it in his ancestral temple inside of a hamper wrapped with cloth. Do you think this tortoise would rather be dead and have its bones preserved as objects of veneration, or be alive and dragging its tail through the mud?”⁹²

莊子與惠子遊於濠梁之上。莊子曰：“儻魚出遊從容，是魚之樂也。” ...

Master Chuang and Master Hui were strolling across the bridge over the Hao River. “The minnows have come out and are swimming so leisurely,” said Master Chuang. “This is the joy of fishes.”⁹³

The images of the tortoise dragging its tail through the mud and of the minnows swimming leisurely speak best of the joy of life — and anyone who empties his mind of the artificial constructions and invites the Dao to come will be able to participate in it.

A NOTE

In the years after the first draft of this paper was completed, I was twice confronted with deaths of beloved family members, and I found myself to be much comforted by the philosophical contemplation on the topic found in these works. I’d like to express my deep gratitude to Professor Victor H. Mair for giving me the opportunity to publish this work. I’d also like to thank Paula Roberts, whose editing makes this a much more readable work. The mistakes that may remain are all my own.

⁹² Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, p. 164.

⁹³ Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, p. 165.

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