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The research of the thought of “virtue is more precious than shape” in “Zhuangzi · Dechongfu”

When we read the article “Zhuangzi · Dechongfu”, the most impressive parts are those characters who are called “wuzhe(兀者)”, namely people with disabled bodies, but these characters also have impressive personality charm. However, their personality charm doesn’t come from their shapes, but comes from their inner virtues, and such contrast between inner and outer is also exactly the key to understanding the article “Zhuangzi · Dechongfu”. Therefore, in this speech, we will analyze the relationship between virtue and shape in “Zhuangzi · Dechongfu”, and expound Zhuangzi's thought of “virtue is more precious than shape” on this basis.

I The meaning of virtue and shape.

i The meaning of virtue.

If we want to have a more detailed understanding on the meaning of virtue in “Dechongfu”, it is very necessary for us to figure out the meaning of virtue in the thought of Zhuangzi. In the article “Dechongfu”, though virtue is written in the title, throughout the whole article, it hasn’t clearly explained the meaning of “virtue”. Instead, it shows the state of the virtuous through the description of these characters, and then reflects “virtue” through these states it described. In “Dechongfu”, the virtuous are all people with incomplete bodies and ugly looks. There are six main characters, Wang Tai, who had no feet; Shentu Jia, who had no feet; Shushan Wuzhi, who had no toes; Aidai Ta, who was very ugly; a persuader with harelip who was crippled and bow-backed; and a persuader who had a big tumor on his neck. Their common characteristic is that they are physically defective and even ugly enough to “shock the world”, but everyone is willing to follow them and even “can’t leave them”. The reason is that their inner virtues are full enough. Such inner virtues rely on their “mind” that is different from the crowd. That is to say, they respond to all things with a “usual mind”. In such a mind state, the state they present is “Life and death are great events, but such things can’t change them. Even if the world is destroyed, they will still adhere to their own thoughts. They never rely on something to view things, so they will not change with the outside world. Even if the world is turned around, they will not change themselves.” So the state of the virtuous is the difference of mind, that is to use the usual mind to treat everything in the world. And the usual mind is the mind of feeling Tao, understanding Tao and fusing with Tao. Moreover, human virtue is given by Tao, so it can be said that virtue is the usual mind, and the virtuous are those people who have obvious usual minds.

ii The meaning of shape.

In the article “Dechongfu”, Zhuangzi elucidates his thoughts with the contrast of virtue and shape. Compared with virtue, the meaning of shape is relatively simple. Protagonists in this article are all people with disabled bodies or ugly looks, and their appearances are described strangely in order to compare with their virtues. So the main meaning of shape is the external

appearance of people. When debating with Huishi, Zhuangzi said, “Tao for appearance is like heaven for shapes”, namely human’s shape and appearance are like virtues, which are all given by Tao. But the shape that Zhuangzi wants to express is not only people’s appearance, but includes everything “beside the body”, namely people’s social status, life and death, rich and poor, etc. The second story is about Shentu Jia, who had no feet, and Zichan, who had a very high social status. They are both students of Bohun Wuren. Zichan looked down on Shentu Jia because of his high social status. So Shentu Jia criticized him, “We are here to study great virtues, but you are judging my external appearance.” In this sentence, the word “appearance” not only includes people’s body, but also their social and political status. Moreover, when explaining “caiquan(才全)”, in the words of Kongzi, Zhuangzi expresses the thought that never let “death, life, survival, poverty, rich and poor, virtuous and unworthy, repudiation, hunger and thirst, cold and warmth” disturb our inner peace and comfort. Therefore, these elements also belong to the scope of “shape”. By the contrast between virtue and shape, what Zhuangzi wants to express is not only to forget the body, but also to forget the external fame and wealth, wealth and everything else. So in this article, the shape given by Tao not only refers to people’s body, but also everything outside the inner world, including fame, wealth, and other things.

II Relationship between virtue and shape.

After a preliminary analysis of virtue and shape in the previous article, though virtue and shape are two different categories, they are not simply diametrically opposed. As two aspects of our life, both of them are indispensable, and the relationship between them is an issue worth pondering. In the view of Zhuangzi, virtue does not rely on shape, and a good virtue can make up the deficiency of shape.

In the previous analysis of the meaning of virtue and shape, we could know that virtue is given by Tao, which means that virtue originates from Tao, and shape is also given by Tao. Therefore, at this level, virtue and shape are equivalent. However, only in terms of the contrast between virtue and shape on people, virtue is more precious than shape, and is the foundation of shape. This article describes a disabled man, Shusan Wuzhi, who though had no toes, still “visited Kongzi walking on his heels”. Kongzi criticized him, but he answered, “I came here today, because I believe that there is still something more precious than toes. So I try my best to keep them.” The expression “something more precious than toes” here refers to people’s inner virtue and spirit, which are more precious than toes. Therefore, in the view of Zhuangzi, virtue is more precious than shape. However, this is only in terms of the relationship between virtue and shape, it does not mean that Zhuangzi has the idea of despising shape. Speaking from his logical thinking, Tao gives people shape, so people should not despise shape, but should “live all one’s life as healthy as possible.” Zhuangzi’s rich thought of keeping healthy is a good illustration. In terms of the article “Dechongfu”, we can get some clues in his dialogue with Huishi at the end of the passage. Zhuangzi said people should be heartless, namely “people should not hurt themselves because of love and hate, and should follow nature without adding things at will”. From this point of view, Zhuangzi believed that people should treat their shapes “naturally”, don’t hurt their shapes, rather than despising their shapes.

For people, virtue is not only more precious than shape, but also the foundation of shape. In the story of a piggy metaphor, Kongzi shared what he saw and heard when he visited Chu State. When Kongzi was in Chu State, he saw some piggies “sucking the milk of a newly dead mother pig”. After a while, these piggies ran away from their mother in panic. That was because these piggies could not find the information of their own kind in this dead mother pig. In this part, Zhuangzi quoted Kongzi’s words “Those piggies loved their mother, but what they really loved was not their mother’s shape, but the spirit that governed that shape.” In this sentence, “the spirit

that governed that shape” refers to the foundation of a pig, namely things that make a pig a pig, which are the features of pigs, and the nature of pigs. It is a metaphor of people’s virtue. “A person who has lost his feet will not love the shoes that he wore before, because they have lost their foundation.” In this sentence, “shoes” is equivalent to the shape of mother pig in the story of piggy metaphor, and “foundation” is equivalent to the “spirit that governed that shape”. If there is no foundation, then the shape will lose the basis for its existence, and the a thing can not be a thing. Therefore, for people, virtue is the foundation of shape, the embodiment of human nature, and a person can not be called a human if he only has shape but has no virtue.

Though virtue is the foundation of shape, virtue will lose its carrier if there is no shape. “Let alone those who mind the world, contain all things, regard their bodies and limbs as a temporary residence, regard their eyes and eyes as a kind of decoration, and master the essence of the operation law of the world. They know everything in this world, but they never lose their true heart.” In this sentence, “regard their bodies and limbs as a temporary residence, regard their eyes and eyes as a kind of decoration” means that people’s inner spirit is living in people’s bodies and limbs, and the eyes and ears are only a kind of decoration. Therefore, virtue can not exist without shape, and shape is the residence of virtue. Though virtue can not exist without shape, virtue is not determined by the complete or incomplete of the shape.

In “Dechongfu”, all the virtuous listed by Zhuangzi are people with disabled bodies or ugly looks, but this doesn’t mean that a virtuous one must be disabled. These examples aim at highlighting the contrast between virtue and shape. What Zhuangzi wants to express is that the enrichment of virtue does not lie in the beauty, ugliness, completeness or incompleteness of the shape. Like the disabled man, Shushan Wuzhi, though he had no toes, he still “visited Kongzi walking on his heels” to “keep” “something more precious than toes” (virtue). However, he himself was a more virtuous man than Kongzi, which also shows that incomplete shape won’t impact the “rich virtue”. For Zhuangzi, virtue is not determined by shape, and virtue can make up the deficiency of shape. Though these virtuous people mentioned by Zhuangzi in this passage were disabled or ugly, none of them was despised by the people. Instead, they were followed by the public, even to the extent that “can’t leave them”. It can be said that their virtues make up for their physical deficiencies, so as to be sought after by everyone.

III Why virtue is more precious than shape?

Zhuangzi believes that virtue is more precious than shape, but virtue and shape are two indispensable aspects of human life. Why are they treated differently? According to the article “Dechongfu”, we answer this question from the following two aspects.

First of all, virtue is the foundation of shape, the foundation of humans. So people must improve their foundation. If losing the foundation, a man can not be called a man. Like the dead mother pig in the story of piggy metaphor, the reason why the piggies “abandoned their mother and ran away” is that the dead mother pig’s inner spirit (virtue) has gone, and she is not a pig anymore, which shows the importance of virtue as the foundation. Therefore, people should cherish virtue more to keep their foundation.

Secondly, a mind with mental capacity determines whether there is a virtue. So people can gain their own virtues through their self-cultivation. The gain and loss of things beyond the body is determined by fate, and can’t be controlled by people. So people should not strive to chase them. “Other things, like external life forms, others can destroy them, and only “mind” or spirit belong to your own, which gives life a dignified inner mind and self-sufficiency, which can not be made incomplete by anyone but yourself.” said Li Zhengang. This passage also reveals the reason why people should practice the theory that virtue is more precious than shape.

IV Conclusion

To sum up, virtue is the foundation of shape, and the formation of virtue is determined by people's minds. Therefore, people should value virtue more, and enrich their won virtue (essence) with their won minds to make themselves better people. The gain and loss of the shape is determined by fate, which people cannot learn and control. So we should be content with and forget the shape, and keep it from disturbing our inner virtues. Actually, we could say that valuing virtue more is to forget the shape, because people who value virtue more can treat all things evenly. In their minds, everything in the world is the same, which makes them not consider the shape, and further makes them naturally focus on things beyond the body.



The Research of the
Thought of “virtue is
more precious than shape”
in “Zhuangzi 莊子
Dechongfu 德充符 ”

Module Code: SICH7019

Module Tutor: Dr. Chen,Sufan

Student name: Qixuan Zhou (1804447)

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Foreword





I 、 The meaning of virtue 德 and shape 形.



1、 The meaning of virtue.

The characteristic of virtuous

- They are physically defective and even ugly enough to "shock the world"
- Their inner virtues are full enough
- Respond to all things with a "usual mind" 平常心



1、The meaning of virtue.

“Life and death are great events, but such things can’t change them. Even if the world is destroyed, they will still adhere to their own thoughts. They never rely on something to view things, so they will not change with the outside world. Even if the world is turned around, they will not change themselves.”

死生亦大矣，而不得與之變，雖天地覆墜，亦將不與之遺。審乎無假，而不與物遷，命物之化，而守其宗也。——《莊子·德充符》



1、 The meaning of virtue.

What is the virtue

- Virtue is the usual mind, and the virtuous are those people who have obvious usual minds.
- Human virtue is given by Tao, and is based on Tao
- The concrete manifestation of the virtuous is to conform to the change of things and not to change with these changes.



2、 The meaning of shape.

The main meaning of shape

- The external appearance of people

The external meaning of shape

- Everything outside the inner world, including fame, wealth, and other things.



II 、 Relationship between virtue and shape



1、Virtue is more precious than shape, and is the foundation of shape

“I came here today, because I believe that there is still something more precious than toes. So I try my best to keep them.”

今吾來也，猶有尊足者存，吾是以務全之也。——《莊子·德充符》

The main point

- Virtue is more precious than shape.
- Tao gives people shape, so people should not despise shape, but should “live all one’s life as healthy as possible.”



1、Virtue is more precious than shape, and is the foundation of shape

Those piggies loved their mother, but what they really loved was not their mother's shape, but the spirit that governed that shape.

所愛其母者，非愛其形也，愛使其形者也。——《莊子·德充符》

The main point

- Virtue is the foundation of shape, the embodiment of human nature, and a person can not be called a human if he only has shape but has no virtue.



2、 Shape is the carrier of virtue, but virtue is not determined by shape

“Let alone those who mind the world, contain all things, regard their bodies and limbs as a temporary residence, regard their eyes and ears as a kind of decoration, and master the essence of the operation law of the world. They know everything in this world, but they never lose their true heart.”

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！——《莊子·德充符》



III 、 Why virtue is more precious than shape?



1、 Virtue is the foundation of shape

The main point

- People must improve their foundation. If losing the foundation, a man can not be called a man.
- People should cherish virtue more to keep their foundation.



2、A mind with mental capacity determines whether there is a virtue.

“Other things, like external life forms, others can destroy them, and only “mind” or spirit belong to your own, which gives life a dignified inner mind and self-sufficiency, which can not be made incomplete by anyone but yourself.”——李振綱 《莊子·德充符解讀》

The main point

- People can gain their own virtues through their self-cultivation.
- People should not strive to chase the gain and loss of things beyond the body.



Conclusion