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Jumping Out of the Secular World: The Meaning of Wandering in Absolute Freedom

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1. Introduction

The book *Zhuang Zi* was written by an ancient Chinese philosopher named Zhuang Zhou, and < Wandering in Absolute Freedom > is the first chapter of this masterpiece. Zhuang Zhou is known as his artistical words, philosophical fables and fascinating imagination. He imparted a kind of spiritual bliss and transcendental view into Chinese culture, and suggested to people another way to live.

Although some scholars pointed out that all the chapters of *Zhuang Zi* might be named by the editor of *Huainanzi* instead of Zhuang Zhou himself¹, but it does not reduce the value of those ideas Zhuang Zhou wanted to express first in < Wandering in Absolute Freedom >.

This chapter could divided into two parts: the discussion over big and small, and the discussion over usefulness. Through discussions and arguments, it would be clearer to find out the main idea of this chapter, and what could it bring to the modern society and individuals.

2. The Discussion Over Big and Small

2.1. The Animals and Plants

Zhuang Zhou expressed his idea through many conversations and stories happened

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between people, animals and even plants, and most of them are out of imagination at that time. Zhuang Zhou described this in his book: ‘In strange terms, in bold words, in far reaching language, he gave free play to his thoughts, without following any particular school or committing himself to any particular line.’² The chapter starts with a well-known fable in China, and this fable can be said to be ‘One of the fables with the most interpreters and different opinions in the history of interpretation of *Zhuangzi*’³:

In the North Sea there is a kind of fish metamorphoses into a kind of bird by the name of *peng*, whose back covers thousands of li. When it rises in flight, its wings are like clouds that hang from the sky. When the wind blows over the sea, the *peng* moves to the South Sea, the Celestial Pond...A cicada and a turtledove derided the *peng*, saying, ‘We fly upward until we alight on an elm or a sandal tree. Sometimes when we cannot make it, we just fall back to the ground. What is the sense of soaring to a height of 90,000 *li* on your journey to the south?’⁴

There is no such vast ocean nor such huge bird and fish. All these big things like the North sea, Celestial Pond and *peng* can not be seen nor touched by people. Chen Guying thinks that Zhuangzi uses the metamorphosis of the huge bird and fish to break through the limitations in the material world and to abstract them from the world of experience.⁵

Mr. Feng Youlan thinks that all things came from the Tao and have their own nature. Happiness would be here at the moment when you follow your nature, there is no need to have external demand. That is why <Wandering in Absolute Freedom> starts with such extremely big and extremely small things, *peng* is the extremely big, and the

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³ The original text is, ‘該寓言可以說是《莊子》解釋史上解讀者最多而異見紛紜的寓言之一.’ Wang Youxin ‘Tragic Enlightenment on Comprehension in Zhuangzi: An Interpretation of the Reception History and the Topic of Fable kunpeng in the Chapter “Free and Easy Wandering”, ZhongGuo Wenhua Yanjiu, (2022), P.44.

⁴ 汪榕培 [Wang Rongpei], 莊子：漢英對照 [ZhuangZi Chinese-English] (Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 1999), P. 3.

⁵ 陳鼓應 [Chen Guying], 莊子淺說 [ZhuangZi qianshuo] (Beijing: Zhonghuashuju, 2017), P. 28.

extremely small is cicada and turtledove.’⁶ His opinion was probably influenced by Guo Xiang’s interpretation. Guo Xiang said: ‘If one satisfied with oneself, then *peng* feels no superiority to little bird, and little bird does not admire the journey to the Celestial Pond... although they are different on volume, but same in the state of absolute freedom.’⁷

But this kind of idea was against by many scholars, they called this kind of opinion as ‘Shixing Lun 適性論’, and criticized that this idea was misled by Guo Xiang. If the state of a cicada when it is on a branch is the same as that of *peng* when it leaps over the North Sea, this can hardly be called absolute freedom. Because what Zhuangzi wants to express is not a material pursuit, but a yearning for absolute, transcendent freedom.

We could also see Zhuang Zhou’s attitude through a conversation in <Wandering in Absolute Freedom>, when Jianwu expressed to Lianshu his suspicion about Jieyu’s unbelievable story, Lianshu told Jianwu that:

We cannot share the beautiful patterns and colours with a blind man; we cannot share the music of bells and drums with a deaf man. There are not only physical blindness and deafness, but also mental ones. These words apply to you exactly.⁸

It is easy to see that Zhuang Zhou is against the idea of cicada and turtledove, he

⁶ The original text is, ‘凡物皆由道，而各得其德，而物各有其自然之性。苟順其自然之性，則幸福當下即是，不需外求。《莊子逍遙遊篇》，故設為極大極小之物，鯤鵬極大，蜩鳩極小。’ See 馮友蘭 [Feng Youlan], 中國哲學史 [A Short History of Chinese Philosophy] (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2011), P. 244.

⁷ The original text is, ‘苟足於其性，則大鵬无以自貴於小鳥，小鳥无羨于天池.....故小大雖殊，逍遙一也’. The original text is, ‘該寓言可以說是《莊子》解釋史上解讀者最多而異見紛紜的寓言之一.’ Wang Youxin ‘Tragic Enlightenment on Comprehension in Zhuangzi: An Interpretation of the Reception History and the Topic of Fable kunpeng in the Chapter “Free and Easy Wandering”, ZhongGuo Wenhua Yanjiu, (2022), P.45.

⁸ 汪榕培 [Wang Rongpei], 莊子：漢英對照 [Zhuangzi Chinese-English] (Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 1999), P. 3.

pointed out noticeably clear that: ‘Little learning does not com up to great learning; the short-lived does not come up to the long-lived.’ He feels pathetic for those who think they are great, but they are actually entangled with secular world and trapped by the utilitarian standards.

Zhuang Zhou hinted readers from times to times in this chapter that people can be confined by what they learned, and that is what makes them can not really understand each other. Turtledoves can not understand *peng*, the fungi can not understand the concept of night and day. Cicadas can not understand the concept of spring and autumn, and the paragraph of King Yao abdicating his throne to Xu You also shows that King Yao could not understand Xu You’s idea of ‘cares for no name’, and Jianwu can not understand Lianshu and Jieyu. Yet everything has its limit as long as it is still in this world, and that might be the reason that why Zhuang Zhou starts his book with the metamorphosis of *peng*. Kun lives in the North Sea which is a such vast space for a creature, but he will not be confined by what he has. He metamorphosed into *peng* who could fly to everywhere instead of just staying in the North Sea. The North Sea might be enough for *kun* to live, and that is also what turtledoves think.

2.2. The Humans

According to Mr. Nan Huaijin’s opinion, Zhuang Zhou gives seven kinds of people in <Wandering in Absolute Freedom>.

‘For those who are intelligent enough to take a minor office, well-behaved enough to impress a district, virtuous enough to please a lord and win the confidence of a state.’

A philosopher named Song Rongzi is the fourth kind of people who mocks at the former kinds of people. As for people like him who ‘does not feel flattered when the

whole world praises him and does not feel discouraged when the whole world blames him'. Zhuang Zhou praises him since 'he is not entangled in worldly affairs'⁹. All the honor and disgrace is not important to him, just like the huge *peng* does not worry about having an elm or a sandal tree to take a rest at night which might be the most important thing for cicadas and turtledoves to worry about. However, Zhuang Zhou thinks that people like Song Rongzi 'Still has something unattained'.¹⁰

As for Song Rongzi, Zhuang Zhou thinks that he is not entangled with world affairs, but it is his mind will not trap by the world not the body. So, Zhuang Zhou here gives another person called Lie Zi who can travel to everywhere by riding the wind. At the time when aircrafts have not invented and human could be stopped by mountains and rivers, it is already fascinating and romantic enough to only imagine someone could ride wind and go to everywhere without confined by anything in the world.

However, Zhuang Zhou still think that Lie Zi's freedom depend on the wind, and that is something still with form and limit. So Zhuang Zhou made a hypothesis: 'Suppose someone rides on the true course of heaven and earth and harnesses the changes of the six vital elements of yin, yang, wind, rain, darkness and brightness to travel in the infinite. What is there for him to be dependent on?'¹¹ He then imagined a ideal 'Holy Man' through a conversation between Jianwu and Lianshu. This man has perfect skin and appearance, and he does not eat grains but sucks the wind and drinks the dew. He does not care about the world, and there is nothing in the world could

⁹ 汪榕培 [Wang Rongpei], 莊子：漢英對照 [ZhuangZi Chinese-English] (Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 1999), P. 7.

¹⁰ 汪榕培 [Wang Rongpei], 莊子：漢英對照 [ZhuangZi Chinese-English] (Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 1999), P. 7.

¹¹ 汪榕培 [Wang Rongpei], 莊子：漢英對照 [ZhuangZi Chinese-English] (Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 1999), P. 7.

harm him including nature disasters like flood and drought. Just like what Zhuang Zhou said: 'The perfect man cares for no self; the holy man cares for no merit; the sage cares for no name.'¹² So he did not name this person who lived in the Mount Guye. In Zhuang Zhou's mind, it is probably the ideal example of mankind.

3. The Discussion over Usefulness and Uselessness

Zhuang Zhou proposed his idea through his conversation with his friend Huizi. Huizi mocks Zhuang Zhou's idea through the big but useless gourds and tree Chu 樗. Zhuang Zhou also laughed at Huizi for having no idea about what usefulness is.

Huizi thinks that the huge gourds are useless since they can not be the vessel he wanted, and Huizi thinks that tree Chu 樗 is useless since it can not be used by people, and Zhuang Zhou's ideas are big, but useless to people.

Zhuang Zhou told Huizi first that the gourds are not only used as vessels, then he gives the example of the ointment for chapped hands. The people lived in state of Song used this ointment to help their silk floss bleaching, and the traveler used same ointment to the army and awarded by the king. So, you only see the one side of thing, you only know to make vessels. The gourds are not born for being vessels, they could also be buoys and use them to carry you to floating over rivers and lakes.

As for gourds. Zhuang Zhou simply tells Huizi that things could have different uses, and reminds Huizi at the end that 'It seems to me that your mind is not open enough yet.' But Huizi used the uselessness of Chu 樗 to criticize Zhuang Zhou again,

¹² 汪榕培 [Wang Rongpei], *莊子：漢英對照 [ZhuangZi Chinese-English]* (Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 1999), P. 7.

Zhuang Zhou directly tells Huizi that the Huizi's idea is not only wrong in the understanding of the different uses of things, but also in the wrong way to measure the value of others and things by his own ideas. Sun Yongkang think that Zhuangzi directly criticizes people's consistent self-centered way of thinking about the usefulness and uselessness of things. The use of uselessness means that things have their own meaning after they have been freed from the values that people have self-righteously imposed on them. Because in Zhuangzi's eyes, people and things are part of the great life of the universe, without distinction, and so are the humankind. The value of a person should not be judged by a political and utilitarian vision. Zhuang Zhou uses 'the land of nothingness' and 'wilderness where nothing grows and no one comes' to describe an ideal pure land in his heart which has not been polluted by judgment and standards of the secular world. The usefulness what people talked about actually hurts the nature of one thing. The usefulness of the object is only a part of its value, and this part of the usefulness for others does not represent the value of the object itself. Nowadays, people often measure things and people according to the value of this part, and even use the point of usefulness to deny the nature and meaning of the existence of things themselves. It also hurts the people's freedom since the relationship between two is based upon the demanding to each other, and those are the points Zhuang Zhou might want to point out.

4. Conclusion

It looks like that Zhuang Zhou tried to chase something bigger and bigger, but what he chased is not the utilitarian things, not fame, fortune, nor excellent talent. Instead, he wants to have the absolute freedom which will not be confined by things and by oneself.

He tells people not to harm the nature of things by judging things with the standards of usefulness. It is easy to ignore its original feature when we give everything a label and value ourselves. He teaches people to be humble through all those comparisons over extremely big and extremely small. You might be the turtledove and cicada in other's eyes when you think you are *peng*, and you might on a elm when you think you are in the North Sea. Nowadays, human could fly without riding wind, but the highest mountain and the deepest ocean might be what we learned and think, and most powerful enemy could be ourselves.

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