

THE QUEST OF EXISTENCE: A STUDY ON ZHUANG ZI VIS-À-VIS HEIDEGGER ON THE CONCEPT OF “BEING”

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ABSTRACT

Existence has always been a great question in philosophy and a very broad topic explored by different philosophers. In general, existence is the state of being alive or being real. This leads us to the question, what then is the meaning of “being”? And, how does existence relate to being? In answering these questions, I will be focusing on Martin Heidegger’s definition of “being” which will be put side by side to Zhuang Zi, an Eastern philosopher, to further analyze the true essence of “being”. This paper argues that man eventually exists as one “being” because these philosophers’ concepts come together due to the Yin Yang theory.

Keywords: *Existence, Zhuangzi, Heidegger, Being*

What is the motivation for this paper to use the concepts of Heidegger and Zhuangzi? Both were chosen as there are accounts that show Heidegger being likened to Daoism philosophy. Although these accounts show the similarities between Heidegger and Daoism in general, there are still theories where they find similarities between Heidegger and Zhuangzi. Thus to further widen these evidences, this paper aims to see if there are connections between these two philosophers and their respective philosophies.

Being and Dasein

“What is being?” This is the central question of Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time* in which the great philosopher seeks to explain the basic problems of existence. It is said that being is the most universal and emptiest concept. As such it resists every attempt at definition. Nor does this most universal and thus indefinable concept need any definition. This is one of the common prejudices that people tend to give about “being” and often, they are mistaken about this universality of the word. In the first part of his book, Heidegger says that his project is to answer the question of the sense of being in a concrete way. He calls for an understanding of being as something that is distinguishable from any specific entities, or beings. Being, he says, is not like a being, but rather it is that which determines beings in a context in which beings are already understood. To understand being would be to clarify the meaning or sense of being. Thus, to be able to grasp the

sense of being, one must be able to repeatedly interpret and evaluate this concept.

To work out the question of Being means to make a being – one who questions – transparent in its being. This leads to an answer that suggests that it is the being for whom Being is a question, and it is not a what, but a who. Being is referred to by Heidegger as *Dasein*, which is a German word that means “being there” or “existence.” In *Being and Time*, Heidegger attempts to expand the characteristics of *Dasein* to better approach the meaning of Being. *Dasein* is a being that does not simply occur among beings. Rather, it is distinguished by the fact that in its being, this being is concerned about its very being. “The understanding of being is itself a determination of being of *Dasein*” (Heidegger, 2013/1927). The ontic distinction of *Dasein* lies in the fact that it is ontological. However, to be ontological does not yet mean to develop ontology. Thus, the intended ontological character of *Dasein* is to be designated as pre-ontological (Heidegger, 2013/1927). This does not signify being simply ontic, but rather being in the manner of an understanding of being.

Dasein and Existence

The very being to which *Dasein* can relate to one way or another is called existence. (Heidegger, 2013/1927). *Dasein* always understands itself in terms of its existence, in terms of its possibility to be itself or not to be. According to Heidegger, this *Dasein* is a being-in-the-world. His being in the world consists in

being alongside things, the ready-to-hand and present-at-hand (“concern”), and in being with others, “solitude.” Dasein lets the being be, rendering all encounter to be possible. By being in the world, by being involved in it, Dasein has the power to be. Once thrown into the world, Dasein realizes its own possibilities; it constantly actualizes its potentialities for existence. Insofar as some of these possibilities are actualized, others will not be, meaning that there is a sense in which not-Being (a set of unactualized possibilities of Being) is a structural component of Dasein's Being. Out of this dynamic interplay, Dasein emerges as a delicate balance of determination (thrownness) and freedom (projection). Thus, as long as man exists in the world, his potentiality for being is never exhausted, always having an unfinished character (Dy, 1986).

This being-ahead-of-itself is what Heidegger calls *Sorge*, the fundamental structure of Dasein. This understanding of *Sorge* as the structural constitution of Dasein is therefore in terms of three temporal dimensions: past, present and future (Dy, 1986). The past dimension is the “being-already-in” in that “I ineluctably find myself in a world that matters to me one way or another.” The present dimension is the “being-alongside” or fallenness. Lastly, the future dimension is the “being-ahead of itself” or projection. This is the “formal existential totality of Dasein’s ontological structure as a whole” (Heidegger, 2013/1927), which is nothing but care. Given his fore-structure, its ahead-of-itself, “Dasein, therefore, as long as it exists, is already its end. The end of Dasein is not to be understood as being-at-end but as being-towards-

death. Man, being ahead of himself, as projection, comes to the disclosure of his extreme possibility, the possibility that he will no longer be ‘there’” (Dy, 1986).

Phenomenology of Death

According to Heidegger, man reaches his wholeness in death. In death, man loses his potentiality of being, he loses his ‘there.’ There is no more outstanding in man, everything is finished and settled for him. He is no longer being there (Heidegger, 2013/1927).

Before anything else, what is death for Heidegger? How is death related to the being of man and what is man’s attitude towards death? Death is the transition from Dasein to no-longer Dasein. By its transition to no-longer Dasein, the possibility of experiencing this and understanding it is now impossible (Heidegger, 2013/1927). This can be said because no one who experienced death has ever been able to come alive and describe what death is all about. Thus, it cannot be “experienced” by man. How then can we describe death? What is Heidegger’s phenomenology of death?

Supposedly, man’s first experience with death is the death of others. We see, hear people die. “If man is a being with others, will the death of others then give us the objective knowledge about death?” (Dy, 1986). But the death of another person, Heidegger argues, makes him no longer a person but a thing, a corpse, although he might be the object of concern for those who remain behind. However, this means that man still does not experience the loss of being that this other person has “suffered.” Even if man can

say that this death of another person can substitute and represent the dying of any Dasein for another, will this representation be valid and justified? Indeed, the fact that Dasein is a being with others creates the possibility of representation but representation is always a representation in something, with something. However, in death, the totality of man is involved; it is Dasein coming to an end (Dy, 1986). Therefore, Dasein's dying is not representable. "No one can take the other's dying away from him" (Heidegger, 2013/1927). Thus, as the end of Dasein, death is the most nonrelational (own most, non-substitutional, total), certain (inevitable, necessary) and as such, indefinite (possible at any moment) and unsurpassable possibility of Dasein (the possibility of his impossibility).

As long as Dasein exists, then it is already its end. As the end of Dasein, death is the Being of this being-towards-its-end. Heidegger's phenomenology of death therefore is not a description of death of an after-life, but of a man as a being-towards-his-end. If man is a being-towards-death and his being-in-the-world has the fundamental structure of care, then the end of man must be clarified in terms of care, his basic state.

Being-towards-death and care. As mentioned in the previous section, care or *Sorge* has three dimensions: past, present and future. To briefly summarize, Dasein's being can be characterized as the following: existence, in the 'ahead-of-itself'; facticity, in the 'Being-already-in'; and falling, in the 'Being-alongside.' Being-towards-death must be understood in those characteristics.

Man, in being ahead of himself, comes to the disclosure of his extreme possibility, the possibility that he will no longer be 'there.' Thus, it is something that is certain and inevitable for man. The impending of death is distinctive because it is the possibility which is own most; it is something that an individual takes over by themselves. In death, man faces himself in his own most potentiality for being because the problem in death is no other than man's being in the world. This possibility of man's absolute impossibility is not just obtained because as soon as man is born into the world, this possibility already exists. Even though man is not aware of death, the fact that man is thrown into the world, the possibility of death exists. "This possibility is revealed only in the basic mood of man, anxiety, in the experience of dread wherein man comes face-to-face with his potentiality for being" (Dy, 1986). Anxiety is not equated to fear because fear is concerned with something determinate which threatens man's immediate involvement. Anxiety is of something indeterminate because what man dreads is the world itself, being-in-the-world.

There is then a realization that many are still ignorant of death as the possibility which is non-relational, certain, indefinite and unsurpassable possibility of Dasein. These people are engrossed in their immediate concern with things and thus, covering up their being-towards-death, fleeing from this possibility. However, the fact that they are being-towards-death will always remain even when that man is in 'fallenness', being absorbed in everyday world of concern.

Everyday being-towards-death – inauthenticity. More often than not, people have mistaken death as a frequent mishap that occurs. These people who think so, talk about death as ‘a case of death’, an event that constantly happens. The ‘they’ is ignorant of death by saying, “People die and one of these days one will die too, in the end; but right now, it has nothing to do with us” (Heidegger, 2013/1927). The ‘they’ pushes off death as long as it hasn’t happened to them. As far they’re concerned, death has nothing to do with them at the present time and so it doesn’t offer any threat. The ‘they’ will never claim that ‘I’ will die but will always say “one dies”. In this way, ‘they’ levels off death, makes it ambiguous, and hides the true aspects of this possibility.

This is the inauthentic mode of man being-towards-death. He loses himself in the ‘they’ and forgets his distinctive potentiality for being. In this way, man consoles the dying person and at the same time, himself. Death for the ‘they’ becomes a sign of cowardice, fear and insecurity. Anxiety at the face of death is taken as a sign of weakness. According to the ‘they,’ the attitude to the fact that one dies is that of indifferent tranquility. For Heidegger, this indifferent tranquility means the alienation of man from his own most non-relational potentiality for being-towards-death. Therefore, everyday being-towards-death is a “falling”, constant fleeing in the face of death. By evading and hiding the possibility of death, the everyday man denies his potentiality for being. Even though the everyday man attests that he is still a being-towards-death, this becomes an inauthentic way of living. The impersonal

'they' is also certain of death. The 'they' says, "Death certainly comes but not right away." The 'but....' is tantamount to a denial of certainty. This certainty however was only derived because of the frequent cases of death that happens with other people. As long as man remains on this level of certainty, death can never really become certain for him (Dy, 1986).

The inauthentic man also denies or covers up the indefiniteness of death. By ceasing to worry about death and busying himself in the urgency of concern, he defers death as "sometime later." The inauthentic man confers a kind of definiteness upon the indefiniteness of death by intervening it with urgent matters of the everyday. Still, this doesn't erase the fact that being thrown into the world is being-towards-death. Death is ever present in the very being of man.

Authentic being-towards-death. If the inauthentic man evades death, what then is the authentic man? The authentic response of man in his awareness of being-towards-death is obviously not evasion but man facing his possibility of death as his possibility. Facing his possibility does not equate to actualizing it, that is bringing it to happen. Nor does it mean that man must constantly think about death, reflecting on how it would happen; for death is not something man can control. Thus, the authentic being-towards-death is anticipation of this possibility. By anticipation, man comes close to death because of his understanding of it as the possibility of impossibility of any existence. It reveals to man that death means the measureless impossibility of existence (Dy, 1986).

This would allow man to see his extreme potentialities and possibilities that lie beyond him. Man becomes aware of the being-towards-death and how death is his own most possibility, non-relational, certain and indefinite. He knows that he must stay away from the impersonal ‘they’ and make himself an individual. The authentic man does not outstrip death because anticipation allows him to accept this possibility. Thus, by accepting death, man *frees* himself (Dy, 1986).

This is to mean that man, by anticipation, is free for his own death; he is delivered from becoming lost in possibilities. As he is able to accept his extreme possibility, man can now understand and choose among the possibilities in the light of this extreme possibility. His possibilities open before him, determined by his end, and understood as finite. The indefiniteness that goes with the certainty of death calls for authentic man to open itself to the constant threat arising out from its being ‘there.’ This threat is now the anxiety that exists in man. In anxiety, man comes face to face with the ‘nothing’ of possible impossibility of his existence. Thus, authentic being-towards-death is essentially anxiety. For Heidegger, this authentic being-towards-death is something Dasein should strive for.

Knowing this, can we truly say that man is Dasein? Before answering this question, another philosopher will be explored for this paper. To further analyze the concept of being, the philosophy of Zhuang Zi will be studied, Daoism.

The Way, Power and Nature

In Eastern philosophy, one of the most prominent and known philosophies would be Daoism. For the purpose of this paper, the main focus would be Zhuang Zi's teachings of Daoism. To be able to understand Daoism as a philosophy, we must first understand the meaning of *Dao*, or the way. Dao is the all-embracing first principle through which the universe has come into being. When there are things, there must be Dao. Therefore, 'there is nowhere where it is not'. Dao 'exists by and through itself' (Fung, 1931/1952). Without beginning or end, it is eternal, and all things in the universe depend upon it to be constantly brought into being. Dao is manifested in all things, and therefore when these things are born and grow, we may say that in one way that it is Dao that brings this about, yet in another way we may say that all things do these things by themselves. All things are like this; they all are transformed of themselves. Therefore, in the words of Lao Tzu, "Dao never does, yet through it all things are done." Since the Dao is not a particular object, it can be spoken of as non-being. Dao is the process of reality itself, the way things come together, while still transforming. In the *Daodejing*, a book that contains Laozi's teachings, it is said that humans cannot fathom the Dao because any name we give to it cannot capture what it truly means.

With Dao, the existence of De, the power, comes into place. Zhuang Zi says: "When things obtained that by which they came into existence, it was called their De." Thus, the first principle whereby each individual thing is brought into existence is De.

From there, “Form without Dao cannot have existence. Existence without De cannot have manifestation.” In order to accord with Zhuang Zi’s philosophy, “Dao is what all things (including man) follow. De is what things individually obtain from it.” Having become things, they must assume definite forms. These forms, together with their spiritual parts, must have definite organization and principles, or ‘each has its own special principles.’ It is that organization and these principles which we call a thing’s or a man’s nature. The action of Dao is spontaneous. Therefore “Human skill is bound up with human affairs; human affairs are bound up with human affairs; human affairs are bound up with what is right; what is right is bound up with the Power (De); De is bound up with Dao; and Dao is bound up with Nature.” Nature means what is spontaneous, so that: “To act by means of non-activity (*wu wei*) is what is called Nature.” Thus, Zhuang Zi’s philosophy is centered on the non-activity or spontaneous standard of the Dao. He believes that one must have a passive way of life to be able to reach *absolute happiness*. It is important to note that *wu wei* is not complete passivity – it describes a way of getting things done with the absence of excessive force.

The *Wu-wei*

The central theme of Daoism is said to be the spontaneity of one’s life or the non-activity, which is the *wu-wei*. It is said that those who experience oneness with dao will be enabled to *wu-wei*. As said above, the *wu-wei* is not complete passivity – those who

wu-wei do act. It is basically “acting naturally” or “effortless action” in a sense. The point of this non-activity is that there is no need to tamper or disrupt with the flow of reality. This should be our way of life because the dao always benefits, it does not harm.

Similar to the *Daodejing*, the *Zhuangzi* also emphasizes on the wu-wei especially in the Inner Chapters. One of the most famous stories in the text is that of Butcher Ding, who learned what it means to wu-wei through the perfection of his craft. When asked about his great skill, Butcher Ding says, “What I care about is *dao*, which goes beyond skill. When I first began cutting up oxen, all I could see was the ox itself. After three years I no longer saw the whole ox. And now—now I go at it by spirit and don’t look with my eyes. Perception and understanding have come to a stop and spirit moves where it wants. I go along with the natural makeup, strike in the big hollows, guide the knife through the big openings, and follow things as they are. So I never touch the smallest ligament or tendon, much less a main joint. A good cook changes his knife once a year—because he cuts. A mediocre cook changes his knife once a month—because he hacks. I’ve had this knife of mine for nineteen years and I’ve cut up thousands of oxen with it, and yet the blade is as good as though it had just come from the grindstone. There are spaces between the joints, and the blade of the knife has really no thickness....[I] move the knife with the greatest subtlety, until—flop! The whole thing comes apart like a clod of earth crumbling to the ground” (Ch. 3, *The Secret of Caring for Life*). The lesson of these kinds of stories in the

Zhuangzi is that the *wu-wei* is a gift of oneness with *dao*. At this point, it is clearly seen that there is a rejection of the use of reason and argument that the Confucianists try to advocate. In Daoism, there must be an understanding of what *wu-wei* is. Through *wu-wei*, man will be able to attain absolute happiness and achieve what *Zhuangzi* calls the “*zhenren*” or the “Perfect Man”.

Zhuang Zi’s Absolute Happiness and the Perfect Man

How does one achieve absolute happiness? There is another line of Taoist thought which emphasizes the relativity of the nature of things and the identification of man with universe. To achieve this identification, man needs knowledge and understanding of still a higher level and the happiness resulting from this identification is really absolute happiness.

Such a man that has achieved absolute happiness is called the Perfect Man. The perfect man is absolutely happy because he transcends the ordinary distinction of things. He also transcends the distinction between the self and the world, the “me” and the “non-me”. Therefore he has no self. He is one with *Dao*. The *Dao* does nothing and yet there is nothing that is not done. The *Dao* does nothing and therefore, has no achievements. For example, the sage may rule the whole world, but his rule consists of just leaving mankind alone, and letting everyone exercise his own natural ability fully and freely. The *Dao* is nameless and so the sage who is one with the *Dao* is also nameless. To quote from Fung Yu-Lan’s *History of Chinese Philosophy*, “...It is said that the Perfect Man

has no self; the Spiritual Man has no achievement; the Sage has no name.” This claim leaves us to wonder what is so perfect about man who has no self, or holy about a man with no achievement or what is sagely about a man with no name for himself. This passage is a move from smaller to greater understanding that man should not focus on what they know about another person. People only become “perfect”, “spiritual” or “sagely” because others accept this person as having certain qualities that would merit them these titles. But just because man has a self, achievement, or a name for himself, does not necessarily mean he is perfect, spiritual or sagely. Therefore, there is no reason to believe that the relations Zhuangzi is challenging are necessary. Perfection, holiness, and sage-hood do not precede the man, nor does he bring them about; they proceed through him. When man has a greater level of understanding, then he is most likely on his way to being the Perfect Man.

The way to become the Perfect Man is not the result of a withdrawal from life. However, it does require disengaging or emptying oneself of conventional values and the demarcations made by society. The *Zhuangzi* has a passage teaching that the Perfect Man or sages exhibits wondrous powers, frees people from illness and is able to make the harvest plentiful. The sage knows all things are one and does not judge. He sets aside from his desires, knowledge, worries, problems and others so that he is free from judgment.

Transformation of Man

Zhuangzi taught that what can be known or said of the Dao is not the Dao. For him, life is the ongoing transformation of the Dao, in which there is no good or evil. A virtuous man is free from desire, attachments, and need to reform his world. He believed that no one can truly govern a country because this would just disrupt the freedom and spontaneity man must have. The complete relativity of his perspective is forcefully expressed in one of the better-known passages of the *Zhuangzi*, the dream of the butterfly. In this story, it is said:

Once I, Zhuang Zhou, dreamed that I was a butterfly and was happy as a butterfly. I was conscious that I was quite pleased with myself, but I did not know that I was Zhou. Suddenly I awoke, and there I was, visibly Zhou. I do not know whether it was Zhou dreaming that he was a butterfly or the butterfly dreaming that it was Zhou. Between Zhou and the butterfly there must be some distinction. This is called the transformation of things.

The relativity of all experience is in constant tension in the *Zhuangzi* with the unity of all things. In the dream of the butterfly, there is a question of existence by Zhuangzi. Upon waking up, Zhuangzi is uncertain about his identity, whether he is the butterfly or himself. This tells us the unlimited possibilities of man and every possibility of transformation as well. In this story, Zhuangzi

shows his definition of the Dao, the ever-transforming Dao. It also shows the uniqueness of each form as the butterfly has its own experiences that Zhuangzi cannot experience and vice versa. Guo Xiang, the Daoist, says that what can be sure about is that the one is as "real" as the other. He concludes: "Being one, there is no knowledge of the other. Being a butterfly when dreaming is genuine."

When one examines Zhuangzi's teachings, it can be said that he seeks to establish the limitlessness of knowledge about the world and at the same time, he seeks to put life in its proper relation to knowledge about the world. Thus, for him, there is no death but there is a transformation when one "dies." There are accounts that claim Daoists believe in "immortality" because of this belief in transformation. To survive in the world, although there may be temporal limits of life, one must take part in it through limitless knowledge and forget about the temporal limits. Thus, it can be concluded that Zhuangzi's concept of man is ever-transforming, just like the Dao. There is an unlimited transformation of the self that only focuses on the individual aspect and not really the interpersonal relations towards others.

Yin Yang Theory

There has always been some sort of dividing line between Eastern and Western philosophy that somehow does not make them meet eye to eye. As we can see from the previous discussion about philosophers, Heidegger and Zhuang Zi, both have different

teachings. Heidegger on one hand talks about the phenomenology of death and Zhuang Zi on the other hand talks about achieving absolute happiness. However, there is reason to believe that both philosophies will meet eventually. The only question is, how?

In Chinese philosophy, the Yin Yang theory has been one of the most prominent theories that are usually talked about. This is because most would say that its concept is evident in every philosophy (mostly in Chinese Philosophy) known. The principle of Yin Yang is that all things exist as inseparable and contradictory opposites. The two opposites of Yin and Yang attract and complement each other and as their symbol illustrates, each side has in its core an element of the other, represented by the small dots. Neither pole is superior to the other and as an increase in one, brings a corresponding decrease in the other. Yin is usually represented as female, night, earth, moisture, winter and others while the Yang is usually represented as the male, day, sky, air, summer and others. In the case of Heidegger and Zhuang Zi, it is evident that both of their philosophies contradict with each other but at the same time complement each other. Heidegger's concept of active participation could be represented as Yang while Zhuang Zi's passive participation could be the Yin.

In Heidegger's phenomenology of death, he talks about the authentic being-towards-death being free by anticipation and being able make the most out of man's possibilities. Thus, it can be seen that there are spectacles of Yin there because of the element of anticipation and of course, death being a natural way of life which

is the concept of Dao. On the other hand, Zhuang Zi talks about going with the flow or the natural way of life, doing nothing which is something passive. However, he also talks about achieving absolute happiness and happiness here is an emotion which is considered as a Yang element. Thus, it can be said that both Heidegger and Zhuang Zi have bits of their philosophies in each other. What does this mean?

Potentiality of Man

Is it possible to say that Heidegger and Zhuang Zi's concept of man are dependent on each other? If the Yin Yang theory were to be used, then the answer is yes. Without Heidegger's philosophy, Zhuang Zi's philosophy may cease to exist and vice versa. In the Yin Yang theory, Yin can transform into Yang under certain conditions. This can be done because Yang is present in Yin and vice versa. With that being said, Heidegger's phenomenology of death can in fact, transform into the concept of Zhuang Zi's absolute happiness. For example, when one allows himself to be aware of death, it becomes something natural to him. Thus, in a way, the two concepts of man are merged into one. It can also be said that there is a similarity between the two concepts of being. Both philosophers focus on the individual with Heidegger giving ideas about interpersonal connections with other people and Zhuangzi concentrating on the self. As mentioned previously, Zhuangzi has this idea of unlimited transformation of man but in concentrating on the self, it becomes something small like man

being one needle in a pile of other needles. We can call this the “unlimited small” idea. On the other hand, Heidegger focuses on the bigger picture. There is a concept of limitless, but this only happens because of our interpersonal connections with other people that our potentialities become unlimited. Thus, we can call this the “unlimited big” idea. These ideas of the unlimited when merged together can be seen as a transformation that man can transcend to. These are two similar ideas yet different at the same time. Just like in the Yin Yang Theory, there could be a mutual dependence between the two concepts despite them being different from each other. The unlimited small cannot exist by itself because there is still a part of the individual wherein another person could affect choices to be done and at the same time, the unlimited big cannot exist by itself because a portion of interpersonal relationships comes from the self. Thus, it just goes in a circle and yet, transforms to something new every time it reaches its peak.

Although there is no direct relation between the two concepts, the dividing line between Western and Eastern philosophy is one step closer to each other. If further analysis were to be made, it might be possible to connect other philosophers as well. The Yin Yang theory is definitely something universal and it can be applied to many different situations or aspects of life.

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