

On Death: A Possible Dialogue between Zhuangzi and Heidegger

Wen Zhang

School of Humanities, Tongji University, Shanghai, China

Abstract: Death is one of the core issues in Zhuangzi's philosophy. Heidegger also devotes a special chapter to the discussion of death in the second part of *Being and Time*. The two great philosophers may differ in their concerns about death itself, their specific approaches to thinking about death, and their explorations of means of self-cultivation, but the aspect of death illustrated by the metaphor "hanging by the heels" may bridge their arguments and open a dialogue between them.

Key words: Zhuangzi, Heidegger, death, transcendence

1. Introduction

Robert E. Allinson mentioned time and again that the main project of the *Zhuangzi* is the direction of the subject reader toward self-transformation. But he seems to believe that the key to self-transformation is self-forgetting, which Zhuangzi describes through two strategies: the understanding of the dream analogy and the argument from the relativity of all values.[1]143-144 This indeed has given a paradoxical color to Zhuangzi's philosophy, but what Robert didn't see is a more basic metaphor behind the two strategies: death. Sleep is thought to be as being in some way analogous to death, and the ultimate paradox for human beings is the paradox of life and death. What this means is, if Zhuangzi's main project is to help readers transform themselves, then the first and foremost difficulty he'll encounter is to overcome death. The same problem is met by Heidegger two thousand years later, and he provides us with his ideas and solutions of it in his first book of philosophy--*Being and Time*. To know how these two philosophers deal with the problem, and how their methodologies meet and differ, we can start from a single point, viz. image of death.

The Images of "Hanging by the Heels倒懸" and "Being towards Death"

To illustrate the abruptness and helplessness of death, Zhuangzi applies an ingenious analogy: hanging by the heels 倒懸. "Xuan Jie懸解" appears twice in the *Zhuangzi*莊子, both times in the Inner Chapters, which means it is a metaphor of great importance in Zhuangzi's thoughts. "懸" can be more appropriately translated to "hanging by the heels", for Zhuangzi says: we are born suspended, and it is a deep-rooted problem buried steadfastly into the daily life, which one can hardly be aware of but which must be solved with urgency.

"Hanging by the heels" is a special image. The image can be easily conjured: we visualize a person who hangs upside down, hands and feet bound, tipping over the edge of a cliff and spiraling into a free fall. Yet in fact, it is not the fall that poses a threat, but reaching the bottom. The bottom of the cliff is the boundary of life that the blindfolded person will violate at some point. It brings the continuous expectation of being smashed to pieces, and exposes the intrinsic tragedy of being conscious of one's own life.

The upside-down metaphor incorporates Dasein's (In *Being and Time*, Dasein is another name for human beings.) [2]67 concept of "being-at-an-end" into a specific image, and takes from Dasein's fall, a fact inherent but often obliterated in ordinary life. This fact is expressed by Heidegger in an almost horrifying manner: "Dasein, as thrown being-in-the-world, has in every case already been delivered over to its death"[2]303. But in the *Zhuangzi*, the appalling elements of this statement are neutralised by the seemingly mundane narration: "Where one lives, one dies, and where one dies, one lives." (Qiwulun)—to live is to die: the two speak of the same thing.

From the perspective of problem awareness, the excavation of the "fact of death" from daily life by the two philosophers surprisingly consistent, but their means of conceptualizing and expressing it (and, alternatively, the self-cultivation theories determined by these patterns of cognition) greatly differ. Heidegger also makes use of an utterance similar to the image of "hanging by the heels" in *Being and Time*. From this expression, we can begin to bridge the intellectual gap and create a possible dialogue between the two philosophers.

2. Death as a Limit

The corresponding term that reflects the tension of "hanging by the heels" in *Being and Time* is "bevorstehen," ("to be present before"). In the book, death as an end is suspended (hereinstellen) in the "average everydayness" of Dasein. According to Heidegger's argument, death cannot be defined simply by a singular end point, and Dasein himself is not a ready-made being.

Heidegger says, "Death is something that stands before (bevorstehen) us." [2]294 Such a presence (stehen) has an inherent poignancy, so much so that death becomes a possibility that Dasein has to consider constantly--the very possibility of existence is predicated upon the inevitability of death. To be more sympathetic in the reading of *Being and Time*, we may find that Heidegger has his sense in the wording. Taking the perspective of death as possibility is a remedy for the illusion of every day "falling," and preparatory work for the "existential projection of an authentic Being-towards-death": "In anticipating [zum] the indefinite certainty of death, Dasein opens itself to a constant threat arising out of its own "there." In this very threat Being-towards-the-end must maintain itself. So little can it tone this down that it must rather cultivate the indefiniteness of the certainty." This "state-of-mind which can hold open the utter and constant threat to itself arising from Dasein's ownmost individualized Being," is what Heidegger calls "anxiety" (Angst). [2]310 Therefore, being-towards-death is essentially anxiety.

Whether "threat" (Bedrohlichkeit) or "anxiety" (Angst), these expressions all reveal an innate tragic spirit that can trace its origin back to Nietzsche's "positive nihilism." The central function of "positive nihilism" is to open up possibilities where no possibility seems possible, and this legacy of philosophical thought was more or less inherited by Heidegger. Heidegger believes that ultimate freedom can only be obtained by facing death and incorporating it into life.

This is where Zhuangzi and Heidegger differ in their death philosophy. Compared to Nietzsche's and Heidegger's ideas of "power" and "carrying the burden" of the final limit, Zhuangzi's perspective on death has strong oriental characteristics. Zhuangzi believes the wisest way to face death is to be effortless. He advises not to exert one's power against the absolute unknown, though it indeed renders one helpless. There are two aspects needed to dispel effort when confronting death. First, by shifting perspectives, one can remove the predetermined tragic color of death. Two, by cultivating the practice of evaporation (氣化, or Qi-becoming)-materialization(物化, or Thing-becoming), an antidote to the finiteness of individual life will gradually take shape.

Zhuangzi deconstructs the root of the tragedy of life—death as the final limit, and the heavy feeling brought by that limit to ordinary people—in an almost humorous way. The parable of Li Ji 麗姬 in *Qiwulun* and that of the skull in *Zhile* 至樂 are typical examples of Zhuangzi's humorous approach to this topic. After completing the work of deconstruction, Zhuangzi further points out: "When his understanding stops at and rests on what it does not understand, his knowing on what it does not know, it has reached its perfection." (Gengsangchu 庚桑楚) Since death is unknowable, why not sit with our ignorance, and let go of the premonition of the mind? Why not just wait and see?

But there's a potential problem with this approach of "waiting and seeing". Heidegger points out that Dasein tends to be unwilling to confront the greatest challenge of life and chooses "constant fleeing" in the face of death. Although Zhuangzi's deconstruction of our understanding of death appears to relieve the burden of death, how do we know that the apparent tranquility found in knowing "to stop

at and rest on what it does not understand," is not actually an evasion in the sense of Heidegger's existentialism?

3. Transformation and the Transformation between Life and Death

Although Zhuangzi's ever-varying words 卮言 seem to be too absurd and full of nonsense to be founded on any solid basis, through his words he also shows that he has serious concerns about this world. In relation to the problem of death, his attitude is essentially in accordance with a view of the transformative nature of the natural world. The "Xuan Jie" image is just a manifestation of his evaporation-materialization 氣化-物化 theory of natural generation, and the solution to death as a problem is also based on the reality of transformation in nature.

On the occasion of his wife's death, Zhuangzi explains why he isn't sad that she is no more. In his perception, the change between life and death is like the conversion of the seasons, and there remains one thing—Qi 氣—that doesn't change during the whole process and which is the lord of life. Qi is an importance concept both in Zhuangzi's cosmology and in his theory of self-cultivating practices. In fact, the former serves as the basis for the latter, for all human beings are also in the indefatigable process of transformation, inevitably dependent on the natural supply of Qi, and we cycle and recycle Qi like every other creature on earth.

Zhibeiyou 知北游 discusses the relationship between life and death, Qi, and transformation and considers the problem of deformation in the midst of these cycles. Zhuangzi uses "Qi" as a broader term, which includes both the traditional definitions of form and Qi, and in this context, form is a more specific and concrete Qi.

In terms of things, although Zhuangzi talks about the two extremes of "the sacred and wonderful" and "the odious and rotten," he does not argue that they are opposing forces. Instead, he says that the seemingly most extreme forms can and in fact do transform into their complete opposite. Fundamentally, the tragedy of the body's getting scattered into mud and dust is one predetermined by human minds—in reality, it is but a simple truth of change in nature. In contrast to the situation of objects, the situation of life that Zhuangzi discusses in the chapter Zhile is a naturalized category that is generally indistinguishable from the temporal nature of "spring, summer, autumn and winter." Here, Zhuangzi seems to have unraveled the seemingly incomprehensible tragedy that is built in to human life. Thus, the way of resolving the upside-down suspension is to place the reality of transformation in front of people, for in such transformation, "what kills all life without death, begins all life without beginning." (Dazongshi)

If we change our perspective on life from that of an individual to that of nature, then life and death is not a problem at all, but merely a display of transformation. In light of this, the two fables told by Zhuangzi to deconstruct the human tragedy can be better understood. If we consider the point of view that human wisdom cannot fathom the magic of transformation, what comes before and after death is unknowable, and therefore death cannot be verified, we can conclude that once the experience of death is realized, life ceases to exist. Confronted with the unknowability of death, imagination and speculation are humans' only recourse; therefore, sadness about death is nothing but humans' self-pity, and can even be said to be a waste of life energy.

But can the perspective of individual life be so easily discarded? Isn't it that we, as Daseins, can only establish awareness of the greatness of nature through the perspective of individuals? Heidegger calls for an "existential projection of an authentic Being-towards death," and advises us to face "Dasein's ownmost possibility--non-relational, certain and as such indefinite, not to be outstripped." [2]303 In fact, what really needs to be brought to our attention is the individuality and limitation of Dasein. What Heidegger requires is that Dasein must not try to escape when faced with its finiteness (mortality), but be fully aware of it and completely accept it. Only then will "potentiality-for-Being" reach its full potential. Therefore, Heidegger's self-cultivation theory of death also starts from the individual's "anxiety." This anxiety not only cannot be flattened but must always exist as anxiety and

continuously suspend itself in the existence of Dasein, because it is essentially the existence of Dasein itself, i.e. the root of individuality.

But has Zhuangzi escaped from the finiteness of the individual at all, when in reality the foundation for human living lies above, and heaven and man cannot be separated? Moreover, Zhuangzi does not seek to escape from the situation of being in the world. In the chapter Renjianshi, he let Confucius discuss a series of inevitable problems encountered by people, and provides practical guidance and corresponding methods to work through them. In discussing these problems, Zhuangzi presents two important considerations that are often in opposition. The first is human nature (both humane and ethical). The second is the conviction of what is right. For example, a typical case of the former is the love of a son for his parents, and of the latter, the service he must pay to his ruler, viz. his obligations (Renjianshi). As individuals in the mundane world, not only death, but the various regulations created by the "thrown" situation (Geworfenheit) have been placed in our lives. In this case, we have no choice but to fulfill these responsibilities. But in these responsibilities there is still ease and choice of a free mind: "To know that there is no alternative to the acting as we do, and rest in it as what is appointed--this is the highest achievement of virtue." (Renjianshi)

4. The Unfolding of Meaning and the Work of Life

But Zhuangzi is not only dealing with "finiteness," his perspective has always had aspects of both heaven and man. In Zhuangzi's eyes, life has not only a limited dimension, but also an infinite one. He uses an analogy to make it more explicit. In Dechongfu 德充符, Zhuangzi explains that the visible body is not all, just like the sow that piglets rely on is not limited to a fallen body. What the little pig loves is what had given animation to the mother's figure, the "the form maker," which dwells in the body and transcends the body, and which is able to love and takes the breath of life. Such is the Lord of Life in Yangshengzhu 養生主 and the spirit 神 that wards the shape 守形 in Zaiyou 在宥. The mortality of the body is not a tragedy, but can serve as a reminder to those with lofty ideals.

Many self-cultivation theories in the Zhuangzi have an anti-dualism character, such as Nanguo Ziqi's "loosing from a partner 喪耦" at the beginning of Qiwlun, and Yan Hui's "sitting and forgetting 坐忘" in Dazongshi. Duality is the basic structure of life with a body, and the de-dualization is the last stage of transcending the finite. In Dazongshi, according to Yan Hui, one must first break away from the limitations of the body and the five senses ("dispersing physical form"), and then distance oneself from the limitations of the mind ("ousting understanding") before ascending to infinity. This is exactly the solution to resolve the "hanging by the heels" problem. The fear created by "hanging by the heels" lies in the anticipation of the fall and of shattered bones. The shattered bones imply that the body and mind no longer exist, which is equivalent to the nonexistence of any sense of "I" for the individual. The purpose of the transcending effort is to actually experience the "Fountain of Life" in full awareness and to know in a real sense that the so-called "I" in daily use is the foundation of all our self-created hallucinations. Only in this way can the horror of being smashed to pieces be dispelled.

But the upward movement is only the first step. Since the basis of human beings as they are lies in the "Great Openness 大通" and infinity, which is the source of life, then there is no reason for the sage who has experienced infinity and becomes one with it to refuse to deal with reality or hesitate to facilitate the flourishing of life. Therefore, most of Zhuangzi's self-cultivation practices demonstrate a larger aspect of transforming others (other lives, human beings, and even things). In the Seven Inner Chapters, there are 12 of these theories of practice that bear such characteristics. By sorting out the relevant vocabulary of these theories, it is not difficult to find that most of them have two aspects: internal and external. Inside is a transcendent subject with the quality of oneness, which is often expressed as "tranquility," "One," and "master"; outside is a dynamic and changing factor, usually expressed as "disturbances," "multiple," and "transformation," which is plentiful in character and exists encompassing everything. This model is based on the way that the Dao of Heaven operates,

which is called "Tian Jun" 天鈞 in Qi wulun whose prototype is the making of pottery. When this model encounters Zhuangzi's ideal personality—"internal sage, external king," it still shares Tian Jun's two-faced character. Only at this point can Zhuangzi's self-cultivation process be considered complete.

Compared with Zhuangzi, Heidegger's choice of vocabulary for his theory of death cultivation—conscience (Gewissen)—sounds more moral and mystical. He says: "In conscience Dasein calls itself."^{[2]320} Conscience pulls Dasein out of the "factual potentiality-for Being", and calls it back to the silence of the potentiality of existence.

But what Heidegger calls "conscience" is not a moral concept. Instead, it is linked to the "primordial Being-guilty." Therefore, the effort Dasein exerts to comprehend itself in "the potentiality-for-Being which it is" is actually that which "it discloses Dasein's most primordial potentiality-for-Being as Being-guilty." By disclosing this Being-guilty, Dasein becomes Dasein of awareness, and Dasein of responsibility. Heidegger calls the self-projecting of taking on the responsibility for free behavior in oneself "resoluteness," but merely becoming resolute does not mean that the work of death is finished.

"Resoluteness brings itself into the Situation by making present," constituting the "meaning of the authentic care"^{[2]374}-- temporality (Zeitlichkeit), which bears an "ecstases" (ἐκστατικόν) character of effusiveness, including all three phenomena of the past, the present, and the future. This character is inherent in death because the existence of Dasein is essentially "ecstating" towards death. Therefore, if Dasein wants to make up its mind, and to "go without illusions into the resoluteness of 'taking action,'" it must renew its determination every moment. Heidegger refers "the Present which is held in authentic temporality and which thus is authentic itself" as the "moment of vision"(Augenblick)^{[2]387}, which "brings existence into the Situation and discloses the authentic 'there'"^{[2]398}. In a lifetime of the moment of vision, Dasein successfully realizes his freedom, which is a self-fulfilling upward movement.

After the rise of the individual, Heidegger also requires the Dasein of awareness to descend into specific life situations. In short: going back to "care" (Sorge), retrospectively the world, and taking on historical responsibility. Temporality reveals the historicity of Dasein, and Dasein and its "Da" ("there") in turn develop historicity. But only resolute Dasein can develop authentic historicity. That is to say, the resolute Dasein must first go into death and understand the gist of the death-oriented "ecstases"(Dasein's "authentic potentiality-for-Being-in-the-world"). Only then he can be responsible and free to bear his thrownness (Geworfenheit), and in the moment of vision live for its time (its authentic historicity).

So far we can see that both Zhuangzi's and Heidegger's self-cultivation theories of death are linked by the concepts of ascending and descending. However, due to different perspectives and experiences, they have fundamental differences in the disclosure of their theories. Heidegger applies reason to incorporate death into Dasein at all times, in order to realize individual freedom and reveal meaning. But there is a certain danger in doing so: Heidegger's "Übermacht" can easily be transformed into the will of power. The "world" of Dasein is still a world rooted in individuality. The resolute Dasein has made up his mind to undertake the obligation of inheritance, but because his freedom is an individual freedom, there remains an urgent problem to be solved: the relationship between the individual and the others in the world of Dasein. As Levinas points out, Heidegger's ontology is without ethics,^{[3]332-333} i.e. there is the possibility that Dasein's realization of freedom through the cultivation of death can be abused.

By contrast, the ascending movement of Zhuangzi's theory of death cultivation dispels the individual will of power ("the predetermined mind") at the outset, regardless of whether this mind is a mediocre and trivial one of the common people, or a seemingly holy mind which intends to find the best way to rule the kingdom. Zhuangzi's self-cultivation mechanism is manifested as the evaporation-materialization 氣化-物化 movement. At the evaporation(or Qi-becoming) ends, the subject who roams the world can be said to be the only subject, and the subject is the Dao. At the end of

materialization(or Thing-becoming), “they(the Spiritlike Persons)[could] just concentrate their spirits and straightaway all things are free from sickness and the harvest matures” and thus the Dao unfolds itself as things. Compared with Heidegger, Zhuangzi does not stop after the rising process of individual realization, and his evaporation-materialization technique also touched upon the level of transformation of others. In that sense, his image of death cultivation is more complete than the one depicted in Being and Time.

References

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