

HUMOR IN ZHUANG ZI'S PHILOSOPHY

Orlando Ali Mandane Jr.

Zhuang Zi,¹ like Proteus,² allows for different interpretations. It is like a Rorschach test because many interpreters form varying views about it without being either completely wrong or completely right.³ Thomas Merton, Benjamin Schwartz, and Lee Yearly see mysticism in it.⁴ Siao-Fang Sun reads relativism in *Zhuang Zi* as it maintains that, on the one hand, knowledge is relative while does not reject, on the other hand, the Absolute Truth as the goal of an ideal life.⁵ Paul Kjellberg and Lisa Raphals depict the skepticism in *Zhuang Zi* while Lin Yutang and Scott Cook see levity, humor and the view of good life.⁶ These are some of the many interpreters of the *Zhuang Zi* who in varying ways present equally defensible interpretations. All these account for the versatility of the text in it. A text such as the *Zhuang Zi*, rich in style and pregnant with vivid parables, relatively short fables and animated stories, undoubtedly encourages such interpretations with no qualms for certitude and veracity of the author's (*Zhuang Zi*'s) intention.

However, Bryan W. Van Norden insists that these differing opinions "often reveals [sic] more about their (the interpreters') own preoccupations than about the *Zhuang Zi* itself."⁷ His critique indicates that there is an even far better interpretation among the many ones, that is, an interpretation closest to the author's intention.⁸ But his view renders the text reducible to a single interpretation; and thus, it attempts to demystify the protean element of the text. Such tendency to interpret in plain black and white terms draws the *Zhuang Zi* in the Western philosophic categories. However, an understanding of the Chinese mind suggests otherwise. The Chinese mind tends to be intuitive because the Chinese "allow their mind to flow out with their immediate and unspoiled impressions of reality."⁹ It shuns contradiction and *absolutizing* and prefers a "reconciling and harmonizing" view of things.¹⁰ Co maintains,

This tolerant leniency, or should I call it creativity, enables them to develop a refreshing mental posture that the attainment of truth is not the monopoly of one but a possibility for all. Such an attitude can only exist in a mind that brushes logic aside to acknowledge all sorts of thought, and thus effect an easy mental compromise. The supreme consideration here is the unity of truth, as they

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believe all doctrines lead to one truth. This spirit of tolerance and harmony very aptly describes the Chinese philosophical spirit.¹¹

The *Zhuang Zi* is not an exception of texts and literatures that reflect the Chinese thought. It is one of the literatures in the Zhou period that best represent Chinese ideas or philosophy. It is no surprise then that the insights found therein fascinate readers and interpreters and draw varying thoughts and opinions. In this essay, therefore, I shall consider humor in *Zhuang Zi* and examine it in the light of his whole philosophy.¹² In the first section, I will give due attention to the basic insights found in the *Zhuang Zi*. I will follow this up with an analysis of his humor. And, in the last section I will offer synthesis and conclusion.

Zhuang Zi's Insights into the *Dao*

Zhuang Zi's view on *Dao* is essentially similar with Lao Zi.¹³ Zhuang Zi maintains,

In the grand beginning, there was only nonbeing,

But no being and no names.

Out of it arose the One;

There was one, but still no form

From the One, things could be born, receiving what is called their virtue. That which still had no form was divided, yet there was no separation.

This is called destiny.

Through stasis and movement, things were born. As things were completed, various configurations were produced.

These are called forms.

The bodily form protects the spirit, the form and the spirit each having its own usages.

This we call nature.

Through cultivation of nature, it returns to virtue, and when virtue reaches its pinnacle, it is the same as the beginning. Being the same, it is empty. Being empty, it is great. This is like joining in with the chirping of birds. Having joined in with the chirping of birds, one may join with the heaven and earth. (12/9)¹⁴

Compared with Lao Zi, the passage above is not significantly different to the chapters 42 and 55 of the *Dao De Jing*.¹⁵ In fact, Co holds that "Zhuang

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Zi shared with Lao Zi his central conception of the *Dao* as the principle underlying and governing all existence" while differed with the latter in relation to the principle of life.¹⁶ The *Dao* is the absolute reality that simply transcends and governs beings. "It (The *Dao* or Way) has attributes and evidence, but it has no action and no form.... From the root, from the stock before there was heaven or 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 it is not high; it lies beneath the nadir but it is not deep. It is prior to heaven and earth, but it is not ancient; it is senior to high antiquity, but it is not old."¹⁷ (6/3) It is nothing, indeterminate and without form but itself is responsible for all things.¹⁸ While *Dao* is ineffable, it communicates itself in its own way.¹⁹ It finds its way in the myriad things allowing them to grow in their own accord; and thus, the principle of non-action is followed.

As nothing, *Dao* is found in all things. In the *Zhuang Zi*, Master Easturb asked Zhuang Zi where *Dao* can be found; the latter replied that it is found in ants, panic grass, tiles and shard and even shit and piss. Having heard the gruesome association of the Way with the morbid state of things, Master Easturb fell silent. Then Zhuang Zi admonished, "Your questions did not touch the substance of the matter.... Just don't try to be specific because there's no escape from things. The Ultimate Way is like this, as are great words..."²¹ (22/6) For the truth-seekers, like Master Easturb, trapped within the categories and distinctions of reason, there is always an attempt to determine and limit the *Dao* into pure concepts. It is, thus, unimaginable that it belongs to the mundane world of things. However, Zhuang Zi suggests that the search for *Dao* must go far beyond the categories of things, that is, as the Ultimate Way, it transcends all things.

Zhuang Zi confirms the incommunicable character of the *Dao* and the limitations of the language with which to describe it. Thus he says, If words were satisfactory, we could speak the whole day and it would all be about the Way; but if words are unsatisfactory, we can speak the whole day and it will all be about things. The Way is the delimitation of all things. Neither words nor silence are satisfactory for conveying it. Without words and without silence, our deliberations reach their utmost limits.²² (25/10)

Zhuang Zi's acceptance of the *Dao* and its incommunicability does not hinder him from furthering his view. He develops his philosophy by giving

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due attention to the its manifestation in life and less regard for "the *Dao* as being also the *De* or the path in life that possesses an absolute value in itself."²³ He is not concerned about any expeditious formula about reality but with "the direct existential grasp of reality in itself."²⁴ He urges people to extricate themselves from the confines of the mundane social and political structures, the constricting grip of ordinary values and the frustrating knowledge offered by Confucius and his followers;²⁵ and to pursue spiritual freedom from mental structures, transcendence of the distinctions of values and dichotomous view of reality,²⁶ in order to live a laudable life of simplicity and spontaneity. This reminds of the famous story in the *Zhuang Zi*,

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

Without turning around, Master Chuang just kept holding on to his fishing rod and said, "I have heard that in Ch'u there is a sacred tortoise that has 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?"

"It would rather be alive and dragging its tails through the mud," said the two officials.

"Begone!" said Master Chuang. "I'd rather be dragging my tail in the mud."²⁷ (17/5)

In the passage, the luxuries and conveniences offered in governance surely do not outweigh the corresponding encumbrances that may even injure Zhuang Zi's personal pursuit of happy life. In no way does this imply that he opts for a rigidly and strictly personalist life; rather, he refuses to be caught by human affairs and the affairs of the world, that is, the affairs that pursue material values and merits of positions in the society. He avoids the activities of the society, whose concern is the satisfaction of the mundane needs, and the constricting structures of the society that impedes his personal attempt of carefree wandering.

The daily concern of making both ends meet, the intellectual pursuit for a privileged position in the society and jockeying for position in

order to gain prestige, honor and fame, all these do not lure Zhuang Zi to take part. For, he seeks a life of obedience to nature and refuses what is of man.²⁸ Thus, he says,

The sage hatches no schemes, so what use has he for knowledge? He does no splitting, so what use has he for glue? He does no peddling, so what use has he for commerce? These are the gruel of heaven. The gruel of heaven is sustenance from heaven. Since he receives sustenance from heaven, what use has he for man?²⁹ (5/5)

Zhuang Zi's way to a happy life is to accept the transitory state of existence. This acceptance resigns him to the flux of reality and goes along with it even down to the deepest of his imagination. Dwelling unto this deep creative imagination, time, space and distinctions are of no consequence to him.³⁰ Thus, he has the levity and playfulness to consider different forms of existence, at least even through dreams. One of the important passages says,

Once upon a time Chuang Chou dreamed he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting about happily enjoying himself. He didn't know that he was Chou. Suddenly, he awoke and was palpably Chou. He did not know whether he were Chou who had dreamed of being butterfly or a butterfly who was dreaming that he was Chou. Now, there must be a difference between Chou and the butterfly. This is called the transformation of things.³¹ (2/14)

The levity with which Zhuang Zi views the transformation of things equally conveys his magnanimity. He is unfazed by the troubles of the mundane world as he rises above the inconveniences of life and death³² and pain and suffering.³³ Even the most troublesome fact of dying, for him, must be faced with naturalness and openness. In the text, a skull appeared and communicated to Master Chuang in a dream reminding him that the dead has no ruler nor subject and therefore the joys found in death is nothing compared to the yoke and toils of mankind.³⁴ (18/4)

Zhuang Zi's ideas reflect the profundity of his view of reality. For him, reality is relative. "Everything is 'that' in relation to other things and 'this' in relation to itself. We may not be able to understand things from the standpoint of 'that', but we can understand them from the standpoint of

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'this'. Therefore, it may be said that 'that' derives from 'this' and that 'this' is dependent upon 'that'. Such is the notion of the cogeneration of 'this' and 'that'.³⁵ (2/5) While many thinkers, like the philosophers belonging to the Ming Jia, trouble themselves with finding the absolute criteria of reality, ground for certitude and apodictic bases of knowledge, Zhuang Zi acquiesces to the relativity of things.³⁶ The discourses of the dialecticians lend themselves to verbosity and it (verbosity), in turn, lends itself to complexity and shallowness. But his acquiescence to the relativity of things yields to simplicity and mystery; and thus, the profundity.

The relativity of things further reveals Zhuang Zi's view on the interdependence of things. The small is entirely interdependent with big, the narrow with wide, the tall with short, the good with bad, etc. Ordinary individuals who fail to understand this interdependence will oftentimes prefer one over the other, value one over the other, and judge one over the other. Since reality is interdependent, resignation to the relativity of things allows one to recognize vacuity³⁷ and flexibility. As a consequence, he urges one to go beyond the relativity of all things because at bottom these distinctions are in fact no distinctions. Thus, he advises,

"This" is also "that"; "that" is also "this". "This" implies a concept of right and wrong; "that" also implies the concept of right and wrong. But is there really a "this" and a "that"? Or is there really no "this" and no "that"? Where "this" and "that" ceases to be opposites, there lies the pivot of the Way. Only when the pivot is located in the center of the circle of things can we respond to their infinite transformations. The transformations of "right" are infinite and so are the transformations of "wrong". Therefore, it is said that nothing is better for responding to them than lucidity.³⁸ (2/5)

The apparent contradictions seen in reality, the apparent oppositions are mere temporal and vary depending on the locus of standpoint. Zhuang Zi admonishes not to be entangled with one viewpoint or another since all these oppositions disappear when the locus of opposition is found. Beneath this relativity is the view that there is an underlying unity of things that transcends all these distinctions, the *Dao*. Co eloquently depicts this unity amid relativity. He says,

Imagine that one day you set forth on a journey passing through the jungle, seeing one object after another: one small tree, one large tree, one tall tree, one fruit bearing tree. As you move on gradually ascend the mountain passing through many trees, pebbles, stones, rocks, springs and rivers, one different from another. When you finally reach the summit you no longer see one tree distinct from another, one rock from another, but just one vast jungle. There from the top you see reality from a different vista where distinctions are removed and a unifying spirit ensues.

From the empirical world we see the flux which causes people to view reality in terms of dialectical conflict, change, dichotomy, contradiction. But as one matures in his thinking one sees only the unity of all things.³⁹

These concepts of underlying unity and their relativity effect Zhuang Zi's view on knowledge. For him, there is a limited knowledge, which dwells on the vagaries of language, the finitude of things and limited evaluations on them.⁴⁰ If one is to move on wading his way through the vast vegetation to reach the acme of the mountain forest,⁴¹ limited knowledge is like seeing small and big plants, tall and short ones, distinguishing and categorizing each one but failing to see the unity. A knowledge that prefers one category over another, values one and disvalues another is oftentimes based on a finite view. This finitude is evident in the limitation of the human being's intellectual acumen and the infinite possibility of its objects.⁴² This is what Zhuang Zi means when he wrote that "the blind cannot share in the display of pattern and ornament, the deaf cannot share in the sounds of bells and drums,"⁴³ that is, defects not only exist physically but also mentally.

Zhuang Zi's attitude towards this knowledge is that of skepticism.⁴⁴ In "On the Equality of Things," he writes, "Suppose that you and I have a dispute. If you beat me and I lose to you, does that mean you're really right and I'm really wrong? Is one of us right and the other wrong? Or are both of us right and both of us wrong? Neither you nor I can know and others are even more in the dark. Whom shall we have decide the matter? Shall we have someone who agrees with you decide it? Since he agrees with you, how can he decide fairly? Shall we have someone who agrees with me decide it? Since he agrees with me, how can he decide fairly? Shall we have someone who differs with both of use decide it? Since he differs with both

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of us, how can he make a decision? Shall we have someone who agrees with us decide it? Since he agrees with both of us, how can he make a decision? Given that neither you nor I, nor another person, can know how to decide, shall we wait for another?"⁴⁵ (2/12) Here, his distrust for the limited knowledge is very evident. This is due to the delicate choice of vantage point, that is, on which is the "this" and the "that", and so on.

Zhuang Zi's misgiving on limited knowledge agrees with his faith on great knowledge. If limited knowledge is confined to distinctions and disputation and argumentation, great knowledge dissolves these distinctions and argues with no words, nor arguments. While the former separates the "this" and the "that", great knowledge sees that the "this" is also the "that", the "true" is also the "false", the "good" is also the "bad". Paradoxically, great knowledge is not knowledge. Ordinarily, knowledge is often associated with apprehending things in clear and distinct manner and with no equivocation whatsoever. There is no room, in other words, for contradictions. But great knowledge, for Zhuang Zi, uses no words and concepts such that it prefers silence over loud eloquence, brevity and profundity over verbosity; because, great knowledge is knowledge of the *Dao*, which is nameless and ineffable. Thus, Zhuang Zi writes,

Therefore, she who knows to stop at what she does not know has attained the ultimate. Who knows the disputation that is without words and the Way that cannot be walked upon? If one can have knowledge of them, this is called the Treasury of Heaven. You may pour into it but it never fills; you may dip from it but it never empties; and you never know where it comes from. This is called the Inner Light.⁴⁶ (2/9)

Zhuang Zi's Humor

Hardly anyone will miss humor when he sees one; because, it is a facet of life. Humor is oftentimes associated with what makes human beings laugh.⁴⁷ Most often, a human life bereft with it is a life of gravity⁴⁸ and worry; surely, such life would be unbearable.⁴⁹ Thus, the adage "Laugh and the world laughs with you; weep and you weep alone!"⁵⁰ aptly describes humor's role in human life.

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Although human beings recognize with facility, the question "What is humor exactly?" receives no definite answer. Not a single theory offered by thinkers satisfactorily provides explanations about it.⁵¹ What complicate further are the different characterizations made on humor such as "ludicrous, satirical, absurd, mirthful, witty, silly, derisive, pleasurable, powerful, amusing, comical, droll, fanciful, etc."⁵² Monro attempts to simplify humor by classifying it according to the following typology: any breach of the usual order of events, indecency, importing to one situation what belongs to another, anything masquerading as something it is not, word play, nonsense, small misfortunes, want of knowledge or skill and belated insults.⁵³ Furthermore, humor is classified as "wit, irony, satire, sarcasm, parody, puns, banter, mimicry and practical joking."⁵⁴ These various typologies or categorizations on humor merely affirm the difficulty of defining it. Thus, the discussion that follows does not attempt to define humor but tries to recognize it--as generally accepted in the light of those categories---in the *Zhuang Zi*.

Lin Yutang arouses curiosity when he claimed that "Chinese philosophy first acquired depth and humor" with Zhuang Zi.⁵⁵ This pronouncement, if depth and humor are taken separately, will stir a lot of objections. Surely, the ages that passed and the ancient learning handed down do not lend themselves to mere shallowness. But an erudite and prolific writer like Lin Yutang does not simply give in to false claims either. The claim of being the "first" might be too unpopular. However, depth and humor cannot certainly be dismissed. For, "the humor, the sophistication, the literary genius and the philosophical insight" found in the *Zhuang Zi* are very evident for its readers.⁵⁶

The profundity sowed in the pages of the *Zhuang Zi* is already fascinating. Humor, however, in such literature is interest-catching; because, of most human dispositions, humor is taken less seriously and oftentimes met with laughter; and most often, a humorist is the last person in the world to be considered as possessing profundity in thought.⁵⁷ Such stereotype is discarded in the presence of Zhuang Zi. Hence, in this section I will consider his humor and examine its connection with the basic principles found in his philosophy.

The way to examine Zhuang Zi's humor is to go back to the text. In "Autumn Floods," Zhuang Zi relates,

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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 the fishes"

"You're not a fish," said Master Hui. "How do you know what the joy of the fishes is?"

"You're not me," said Master Chuang, "so how do you know that I don't know what the joy of fishes is?"

"I am not you," said Master Hui, "so I certainly do not know what you do. But you're certainly not a fish, so it is irrefutable that you do not know what the joy of fishes is."

"Let's go back to where we started," said Master Chuang. "When you said, 'How do you know what the joy of fishes is?' you asked me because you already knew that I knew. I know it by strolling over Hao."⁵⁸ (17/5)

The wit with which Zhuang Zi handles the challenge of his friend, Hui Shih, who happened to be one of the leading figures of the Ming Jia,⁵⁹ exemplifies his mastery of dialectical language without being restricted by it. He appeals to the comic aspect by abruptly changing the focus of their discussion;⁶⁰ and thus, levity is found in being free from the rigorous display of argument while delivering the thought being held. This can also be found in the pun used. In the "External Things," Zhuang Zi writes,

A fish-trap is for catching fish; once you've caught the fish, you can forget about the trap. A rabbit-snare is for catching rabbits; once you've caught the rabbit, you can forget about the snare. Words are for catching ideas; once you've caught the idea, you can forget about the words. Where can I find a person who knows how to forget about words so that I can have a few words with him?⁶¹ (26/13)

The peculiarity of the passage above is the attempt, this time, to follow the meaning of the passage by accentuating the play of words in the last sentence. In short, the message is gotten across while the medium is abandoned.

The examples mentioned display humor in the context of the play of words and change of focus at the same time delivering the message. These characteristics exhibit the ease with the use of the language, and the simplicity of delivery to convey the thought intended. These imply depth in thought and simplicity of thinking.⁶²

Another characteristic of humor found in the *Zhuang Zi* is the appeal to absurdity. In "On the Equality of Things," the text mentions,

Now I have something to say here. I do not know whether or not what I have to say is of the same category as "this". But whether it is of the same category or not, like them it is a category, thus in the end it is no different from "that." Nevertheless, let me try to explain myself.

There is beginning. There is time before beginning. There is being. There is nonbeing.... Suddenly, there is being and nonbeing. Still, as for being and nonbeing, I do not know which is really being and which is nonbeing. Now I have just said something, but I do not know whether what I have said is really saying something or not.

.... Heaven and earth were born together with me and the myriad things are one with me. Since all things are one, how can there be anything to talk about? But since I have already said that all things are one, how can there be nothing to talk about? One speech makes two, two and one makes three. Continuing on in this fashion, even the cleverest mathematician couldn't keep up, how much less an ordinary person! Therefore, if in proceeding from the nonbeing to being we arrive at three, how much farther we shall reach when proceeding from being to being. We need not proceed at all if we understand the mutual dependence of "this" and "that."⁶³ (2/8)

Pertaining to the passage above, Raphals claims that Zhuang Zi uses humor by appealing to *reductio ab absurdum* to express his skeptical method.⁶⁴ Regardless of the end of such example, there is one thing clear: Zhuang Zi uses sophistic faulty reasoning to do away with serious thinking. Freud describes this characteristic in humor as economy of psychic expenditure.⁶⁵

What does this imply? Humor, in this sense, conveys freedom of thought. Students of reasoning most often encounter the rigors of thinking because of the confining principles of logic. But the pangs of reasoning can be evaded through humor. Ironically, while it appeals to the nonsense, humor requires intellectual aptitude to appreciate it, especially those kinds which belong to wit, pun or word play.⁶⁶ Indeed, the best way to free oneself of enslaving thought, without leaving reason and the world, is

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humor. Through this, thinking reaches the summit of thoughtless thought and flees the rigidity of categories and distinction of individual things because humor introduces levity and shuns gravity. Lin Yutang aptly describes this liberty of thought as the apex of the human mind.⁶⁷

In addition, Zhuang Zi introduces his critical ideas on learning against the Confucian tradition by introducing satirical stories or tales. Below is an example worth due attention:

“I’m making progress,” said Yen Hui,
 “What do you mean?” asked Confucius.
 “I have forgotten rites and music.”
 “Not bad, but you still haven’t got it.”
 Yen Hui saw Confucius again on another day and said, “I’m making progress.”
 “What do you mean?”
 “I have forgotten humaneness and righteousness.”
 “Not bad, but you still haven’t got it.”
 Yen Hui saw Confucius again on another day and said, “I’m making progress.”
 “What do you mean?”
 “I sit and forget.” Confucius asked with surprise.
 “I slough off my limbs and trunk,” said Yen Hui, “dim my intelligence, depart from my form, leave knowledge behind, and become identical with the Transformational Thoroughfare. This is what I mean by ‘sit and forget.’”
 “If you are identical,” said Confucius, “then you have no preferences. If you are transformed, then you have no more constants. It’s you who is really the worthy one! Please permit me to follow after you.”⁶⁸ (6/9)

The passage above makes Confucius look ridiculous. Ironically, the development depicted in the example is the forgetting of the rites, music, humaneness, and righteousness, the basic principles held by Confucius himself. Obviously, if a person espouses learning but is portrayed to be following otherwise, he will always look ridiculous. The liberty exercised by Zhuang Zi in choosing his characters,⁶⁹ including making Kong Zi or Confucius and Hui Shih as spokespersons of his view, speaks of his flexibility of thinking. With such freedom, he delivers his message with efficiency.

Zhuang Zi's Humor and Insights into the *Dao*

The question arises: What has humor got to do with the basic philosophy of Zhuang Zi? Humor, as I pointed out earlier, displays the masterful use of the language through the play of words and directs the focus of the thought to the comic situation by alluding to the paradoxical ideas or even to the seemingly faulty thought. Zhuang Zi's humor displays how he handles language, with mastery and facility. A neophyte student of language will most likely be entangled by syntax and semantics. In other words, he becomes limited to the language. Such confinement to language reflects his inability to freely apprehend reality because language is the only means through which reality is grasped.⁷⁰ However, Zhuang Zi's ability to play with language, shown in his humor, indicates his freedom from it and from reality. He knows that, to a certain extent, language is useful; but when it comes to *Dao*, he may opt to play with language or drop it. Reality can, in the light of Zhuang Zi, be approximated through a "this" and a "that".⁷¹ However, when limitations exist, humor is always at hand.

What does this imply? Humor is an effective medium. Zhuang Zi accepts the limitation of knowledge---the knowledge of things--- and prefers great knowledge, the knowledge of the *Dao*. The means to express this is through humor.⁷² How can this be? If he will use an argumentative prose, he will be encapsulated by the laws of thought and consequently will remain within the categories of thought, distinctions and relativity. Oftentimes, arguments are necessary to prove specific points. Efforts therefore are directed to convincingly prove them. But since Zhuang Zi recognizes relativity, he must avoid being trapped by the knowledge he criticizes and must capture the underlying unity beyond this relativity. Consequently, if he is to reach the acme of the mountain, as found in Co's example earlier, he must free himself with all these categories. The best way is to use a medium and being ready to lose it when the summit is reached. Zhuang Zi uses humor. Thus, being half-serious, he retains the protean character and merely flits from the distinctions and categories, flees gravity and seeks refuge in levity. In this case, he remains in keeping with his search for intellectual freedom.

In addition, when Zhuang Zi uses the nonsense in humor by appealing to faulty thinking, he not only expresses his criticism on finite knowledge but also probes into the limits of language.⁷³ Such display of mental flexibility entails sophistication and is the highest activity of the human mind.

Moreover, humor in Zhuang Zi is not only a medium but also a very much encouraged disposition. What does this mean? The words of Aristotle will help in explaining this part. He writes,

By disposition... we mean a condition that is easily changed and quickly gives place to its opposite. Thus heat, cold, disease, health and so on are dispositions. For a man is disposed in one way or another with reference to these, but quickly changes becoming cold instead of warm, ill instead of well. So it is with all other dispositions.⁷⁴

Aristotle's words emphasize disposition as the condition that lends itself open to its opposites. In Zhuang Zi's context, humor is a sign of his non-attachment to things and his ability to hover, like a butterfly, above the conditions of reality. This means that he certainly accepts with profound understanding this world. On the grave side, the world is not without problems. Poverty, conflicts, crimes, wars, etc., depict the world of darkness and doom. The grave problems surely create a picture of a not so bright future. However, Zhuang Zi's humorous disposition does not close itself to the opposites of these problems. In so far as he embraces the relativity of things and their impermanence, he welcomes the transformation of natural things even if such brings pain, misery; or worse, problems of catastrophic magnitude. Here, one is reminded of Zhuang Zi's disposition when his wife died.⁷⁵ Indeed, in a situation where attachment to wife is concerned, it is but natural to feel pain when the wife dies. However, he understands far better than feels. He feels pain for the loss but he knows that his wife's birth will lend itself---sooner or later---to death. He knows that life gives in to its opposite, to death. And thus, he understands. This is Zhuang Zi's disposition.

The consequence is obvious. Zhuang Zi's humor as a disposition is a way of being-in-the-world. This is where Lin Yutang's seemingly presumptuous pronouncement on Zhuang Zi's view comes in.⁷⁶ Lin Yutang claims that the sense of humor goes hand in hand with good sense and intelligence so as one is able to appreciate humor in all its subtleties.⁷⁷ With good sense and intelligence, humor manifests one's being-in-the-world. Lin Yutang has beautiful words to this kind of being-in-the-world:

Mankind, overburdened with this load of ideas and ambitions and social systems, seems unable to rise above

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them. Luckily, however, there is a power of the human mind which can transcend all these ideas, thoughts and ambitions and treat them with a smile, and this power is the subtlety of the humorist.⁷⁸

Lin Yutang aptly describes the disposition of the humorist: he takes things in a stride and with a smile. It is to see gravity; and levity as well. This disposition includes the openness to the world's not only getting worse but more importantly to the world's getting better. This is Zhuang Zi's humor: to view reality with a great sense of profundity.

Conclusion

Earlier, I mentioned that Zhuang Zi shares profound thought with Lao Zi regarding the view on the Ultimate Reality, the *Dao*. Like Lao Zi, he claims that *Dao* is incommunicable and without form but responsible for the myriad existence of things. As a philosopher though, he gives keen interest on *Dao*'s manifestation on things. He claims that since *Dao* is the principle of all things it is found in them. As a consequence, he accepts the transitory state of existence and lives a life of simplicity and spontaneity. More importantly, *Dao*'s manifestation in reality renders it (reality) interdependent. Thus, he accepts limited knowledge but sees the underlying unity of things.

Furthermore, after I showed its different categorizations, I examined humor in its different contexts in the *Zhuang Zi*. Humor appears as a play of words or pun, sudden change of focus in the dialogical discourse, appeal to absurdity, satire, ridicule and others. When analyzed with Zhuang Zi's philosophy, it expresses freedom of thought. It is a medium for conveying a great knowledge beyond things while equally accepting the relativity of limited knowledge. It is a form of mental flexibility that avoids the pangs of rigorous reasoning.

Finally, humor is a disposition, a way of being-in-the-world. It is a person's response from his finitude to cope with the limited world while maintaining his sight toward the myriad beauty of limitless reality, the *Dao*. Thus, for Zhuang Zi, humor is a response of utmost profundity.

ENDNOTES

¹ Pinyin system of transliteration is used in this text. Thus, Zhuang Zi might be familiar to some readers as Chuang Tzu or Chuang Chou. Zhuang Zi (369 B.C.E.-286 B.C.E.) is used in reference to the person putatively considered as the author of the text of the same name. Although the question of authorship is very much prevalent among scholars and many are of the same view that no single person actually wrote the text, I agree with Siao-Fang Sun in maintaining that Zhuang Zi is the author of the text, that is, the ideas contained therein are expounded by him but this need not imply that he actually wrote it. (Cf. Siao-Fang Sun, "Chuang Tzu's Theory of Truth" *Philosophy East and West* 3 (July 1953), 137-note 1) Some scholars, however, maintain that while the rest of the thirty-three chapters were written by different authors, the Inner Chapters, the most analyzed part of the Zhuang Zi, were written by one person. (Cf. A.C. Graham, "How Much of Chuang Tzu Did Chuang Tzu Write?" and Harold Roth, "Who Compiled Chuang Tzu?" as quoted by Bryan W. Van Norden, "Competing Interpretations of the Inner Chapters of the 'Zhuang Zi'" *Philosophy East and West* 46 (April 1996): 263.) Thus, Zhuang Zi refers to the person and his thoughts embodied in the text named after him.

There are instances in the text that the Wade-Giles system of transliteration is used.

² In Greek mythology, a sea god who has the power of assuming different forms.

³ Van Norden, "Competing Interpretations," 247.

⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (Great Britain: Burns and Oates, 1995), 9; Benjamin Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1985), 192-194, 215-237.; and Lee Yearly, "The Perfected Person in the Radical Chuang Tzu," in Victor Mair, *Experimental Essays on Chuang Tzu* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983), 125-139, cited by Bryan W. Van Norden, "Competing Interpretations," 262.

⁵ Siao-Fang Sun, "Chuang Tzu's Theory of Truth" *Philosophy East and West* 3 (July 1953): 146.

⁶ For Kjellberg see "Skepticism, Truth and the Good Life: A Comparison of Zhuang Zi and Sextus Empiricus" *Philosophy East and West* 44 (January 1994): 111-33; and for Lisa Raphals see "Skeptical Strategies in the Zhuang Zi and Theaetetus" *Philosophy East and West* 44 (January 1994): 501-26. For Lin Yutang see *The Importance of Living* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1965), 39; and for Scott Cook, "Zhuang Zi and His Carving of the Confucian Ox" *Philosophy East and West* 47 (October 1997): 521-53.

⁷ Van Norden, "Competing Interpretations," 247.

⁸ Madison criticizes severely this Hirschian notion of interpretation. See Gary B. Madison, *The Hermeneutics of Postmodernity: Figures and Themes* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 5-24.

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⁹ Lisa Raphals argues against the bias that Greek thought is rational and analytic while Chinese mentality is holistic and intuitive. Such notion of mentality, which was forwarded by French sociologist Lucien Levy-Bruhl, is, for Raphals, of lesser weight compared to the style of reasoning used. Cf. Raphals, "Skeptical Strategies," 516 and 523.

¹⁰ Alfredo P. Co, *Philosophy of Ancient China* (Manila: UST Publishing House), 27.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² In this effort, for purposes and convenience I will mostly rely on the translation made by Victor H. Mair, *Wandering on the Way* (New York: Bantam Books, 1994) unless otherwise stated.

¹³ Cf. Fung Yu-lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (New York: McMillan Company, 1960), 105.

¹⁴ The reference method used here is the chapter number/section number for convenience. Thus, the reference (12/9) means Chapter 12, Section 9 of the *Zhuang Zi*.

¹⁵ In this note I refer to the Wing Sit Chan's translation *The Way of Lao Tzu* (New York: Bobbs-Merrel, 1963 and Alfredo P. Co's selections from the *Dao De Jing* based on Chang Chung-yuan's translation.

¹⁶ Co, *Philosophy*, 280.

¹⁷ Mair, *Wandering*, 55.

¹⁸ Chuang-ying Cheng, "Chinese Philosophy and Symbolic Reference," *Philosophy East and West* 27 (July 1977): 316.

¹⁹ Merton, *Way of Chuang Tzu*, 31.

²⁰ The principle of non-action is translated from the Chinese paradoxical expression *wei wu wei* which literally means to "do by not doing" or to "act by not acting." This approximately means growing in its own accord. Cf. Alan Watts, *The Way of Zen* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 16-19; and Co, *Philosophy*, 131.

²¹ Mair, *Wandering*, 217-18.

²² Ibid., 267.

²³ Co, *Philosophy*, 286.

²⁴ Merton, *Way of Chuang Tzu*, 11.

²⁵ Chen Guying, "Zhuang Zi and Nietzsche: Plays of Perspectives" in Graham Parkes, ed. *Nietzsche and Asian Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 118-22.

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²⁶ Cf. Co, *Philosophy*, 284-85.

²⁷ Mair, *Wandering*, 164.

²⁸ Fung Yu-lan, *Short History*, 105.

²⁹ Mair, *Wandering*, 49.

³⁰ Cf. Co, *Philosophy*, 286.

³¹ Mair, *Wandering*, 24.

³² The story about the death of Zhuang Zi's wife very well clarifies this point. When Master Hui visited his friend Master Chuang to condole with him, the former found Master Chuang singing. Surprised for such behavior, Master Hui asked for an explanation. But Master Chuang offered his realization that his wife's demise is in accordance with the natural transformation of things. See (18/2) in Mair, *Wandering*, 168-69.

³³ Zhuang Zi holds that what causes pain and suffering is being swept by emotion and failing to rise from it through understanding. Cf. Fung Yu-lan, *Short History*, 108.

³⁴ Mair, *Wandering*, 170.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁶ In the *Zhuang Zi*, prominent dialecticians like Hui Shih--- Zhuang Zi's friend--- and Kung Sun Lung were alluded to by Zhuang Zi.

³⁷ This characteristic of the *Dao* is found in the chapter of *Dao De Jing*. Cf. Chang Chung-yuan, *Tao: A New Way of Thinking* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975) cited in Co, *Philosophy*, 143.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

³⁹ Co, *Philosophy*, 284.

⁴⁰ Cf. Raphals, "Skeptical Strategies," 505.

⁴¹ I am alluding to the vivid explanation given by Co in the earlier part of this paper.

⁴² Cf. Siao-Fang Sun, "Theory of Truth," 139.

⁴³ Mair, *Wandering*, 7.

⁴⁴ Raphals distinguishes skepticism as a doctrine, a recommendation and a method and proffers that skepticism as a recommendation and method are found in the *Zhuang Zi*. See "Skeptical Strategies," 502-17.

⁴⁵ Mair, *Wandering*, 23.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

⁴⁷ *The New Book of Knowledge*, (1986) s.v. "Humor" by Arnold Lazarus.

⁴⁸ Nietzsche interestingly mocks this kind of attitude found in the intellectual environment during his time. See *The Gay Science*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 202; and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (New York: Tudor Publishing, 1931), 57.

⁴⁹ Cf. J. Goldstein and P. McGhee, *The Psychology of Humor* (New York: Academic Press, 1972), xiii.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, *Book of Knowledge*.

⁵¹ For an extensive account of various existing theories about humor see Goldstein and McGhee's *The Psychology of Humor*.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵³ H. Monro, *Arguments of Laughter* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963), 40.

⁵⁴ Goldstein and McGhee, *Psychology of Humor*, 16.

⁵⁵ Lin Yutang, *Importance of Living*, 39.

⁵⁶ Merton, *Way of Chuang Tzu*, 15.

⁵⁷ Cf. Orlando Ali Mandane Jr., "Freud and Nietzsche: On Wit, Humor and Laughter" *USC Graduate Journal* XIX (March 2003): 86-97.

⁵⁸ Mair, *Wandering*, 165.

⁵⁹ Cf. Co, *Philosophy*, 327.

⁶⁰ Sigmund Freud holds that one of the comic appeals is oftentimes achieved by directing the psychic focus and the play in words. See *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*. Translated by Dr. A.A. Brill (New York: Modern Library, 1938), 712-13.

⁶¹ Mair, *Wandering*, 276-77.

⁶² Lin Yutang, *Importance of Living*, 81.

⁶³ Mair, *Wandering*, 18-9.

⁶⁴ Raphals, "Skeptical Strategies," 508-9.

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⁶⁵ Freud, *Basic Writings*, 713.

⁶⁶ Theorists like N. Maier, G. Bateson, W. Fry and A. Koestler hold that humor is an interplay of intellectual processes. See Goldstein and McGhee, *Psychology of Humor*, 55.

⁶⁷ Lin Yutang, *Importance of Living*, 70.

⁶⁸ Mair, *Wandering*, 63-4.

⁶⁹ Scattered in the pages of the *Zhuang Zi* are tales using animals, plants and even body parts as characters being able to converse as if normal persons.

⁷⁰ Florencio L. Lagura, SVD, argues that anything which has the capacity to manifest its being can do so through language. See "Course Notes on Philosophy of Language" (University of San Carlos, 2001), 2.

⁷¹ Cf. Mair, *Wandering*, 15.

⁷² In the *Dao De Jing*, Lao Zi avoids the limits of language by expressing his philosophy through poetry. Since true knowledge is the understanding of the ineffable *Dao*, argumentation, for Lao Zi, is superficial. Hence, the necessity of avoiding superficial arguments. In some parts of the *Zhuang Zi*, poetic passages can also be found. In fact, Thomas Merton translated the *Zhuang Zi* using poetic verses. See Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (Great Britain: Burns and Oates, 1995).

⁷³ Mair, *Wandering*, xliii.

⁷⁴ Aristotle *Categories* 7 8b35 in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, edited by Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 23.

⁷⁵ See (18/2) in Mair, *Wandering*, 168-69.

⁷⁶ Cf. Footnote 69.

⁷⁷ Lin Yutang, *Importance of Living*, 77.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.