

Zhuangzi: Knowledge, Love, and the Criminal Justice System

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Zhuangzi raises several points of contention regarding knowledge. Within a single passage, he makes a point regarding relativism, scepticism, epistemology and metaphysics. While not explicitly addressed, he asks three questions: "What is the nature of knowledge?", "How can one acquire knowledge?" and "What are the societal implications of knowledge?". In this essay, I argue that Zhuangzi's text is a source of epistemological criticism, i.e. he argues that knowledge is structured in three categories: knowledge that exists independently from us, knowledge that exists within our perceptions, and knowledge that does not exist. These three categories of knowledge have interesting consequences, as demonstrated in regards to love, and the criminal justice system.

Due to the nature of Zhuangzi's writings, multiple interpretations can be derived from the same passages. This is because he makes several claims within the same passage. Furthermore, people disagree on his ultimate meaning. Zhuangzi has a distinct writing style; He introduces a concept, then examines it under the lens of relativism, then scepticism, and then makes either an epistemological or metaphysical claim. The tension lies in discerning whether he is making an epistemological challenge, a metaphysical one, or both. There are multiple interpretations of Zhuangzi's view on knowledge. A popular interpretation is of Zhuangzi: the relativist—while some things are perceived differently, they are ultimately the same. Another interpretation is of Zhuangzi: the scepticist, i.e. knowledge cannot be known for certain. There will always be an inherent unknowability of every piece of knowledge. I begin with his epistemological claims.

Epistemological claims

In Zhuangzi's passage on Huizi, the Hao River and fish (Watson, 1986), he challenges epistemological knowledge acquisition. He calls into doubt how one can know something for certain as we are limited by our own perceptions and existence. For example, we cannot know what fish enjoy because we are not fish. We do not have the experience of a fish, and therefore do not know. This doubt is transferable beyond fish. During the same discussion, Zhuangzi says he does not know what other people know, because he is not them. In the end, he claims he knows what fish likes because he is standing next to the Hao River. The justification of the conclusion is absurd, which makes us critically examine the passage. I argue this passage was written and designed as intended. Zhuangzi wanted us to question him, and question epistemology. His ultimate goal is to get readers to challenge their assumptions.

Extreme interpretations of epistemological scepticism are justified based on this passage—because we are not other people or other things, we cannot know what they are in any sense. Thus, we can only ever know things from our point of view. However, I argue this interpretation fails under certain conditions. We know what other people think and feel because they tell us so. Knowledge is acquired through communication, limited by experience, but grounded in trust. But, how can we ground knowledge in trust? Scepticism regarding trust is justified. A surface-level understanding of the real world leads us to the trust-epistemological argument. A deeper exploration leads us to extreme scepticism, with paradoxical implications. This will be explored in a later section.

Metaphysical claims

I argue Zhuangzi believes knowledge truly exists. He knows some things for absolute certainty. For example, he knows The Way exists (Watson, 1986). He also knows Great

Understanding and Little Understanding exist. More trivially, he knows words, thoughts and actions exist.

His extreme metaphysical challenge arises from his lack of clear grounding. In his passage on dreaming about a butterfly (Watson, 1986), he challenges our perceptions and what it can really tell us. During his dream, he fully experienced himself as a butterfly, doing what butterflies do. During his butterfly phase, he could not discern whether this was reality or not. He was limited by his perceptions. It did not matter whether his perceptions led him to a relativist and sceptical standpoint of meaning or not. He has cause for both epistemological and metaphysical doubt. Metaphysical, because he could not discern what reality was. Epistemological, because he had no tools that were sufficient in proving any metaphysical claim.

Then, he woke up (Watson, 1986). He transferred all these doubts about his butterfly-ness to his existence as a human. He found that all the doubts remained. Therefore, he questions how one can know anything for certain.

Relativism claims

An extreme relativistic reading of Zhuangzi may conclude that all things are relative, i.e. the value of something only exists within our perception of it. "Right" and "Wrong" only have the value we assign them to. There is no value which is external to our perception. This line of reasoning extends to all things. The generalisation of this is to label things into two categories: "This" or "That".

However, I am unconvinced by this extreme interpretation as it can be challenged. There are things of value which are independent of our perceptions. In his passage on roads (Watson, 1986), he makes both a scepticist and relativist challenge, which leads to an epistemological and metaphysical claim. We take it for granted that roads exist. However, Zhuangzi challenges this, asking us what grounds our knowledge of the existence of roads.

He says roads are roads because we call them roads. The naming of things brings about their thing-ness. This means the thing-ness is arbitrary. The question is, is something inherently meaningless or non-existent when said thing is arbitrary? The concept of "road" is an example of a thing coming into existence because of its relation with other things. A thing becomes a thing by definition, designation and function. A road is a road because we designate certain bits of the ground as roads, and then use it for transportation, i.e. for cars, pedestrians and cyclists. While it is relative, it is not to say roads do not exist. They do. We are simply unable to define its essential properties definitively.

While the categories are arbitrary, the existence of things in the categories does exist. Just because the category is arbitrary, it does not mean the thing in a said category does not exist. The epistemological tension is in how one can discern what a thing is, i.e. how can we know a road is a road when we label it as such?

Scepticism claims

Scepticism is best understood from its metaphysical or epistemological claims, which have been explored above. The extreme interpretations lead one to paradoxical conclusions. If knowledge does not exist, then what is the thing we call knowledge? If Daoism does not exist, then what is Zhuangzi talking about? If we call into question our own existence through his metaphysical scepticism, how do we explain what we think and feel? How do we explain what we call life?

Given that these questions are unanswerable, I am not convinced that Zhuangzi's extreme interpretations are what he intends us to follow. I argue that we should use these tools within reason. To reach the level of scepticism is viable, but only in order to reach an understanding of The Way, and not to enter a metaphysical existential crisis. This interpretation also allows us to see something that is unknowable, thus proving unknowable knowledge exists.

Consequences: The abuse of tools

Zhuangzi's method of questioning can be extended to anything. This includes the utility and existence of the tools themselves. Paradoxical implications arise from this line of inquiry. If we have grounds to be sceptical of the knowledge of everything, we should be sceptical of our scepticism. This causes an infinite regression of scepticism; paradoxical conclusions in meta-analysis. There is no solution to this regression. Regardless, I will proceed in my analysis with Zhuangzi's view of knowledge in aspects of society.

Society

I argue that following Zhuangzi's extreme interpretations of knowledge, a society of anarchy necessarily arises. It adheres to wuwei. It allows anyone to do anything with minimal interference. There is no rule of law, as the rule of law is derived from consensus. As extreme interpretations of Zhuangzi's knowledge will question everything, it will not support the codification of laws, moral values, or anything. Societal structure and its infrastructure are fundamentally incompatible. What does this mean for love and the criminal justice system?

Tangentially, I argue that love is compatible with Zhuangzi's view of knowledge, regardless of which interpretation one takes. I also argue that the Criminal Justice System is incompatible with extreme interpretations, while being compatible under moderate takes.

Love

"Love at first sight" is a common adage. It also adheres to The Way because it is ziran. Falling in love through sight requires no rational thinking. The bare minimum necessary knowledge one must possess in order to fall in love at first sight is to know the other exists. That is done through perceiving the other. One does not need to know the other's social status, employment, hobbies, parents, character, or ethics — nothing of substance. Love can begin and be sustained through pure emotion. Emotion does not necessitate knowledge. Thus, love does not require possession of knowledge. While a majority of people

rationalise liking someone, and consider circumstances and desires justification for liking someone, strictly speaking, it is not necessary for love to occur.

Furthermore, if one wishes to kiss their partner, one does not need to think. One does not need to plan, or worry about what is the best kiss. One does not need to possess the knowledge of courting and kissing. One merely requires the ability to do so.

Love is the rare instance in everyday life where ziran and wuwei can be discovered and experienced without studying or philosophising. It is also compatible with extreme interpretations of Zhuangzi's knowledge. Although, such a love that arises under these circumstances is fundamentally superficial—one does not love the person because or despite of one's character, ethics, or who they are.

Criminal justice system

Under an extreme interpretation of Zhuangzi, there can be no criminal justice system. After all, no one can know anything for certain, and as we need certainty to give out rulings, the system cannot function and thus should not exist. This also means ethical relativism is true and ethical absolutism is false.

Thus, when someone commits a crime under Zhuangzi's society, nothing happens as no crimes can occur. This allows everyone to practise wuwei as no action is justified and necessitated. However, ethical relativism does not eliminate conflicts, be they interpersonal or international. In this case, it is unclear what should be done in accordance with The Way. Intellectually, under extreme scepticism, people can debate what constitutes wuwei to no end, while "crime" goes rampant and unimpeded.

This is not to say Zhuangzi's views should be isolated in hypothetical situations. Bringing it to the modern criminal justice system, it is a valid problem — given that no one is purely objective, who ought to arbitrate rulings (Passage on "Suppose you and I have had an argument"; Watson, 1986)? The extreme interpretation says no one is objective, and that

arguments can only be settled through objective rulings. However, given that objectivism does not exist (as derived from relativism), what can be done?

Under this interpretation, judges are forced by time or societal pressure to make a ruling despite being partial. In this case, action arises despite scepticism. Thus, Zhuangzi's extreme interpretations could be compatible with contemporary systems, albeit solely within philosophical dilemmas.

Conclusion

I argue Zhuangzi makes three key claims in his thoughts: (1) knowledge ultimately exists, (2) some things we know are relative in nature and (3) some things we ought to be sceptical of. Based on Zhuangzi's views, I argue there are different types of knowledge:

1. Knowledge that exists independently from us
 - 1.1. Knowable within our abilities
 - 1.2. Unknowable within our abilities
2. Knowledge that exists within our perceptions
 - 2.1. e.g. words, roads, categories
3. Knowledge that does not exist

I argue we do not have the necessary information required to discern Zhuangzi's philosophical positions. The two intended outcomes of his writing were to (1.) challenge the conventions of his time and (2.) to push the boundaries and ways of our thinking. As Zhuangzi never directly addressed his personal views, it is impossible to discern what his position is. It goes against the spirit of Zhuangzi's teachings to discover and assign meaning where there is none. What he does is challenge our understanding of reality by pointing out the hidden assumptions we hold. Knowledge will forever be a subject of inquiry, regardless of the circumstances and environments that intellectual discourse inhabits. As knowledge is the basis for intellectual discourse, it must be scrutinised in all aspects.

We may not know what knowledge is, nor how we can acquire knowledge, but we will act regardless of the information and beliefs we have. We live with scepticism and relativism. We live on some level of The Way whether we intend to or not.

References

Zhuangzi (1968). *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (Watson, B., Trans.). New York: Columbia University Press.