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Death in the *Zhuangzi*: Themes, Arguments and Interpretations

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Abstract. This paper distinguishes three major themes in the philosophy of death of the Zhuangzi. It shows that, while these themes are often intertwined in the text, they offer different outlooks on the nature of death and, correspondingly, different arguments about the significance of death and strategies for coping with death. The first sees death as a natural and inevitable part of the process of cosmic transformation that we have to accept or embrace. The second emphasizes the unity, continuity and interdependence of life and death, and advises us to appreciate death from this holistic perspective. The last strand of thought challenges our ability to know about death's nature and value. In addition, the paper reviews a few competing interpretations of the Zhuangzi in recent Anglophone literature and suggests that, first, they can be seen as attempts to articulate and develop different themes in the text, and second, they fail to offer a strong rational ground for the Zhuangist attitudes toward death, in part because they all rely on critical assumptions that are questionable or at least insufficiently defended.

1. Introduction

Death is one of the most important and intriguing subjects in the *Zhuangzi*. This paper identifies and distinguishes three major themes in the Zhuangist philosophy of death. It aims to show that, while these themes are often intertwined in the text, they offer different outlooks on death and, correspondingly, different arguments about the significance of death and strategies for coping with it. To a first approximation: the first outlook implies that we should accept and embrace death as a natural and inevitable part of cosmic transformation. The second focuses on the unity, continuity and interdependence of life and death, and advises us to appreciate the value of death from this holistic perspective. The last one is characteristic of Zhuangzi at his more skeptical moments: it challenges our ability to know whether death is really bad or good, and, for that matter, whether the distinction between life and death can be meaningfully drawn in the first place. For convenience, I will label these themes the *cosmic theme*, the *holistic theme*, and the *skeptical theme*, respectively.[1]

[1] There is arguably a fourth strand in the text that is concerned with nurturing life and living out one's natural span of years. For discussion of this strand in connection with others, see Berkson (2011) and Schwitzgeble (2018). While this is an important thread in the text, I will not discuss it here, partly for the interest of space, and partly because I think it is more about the ideal way of life (e.g., a simple, spontaneous, and natural life) than the value of life/death *per se*.

In the next three sections, I will explore these themes in detail. In each section, I first use key concepts and passages from the text to illustrate a particular theme, then extrapolate from them a general *view* of death (e.g., the cosmic *view*), and lastly turn to recent Anglophone literature on the *Zhuangzi* and examine (what I take to be) different ways to elucidate, develop and defend that view, which I will refer to as different *interpretations* or *versions* of the view. The final section briefly discusses the commonalities and differences between these strands of thought. I argue that, while there clearly are some tensions between the first two strands and the last, they are *not* inconsistent. I conclude with tentative suggestions on how to reconcile the apparent tensions.

2. The Cosmic View

One of the most salient features of Zhuangzi's treatment of death[2] is that death is almost always placed in the larger context of changes and transformations in nature. In the text, life and death are frequently compared to natural phenomena such as day and night and the four seasons. The implication is that life and death, ultimately, are just natural and non-mysterious phenomena that we have to come to terms with. The feelings we commonly undergo when we are confronted with death (either our own death or the death of a loved one), such as dread, sadness, anxiety, grief, etc., are just the result of losing sight of this larger perspective.

Specifically, what I will call *the cosmic view* of death has two components, each of which is commonly associated with a cluster of concepts. First, concepts such as regularity (*chang* 常), heaven/nature (*tian* 天), and fate (*ming* 命) point to the fact that death is an integral part of nature, and as such it is beyond our control:

> Life and death are fated, and that they come with the regularity of day and night is of Heaven—that which humans can do nothing about, simply the way things are. (6/20-21; Ziporyn, 2020, p.55)[3]

Second, notions like change (*bian* 變) and transformation (*hua* 化) situate life and death in the endless changes of the cosmos. As Steven Coutinho puts it: "Living and dying are merely manifestations of cycles of processes that characterize the natural world in general and the integration, replication, and dissolution of organic entities in the biosphere in particular."(2013, p.87) Plants grow out of the soil and eventually dissolve to it. Likewise, we spring into existence (*sheng* 生) from the natural world, and

[2] For convenience, I will use Zhuangzi and the *Zhuangzi* interchangeably, but it is worth keeping in mind that the text is the work of multiple authors and compiled over many decades. The views that I attribute to Zhuangzi is based on the *Inner Chapters* (traditionally associated with the historical Zhuangzi) and related passages in the *Outer Chapters* (esp. chapters 18-22, which are associated with the "school of Zhuangzi". See Graham (2001)).

[3] Citations of the *Zhuangzi* follow the chapter/line number format of the Harvard–Yenching *Zhuangzi Yinde*. Except where specified, I use Brook Ziporyn's translation (Ziporyn 2020) throughout the paper.

return (*gui* 歸) to it when we die.[4] What underlie these processes, ultimately, is the transformation of the vital energy (*qi* 氣): life is the accumulation of *qi*, and death its dispersion (22/11).[5]

These two aspects of the cosmic view are closely related, as shown in the famous story about Zhuangzi's reaction to the death of his wife. When she passed way, Zhuangzi initially felt grief like any other, but then he realized that:

> …previously, before she was born, there was no life there. Not only no life: no physical form. Not only no physical form: not even energy. Then in the course of some heedless mingling mishmash a change occurred and there was energy, and then this energy changed and there was a physical form, and then this form changed and there was life. Now there has been another change and she is dead. This is how she participates in the making of the spring and the autumn, of the winter and the summer. For the moment a human lies stiffened here, slumbering in this enormous house. And yet there I was getting all weepy, even going on to wail over her. Even to myself I looked like someone without any understanding of fate. So I stopped." (18/16-19; Ziporyn, 2020, p.145-146)

In short, death is natural and inevitable precisely *because* it is part of the ceaseless transformation of the cosmos that is beyond our control. Moreover, since it is natural and inevitable, the text recommends that we accept the loss of a loved one as fate and refrain from (prolonged) grief. In a similar vein, the text speaks favorably of an ideal response to one's own life and death: one rests content in the time of life and follows along with the flow when death arrives, so that neither joy nor sorrow enters one's heart (3/18; 6/52).

However, it is not clear how these responses and attitudes follow from the cosmic view itself. To see this, note that the cosmic view is not too far from the modern naturalist conception of the world that many of us endorse: humans are part of the material world, constituted by cells, molecules and atoms, and there is no immortal soul, life after death, or the like. However, we hardly feel that this makes it inappropriate to lament the loss of a friend, nor do we think it is a mistake to be concerned with or troubled by our own death. Natural things can be awful, after all: while some events are perfectly natural and even inevitable (earthquake, tsunami, pandemic, mass extinction, etc.), it still seems reasonable to hold that (1) they are terribly unfortunate and tragic, and (2) fear, dread, anxiety, sadness, etc., *are* proper responses to them, at least some of the times.

To make this point clearer, it may be helpful to distinguish two types of cosmic view: the *objective* cosmic view and the *immersive* cosmic view, as I will call them. When one adopts the *objective* cosmic view, one sees death from the impersonal and naturalist perspective of an *observer*. From this perspective, death is a perfectly natural phenomenon, and is, ultimately, insignificant *to the cosmos*. Importantly, this view is noncommittal to the (dis)value of death *to us*. The *immersive* cosmic view, by

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[4] Jung H. Lee labels this view "cosmic materialism" (114). He suggests that the transformation at issue is fundamentally a material process which only preserves material, but not personal or psychological, continuity. In other words, the transformation of death does not lead to reincarnation or rebirth. I think this is a plausible reading of the passages expressing the cosmic theme. However, there are also other themes, to be discussed below, that flirt with the *possibility* that death is a great awakening such that the dead will regrets their attachment to life.

[5] For a clear exposition of this conception of death in the cultural and intellectual context of early China, see (Lee, 2014, Chapter 8)

contrast, goes beyond the mere recognition of our place in the cosmos, and takes on a more engaged stance of *affirming* and *embracing* the cosmic states and processes. In adopting this view, one not only *acknowledge*s that one is part of the natural world, but also in some sense *identifies with* it and becomes *attuned to* the changes and transformations unfolding in it. Therefore, the immersive cosmic view is not a neutral representation of the world, but is essentially evaluative, and perhaps also existential, aesthetic and religious.

The immersive cosmic view, I believe, is closer to the spirit of the passages expounding the cosmic theme, so let me elaborate a bit. Broadly speaking, we can identify three dimensions of this view. First and foremost, the view is *evaluative*: changes and transformations in the natural world are manifestations of the great Way or *Dao*, and as such they are value-laden and often, if not always, constitute the context against which we can and should follow along (*shun* 順). Relatedly, it has an *attitudinal* dimension, central to which is an active *embracing* of the natural world, including all of its changes and alterations, as whole. This in turn leads to a sense of *joining* (*ru* 入) the oneness of the world (6/82). This sense of joining is also related to other important ideals of the *Zhuangzi*, such as forgetting (*wang* 忘) and wandering (*you* 遊): forgetting one's self, one's preferences, the conventional norms, and so on, and eventually identifying with "the Great Thoroughfare"(6/92-93)[6], which can be understood as a state where all rigid distinctions about good and bad, gain and loss, etc., are abolished.[7] A subject in such a state is able to accept and wander through whatever circumstances she finds herself in with admirable equanimity and ease.

The immersive cosmic view also seems to have an *ontological* dimension, although its exact content is harder to pin down. For some commentators, the text invites a dramatic reconceptualization of the self: by immersing ourselves in the cosmic processes, we become, in some sense, identical with the cosmos. For example, A.C. Graham says "

> …in grasping the Way one's viewpoint shifts from 'I shall no longer exist' to something like 'In losing selfhood I shall remain what at bottom I always was*, identical with everything conscious or nonconscious in the universe*'. [From this viewpoint] …the extinction of self does not matter since at bottom *I am everything and have neither beginning nor end*" (Graham, 2001, p.23; my emphasis)

However, not all interpreters think that a radical metaphysics of the self is required by the text. David Wong suggests that one can accept the cosmic perspective and identify with the world as a whole, *without* abandoning the human perspective, including basic human sensibilities:

> As this infinitesimally small part, it sorrows and grieves over this extinction, but through its intellect and imaginative capacities for identification with the whole, it can come to embrace the ceaseless change and whole as a home that enfolds the small. (Wong, 2006, p.215)[8]

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[6] This is Watson's translation of *da tong* 大通 (Watson 2013). Following Xi Dong 奚侗 and referring to a passage in the *Huainanzi* 淮南子, Ziporyn reads the phrase as *hua tong* 化通 ("Transforming Openness") (Ziporyn, 2020, p.62). I agree with Wang Shumin 王叔岷 that this rendering is unwarranted (Wang, 2007, p.268).

[7] This kind of state may be achieved through spiritual practices such as "heart-fasting" (*xin zhai* 心齋) and "sitting and forgetting" (*zuo wang* 坐忘). It is also perhaps related to Daoist mysticism more broadly (Roth 1999). Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this potential connection.

[8] For a similar approach, see Tiwald (2015).

I think both readings face important challenges. For Graham's reading, the main challenge is how the radical metaphysics of personal identity can be plausibly spelled out and defended. Moreover, the reading seems to imply that, paradoxically, while death *is* a transformation, it does *not* fundamentally change what we are—so in a sense we do not *really* die, or at least do not cease to exist when we die. For Wong's interpretation, the question is how these "dual perspectives" mesh together and which, if any, should assume priority in a given situation, especially when they are in conflict.

The deeper challenge for the immersive cosmic view, however, is its justification. We have seen that even though the *objective* cosmic view is plausible, it does not entail the immersive cosmic view. In particular, it does not imply that we should embrace all the changes in the world and go along with them unperturbed.[9] While the vision of our lives as parts of the process of cosmic transformation *may* bring about a deep appreciation of nature, a sense of belonging to something larger than ourselves, even reverence and awe, it does not imply that every transformation in nature is valuable or is to be welcomed. Moreover, that vision itself is value-neutral and perfectly compatible with nihilism, the view that *nothing*, our lives included, has any real significance.[10] I suspect that the Zhuangist move from the objective view to the immersive view relies on a *metaethical* assumption that is unproblematic for early Daoists but is alien to contemporary naturalists, but a thorough discussion of that assumption has to wait for another occasion.[11]

3. The Holistic View

The cosmic theme in the *Zhuangzi* is concerned with our place in the cosmos. A closely related theme in the text, which I call *the holistic theme*, emphasizes the *continuity, unity* and *interdependence* of life and death: e.g., life and death "follow one another"(22/11), "constitute a single body"(6/46), and they are, ultimately, unified by the vital energy (22/13). Correspondingly, the basic tenet of *the holistic view* of death is that, since life and death are interdependent, their respective values can only be assessed holistically, rather than in isolation. We all value life, but the value of life is derived from its relation to death and, more broadly, from its place in the larger context where life and death are situated, e.g., the world as a whole. Therefore, given its role in and contribution to the whole, death is not merely to be *accepted* (as natural and inevitable), but is to be properly *appreciated* and even *celebrated*.

These ideas are found throughout the text and often intertwined with the cosmic theme. Indeed, analogizing life and death with day and night highlights the fact that they are continuous stages of the

[9] Wong explicitly says that the Zhuangist acceptance and embracement of cosmic change and transformation can*not* be induced through rational argument, but through imagination. (Wong, 2006, p.215)

[10] See Rosenberg (2011).

[11] Very roughly put, the assumption is twofold: (1) Dao is the *ultimate* and *only* source of value, and (2) Dao is constituted by the patterns or courses of transformations in the cosmos. This implies that the (dis)value of death depends entirely on its place in the natural transformations. By contrast, to contemporary naturalists, while death is a natural state or process, it is not *just* that. It is also, in most ordinary cases, the deprivation of valuable experiences and opportunities, an end of cherished relationships, a loss of what one has achieved or invested in one's lifetime, etc. It is these things, not the place of death in nature, that are (more) relevant to how we evaluate and respond to the death of particular individuals.

same process. Transformation itself is, or presupposes, a form of continuity. The story of the four friends, Masters Si, Yu, Yu, Lai, gives the most vivid expression of these sentiments:

> Who can see nothingness as his own head, life as his own spine, and death as his own backside? Who knows the single body formed by life and death, existence and nonexistence? I will be his friend!" (6/46; Ziporyn, 2020, p.58)

> [T]he Great Clump burdens me with a physical form, labors me with life, eases me with old age, and rests me with death. What makes my life good is what makes my death good; that I consider my life good is what makes me consider my death good. (6/57-58; Ziporyn, 2020, p.59)

The first passage stresses the continuity and unity of life and death. The second passage goes further to claim that what makes life valuable also makes death valuable, and provocatively suggests that death, since it relieves us from the hassles and burdens in life, may even be superior to life.[12]

Different interpretations of these passages lead to different *versions* of the holistic view. On one end of the spectrum, the holistic view is a natural extension of the cosmic view; on the other end, it can be developed in ways that are independent of the places of life and death in the cosmos. Roger Ames' interpretation is an example of the first type of interpretation (Ames, 1998). According to Ames, every process of transformation is at once "a living and a dying", and it is a mistake to "abstract away the dying from this continuing process as 'death' and to consider the emerging aspect independent of it as 'life'"(Ames, 1998, p.58) The idea seems to be that, since life and death are essential and inseparable contributors to the process of transformation, it is arbitrary to privilege one and condemn the other. Instead, they must be appreciated holistically and in a similar way.[13]

This version of the holistic view seems to assume that if two things are mutually dependent, in the sense that one is impossible without the other, their values are on a par. However, it is not clear how this assumption is justified. *Conceptually*, it is perfectly consistent for something to be good in one essential respect and bad in another. In practice, many things in life are just like that: giving birth to and raising a child, personal growth, a love-hate relationship, etc. We can and do differentiate the good (or pleasant) from bad (or painful) parts of these events, and even though the good parts might be impossible without the bad parts, we don't necessarily deem their values to be equivalent. Furthermore, *even if* we grant that life and death are, in some sense, equally important parts of natural transformation, the best we can infer from this is just that life and death are equally valuable *qua constituents of transformation*—it does not follow that they are equally valuable *all things considered*.[14]

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[12] In the next story, Confucius claims that the sages "look upon life as a dangling wart or swollen pimple, and on death as its dropping off, its bursting and draining." (6/68; Ziporyn, 2020, p.60)

[13] See also Berkson (2011, p.199).

[14]Unless we assume that (1) the *only* source of something's value is the larger process it belongs to, and (2) the *only* larger process that life and death belong to is the process of natural transformation. *Even if* we grant some version of value holism and (1), (2) is an additional and implausibly strong assumption. An objector can allow that one's life and death are equal aspects of transformation, but they will deny that they are *just* that, for someone's life may contribute to *other* valuable processes (e.g., the advancement of humanity) in ways that her death does not. (For a parallel assumption of the immersive cosmic view and the problem it faces, see footnote 10.) Chris Fraser makes explicit a similar assumption underlying his version of the holistic view: "whatever it is that makes my life good emerges from the same forces and processes of formation and transformation that eventually bring about my death…the value of my life derives from its place in the

Amy Olberding's interpretation, by contrast, focuses less on ontology but more on human *experience* (Olberding, 2007). The value of death does not derive from its place in natural changes and transformations, but from its role in making possible our experiences of pleasure and joy. Specifically, we cannot experience satisfactions, pleasures and joys in life unless we acknowledge the cost or constraint that death imposes on us. Hence, death is both a value and disvalue: it is valuable as a *necessary* condition for enjoying (certain) goods, but unless we *acknowledge* that the death of, say, a friend, is a genuine *disvalue*, we cannot fully enjoy their presence and companion. She writes:

> *Death globally sustains our capacity for pleasure but some deaths can and will occasion pain*. To acknowledge that I have a stake in what transpires is to conceive Zhuangzi's response to his wife's death as issuing from a local perspective in which natural impulse to sorrow is embraced as an indication of participation in processes that, while they work generally to my benefit and produce joy, come at occasional personal cost. *These costs, moreover, must be paid: I must feel them if I am to feel their corresponding joys.*"(Olberding, 2007, p.356; my emphasis)

A somewhat unorthodox implication of this interpretation is that the four friends' response to death is in fact deeply problematic, precisely because they do *not* seem to register the unfavorable nature of death: for them, the impending death of their friend is an occasion for wonder and celebration rather than sorrow or fear. Hence, Olberding suggests that the story is better read as "a kind of shock pedagogy aimed at unseating complacent acceptance of grief"(2007, p.353, fn.16), as opposed to a depiction of the sagely models we should aspire to.[15]

Crucially, this interpretation claims or assumes that our "capacity for pleasure" in life is *impossible* without awareness of our own mortality and finitude. This is a *very* strong empirical assumption. To support this assumption, Olberding draws on Bernard Williams' and Martha Nussbaum's works on immortality (Williams 1973; Nussbaum 1994). However, it is not clear to me that, *even if* these authors are correct, *the Zhuangzi* actually admits such a reading. Moreover, the assumption itself seems rather speculative[16]: for one thing, not all pleasures in life depend on the acknowledgement of the disvalue of death (otherwise young children cannot experience pleasure); for another, even if *some* limit is necessary for enjoying *some* goods in life, it is far from clear that the limit *has to be* death.[17]

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holistic course of natural creation and transformation, and death has a parallel place in that course." (Fraser, 2013, p.10) However, like Wong, he notes that this view "rests primarily on an ethical or aesthetic attitude—or perhaps even a religious attitude—rather than rational persuasion."(p.11) So we still lack a complete justification for the holistic view.

[15] Note that, if her interpretation is correct, the four friends not only fall as an ideal model of coping with death, but also as a model of *friendship*, since acknowledging the disvalue of death is, according to her, is a *necessary* condition for experiencing the goods of friendship.

[16] For criticisms of the Williams-Nussbaum argument, see Fischer (1994) and Chappell (2009).

[17] On this point, Olberding says,

> "Death provisions us with limits within a host of goods—for example, long-lived marriages and friendships—become possible, but it does so only where the fragility of these joys is acknowledged. The trepidation we experience in apprehension of this fragility is part of these joys." (Olberding, 2007, p.357-358)

However, many things unrelated to death can make our relationships fragile and ourselves vulnerable. Love and friendship may come to an end as a result of personal growth and circumstantial changes. If a husband fears that his wife will leave him one day, knowing that they are both immortals will hardly provide any relief.

4. The Skeptical View

In the *Inner Chapters*, we also find passages that directly challenge our knowledge of death and its value. In chapter 2, the chapter most concerned with knowledge, the fictional character Changwu Zi says:

> How then do I know that delighting in life is not a delusion? How do I know that in hating death I am not like an orphan who left home in youth and no longer knows the way back? Lady Li was a daughter of the border guard of Ai. When she was first captured and brought to Qin, she wept until tears drenched her collar. But when she got to the palace, sharing the king's luxurious bed, and feasting on the finest meats, she regretted her tears. How do I know that the dead don't regret the way they used to cling to life? 'If you dream of drinking wine, in the morning you will weep. If you dream of weeping, in the morning you will go out hunting.' While dreaming you don't know it's a dream. You might even interpret a dream in your dream—and then you wake up and realize it was all a dream. Perhaps a great awakening would reveal all of this to be a vast dream. And yet the foolish imagine they are already awake—how clearly and certainly they understand it all! (2/78-83; Ziporyn, 2020, p.20)

While this passage may *seem* like a Cartesian dream argument that invokes the possibility that we are dreaming to challenge the common perception of death, the underlying concern follows naturally from some distinctive Zhuangist themes, such as cosmic change and transformation.[18] Things are always in a flux—this much is rarely in doubt. What is questionable is whether there is a nonarbitrary way to pick out and privilege a particular episode in the continuous changes. Specifically, our epistemic limitation is twofold: first, the conceptual tool we use to make these selections, i.e., language, is necessarily artificial and perspective-dependent; second, our lives only make up a tiny part of the natural processes of the cosmos, and we simply do not have the epistemic resource needed to be certain of our judgements about the nature and value of death. The first limitation is the main target of Zhuangzi's brand of skepticism[19]; the second limitation is discussed in the story of Mengsun Cai (6/75-82). Mengsun is known as an exemplary mourner, although he shows no signs of sorrow when his mother died. Confucius comments:

> His non-knowing applies equally to what went before and what is yet to come. Having already transformed into some particular being, he takes it as no more than a waiting for the next unknown transformation, nothing more. For indeed, how could someone still in the midst of a transformation know anything about what he will be when done with this transformation, about what he has not yet transformed into? …Even to think I am being specifically here right now with specifically you; is it just that we have not yet begun to awaken from this dream? (6/77-79; Ziporyn, 2020, p.61)

While these skeptical passages have been discussed by many scholars[20], Zhuangzi's overall approach to death is rarely described as skeptical. This is unsurprising, for it is hard to see how the skeptical view, which challenges our knowledge of death and its value, can be the basis of the positive attitudes

[18] As noted by Lee (2014, p.115-116)
[19] See Ivanhoe (1993), Graham (2001), Fraser (2009), among others.
[20] See, for example, Berkson(2011) and Schwitzgeble (2018).

toward death that the text seems to endorse, such as equanimity and ease. Relatedly, it is also hard to see how the skeptical view coheres with the much more common and affirmative claims about death in the text: despite their differences, the cosmic and the holistic views both seem to presuppose that there *is* a correct understanding of death, and once we attain that understanding, we can accept and embrace death.

My recent proposal, in which the skeptical theme figures prominently, is in part an attempt to address these questions (Liu, 2020).[21] According to the proposal, Zhuangzi's skepticism is modest in that it only challenges our ability to know the *absolute* and *ultimate* truth about the world and our place in it.[22] This modest skepticism leaves plenty of room for our local and provisional judgements to be appropriate, at least in the relevant contexts. The positive side of this skepticism is that, while there are many different evaluative perspectives on death, what matters is not *which* perspective is correct, but "*how* one takes on a perspective and switches between different perspectives" (Liu, 2020, p.201). Therefore:

> …when he draws our attention to the place of death in the ceaseless changes of the universe, Zhuangzi is not asserting that this is *the* correct view of death or that we *should* accept death and loss with indifference. Instead, he is trying to get us to appreciate a broadened vision that is, when we reflect on it, as compelling as (if not more) than our conventional view of death. Our problem is not that we fail to appreciate the *ultimate* (in)significance of death or that we do not *really* know whether it is good or bad; rather, it is that…we are preoccupied with a natural but very narrow perspective, to which we adhere closely and emotionally, such that we become blind to alternative ways of understanding death and its relation to life. (Liu, 2020, p.201-202)

On this reading, sometimes it *is* appropriate to view the death of a loved one as a terrible loss. The problem arises when we take this to be the *uniquely correct* way to look at it. For example, as we lament the loss, it is too easy to become emotionally obsessed with the thought that *we* have lost them. Consequently, we lose sight of the larger picture and value them only in light of what *we* want or need, rather than in their own right. The Zhuangist skepticism, thus understood, is constructive in that it exposes our bias and dogmatism, enables us to appreciate alternative perspectives, and makes us more open-minded, flexible and adaptive. Importantly, it does not urge us to abandon all of our ordinary values and beliefs, e.g., that the death of a love one is bad; rather, it asks us to step back and view our relationship with an open mind. Then we can shift our perspective and discover new ways to continue and enrich the relationship, to value the deceased *in their own right*, and "to *transform* our relationship after they are gone: pursuing our common interest, carrying on the deceased's wishes, promoting our shared values, and so on." (Liu, 2020, p.202) In short: skepticism paves the way for adaptiveness and flexibility, which in turn help us to confront death with resilience and equanimity.

This proposal departs from the traditional interpretations in that it does not prioritize the global perspective, e.g., the view of nature/heaven. As it stands, however, it is incomplete. A fundamental problem is that, while an open, adaptive and flexible approach to death may be *compatible with* skepticism about death, it is not required or implied by it. Nor do resilience and equanimity seem to be the most natural psychological outcomes of the skeptical attitude. Indeed, for many people, the lack of certainty about death and what it means will bring about bewilderment, confusion, and *more*,

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[21] The primary focus of that paper, however, is *metaphilosophica*l skepticism rather than skepticism about death.
[22] See also Fraser (2009).

rather than less, anxiety and fear. In other words, the connection between the skeptical attitude and the state of mind characterized by adaptiveness and equanimity is far from obvious. Hence, this version of the skeptical view, like the versions of the immersive cosmic view and the holistic view reviewed above, faces a justificatory or explanatory gap that should be bridged before it can claim to be not only a plausible reading of the *Zhuangzi* but also an independently defensible philosophy of death.

5. Taking Stock

In summary: the (immersive) cosmic view emphasizes the aspects of death that are most salient from the standpoint of the cosmos, i.e., it is an integral and inevitable part of the ceaseless process of cosmic transformation, and invites us to accept, embrace and identify with the process; the holistic view reveals the unity, continuity, and interdependence of life and death, and ask us to appreciate the value of death holistically; the skeptical view exposes our parochialism and dogmatism, and challenges us to become more open-minded, flexible and creative in dealing with life and death.

Despite their differences, they are all *practically* oriented approaches with a common goal: they start by highlighting certain key features of death (or, in the case of the skeptical view, by noting that we do not know what death really is), and, on the basis of these observations, seek to cultivate a set of mental states and dispositions that can help us better cope with death: equanimity, freedom from anxiety and disturbance, the ability to go along with changes in life with ease and joy, etc. However, their recommended paths to this goal, if my analysis above is correct, are subtly but importantly different: depending on how death is conceived, the goal is to be achieved through either acceptance and identification (the *immersive* cosmic view), holistic appreciation (the holistic view), or openness and adaptability (the skeptical view).

An important question arises at this point: are these viewpoints consistent? We have seen that the holistic view, at least on some interpretations, appears to be a natural extension of the cosmic view, and both recommend appreciating the roles of and relation between life and death from a larger, global perspective, which might be called the perspective of heaven, nature, or the *Dao*. On the other hand, however, they do not sit easily with the skeptical view, which deliberately refrains from asserting what death is or if it is genuinely good or bad.

Since it is impossible to fully address this question here, I will conclude with some tentative remarks and suggestions. First of all, given the heterogeneous nature of the *Zhuangzi*, it is perhaps not surprising to find conflicting views in the text. Furthermore, Zhuangzi and his followers might have interesting philosophical or metaphilosophical reasons for not being committed to a particular viewpoint, and, therefore, the inconsistency may be a feature, not a bug, of Zhuangist philosophy.[23] That said, on the present issue I think there are at least two strategies of reconciliation that are worth exploring. First, we can mitigate the force of the skeptical view by construing it as merely therapeutic or pedagogical, rather than doctrinal: it only aims to challenge our thinking and induce a certain mental state, such as open-mindedness and flexibility, rather than to *establish* a skeptical thesis about the limitation of our knowledge.[24] Then we can consistently maintain that the cosmic/holistic view is a

[23] See Schwitzgebel (2018) and Liu (2020) for discussions of such reasons. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this possibility.

[24] For this interpretation of Zhuangzi's skepticism, see Ivanhoe (1993), Kjellberg (1994) and Van Norden (1996). For criticisms, see Wong (2005) and Fraser (2009).

truthful representation of the world as it is. Conversely, we can mitigate the force of cosmic and holistic views, by treating their depictions of death as plausible and attractive perspectives on the way things *appear to be*, rather than as truth about the way things *really are*. These views may or may not reflect the ultimate truth of the matter—we cannot be sure either way (thus modest skepticism). What matters, however, is they offer an appealing and useful alternative that is as legitimate as, and sometimes more useful than, the ordinary view that death is bad and should be resisted as long as possible.[25] I think both strategies are promising, but more work is needed to flesh them out. This kind of work, I believe, will not only be essential for developing a comprehensive and attractive Zhuangist philosophy of death but will also contribute greatly to the more general task of making sense of different, and sometimes conflicting, strands of ideas that one finds in *the Zhuangzi*.

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[25] For an exploration of this strategy, see Liu (2020).

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