

Zhuangzi and Plato: Language – World – Language

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Abstract

At the beginning of the 20th century language had become the focal point of Western philosophy, displacing epistemology and metaphysics, with which philosophy had traditionally dealt. Even as the philosophy of language has begun to lose its privileged status in the last few decades, it still remains a substantial branch of Western and world philosophy. However, a closer look at the early days of world philosophy reveals that the study of language was integral to philosophical investigations, and that language occupied a prominent place – whether explicitly or implicitly – in establishing comprehensive philosophical systems. Zhuangzi and Plato represent early stages in the evolution of world philosophy and, as is well-known, contributed, to a great extent, to the development of the Chinese and Western philosophy. These two philosophers come from two very different cultural contexts and differ in their philosophical orientation and views – which seem to stand in opposition, and, yet, for both language played a major role in the construction of their philosophies. In this paper I will therefore explore how Plato and Zhuangzi understood language, and how these understandings correlate with their worldview and their writing styles. Based on philosophical theories of language and thought, particularly those of Jacques Derrida and Chad Hansen, I will consider some possible explanations for the differences between the two philosophers, which relate to the specific cultural and linguistic background of the philosophical traditions which they helped to create and to which they belonged.

Keywords: Comparative Philosophy, Zhuangzi, Plato, Language, Realism, Conventionalism

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Introduction

At the start of the 20th century, language became central in Western philosophy, and the philosophy of language seemed to replace the previous big philosophies – those relying on metaphysical and epistemological foundations. Many considered this change to be revolutionary in the history of philosophy, however, its seeds, as I will show, were sown years before it occurred – in the early days of world philosophy.

Plato and Zhuangzi are two philosophers representing the early stages of the history of philosophy. They are differentiated not only by the traditions to which they belong – and whose foundations they helped to build – but also in their theories positioned, apparently, at the two ends of the philosophical scale, and both were also concerned with the study of language and its place in the world and worldview.

What was their approach to language, how did it correspond with their worldview and what is the association between these and how they presented their ideas – I will attempt to answer these questions in this paper. In the background to these questions lies the fact that both were scions of different philosophical and cultural traditions, which invites conjectures about their differing attitudes as a product of language and culture.

Plato and Zhuangzi: The Relation Between Language and the World

Plato: Language as a Picture of the World

Discussions about language take place mainly in two of Plato's dialogues: *Cratylus* and the *Sophist*. The perception of language and its relation to the world are not addressed at the same level in the two dialogues: In *Cratylus*, discussion focuses mainly on names in their basic meanings, i.e., nouns, whereas in the *Sophist* the focus is on sentences or statements, perceived as a composition of names and verbs.¹ However, I argue that the two dialogues reflect a similar view of language and its relation to the world, and that this view indeed expresses Plato's own position.

In *Cratylus*, Plato examines the theory of “natural language”. This theory maintains a resemblance between the names we call things and things themselves, and therefore, it implies that there are correct and incorrect names – depending on the degree of resemblance between them and the things in the world to which they point (Robinson, 1969).

What exactly is the nature of this resemblance – Plato does not explain, but (the Platonic) Socrates makes an attempt to describe how letters and syllables can mimic things through the way they are pronounced (*Cratylus*, 425b-427d). Therefore, we can assume that when Plato refers to the correctness of names this correctness derives from how they mimic things: they can mimic them well and thus are correct, or badly and thus are incorrect, similar to painting, which can describe its object well or badly (*Cratylus*, 430c-431c).

Facing the natural theory of language is the theory according to which names are arbitrary: every naming is a matter of convention, and therefore, there is no good or bad name, correct

¹ The issue of the relation between names and verbs is actually more complex, because in *Cratylus* names sometimes considered as including verbs. However, in the light of the *Sophist* (see below), I will treat them as different parts of statements (more on this see, Ademollo, 2015).

or incorrect. Every name is good to the same degree, provided it is acceptable to certain cultural group.

Does Plato accept the natural theory of language? The answer is not unequivocal: at the beginning of the dialog Socrates presents arguments in favor of the theory, such as the argument which can be rephrased as follows:

- When we talk to each other and call something by a name, we distinguish between things according to their nature.
- We do not determine the nature of actions, they have a nature of their own.
- Speech is an action.
- Calling names is part of the speaking act.
- An action is correct if it is performed according to its nature.
- Therefore, there is correct name calling – if it is performed according to its nature, and incorrect – if it is not so performed (*Cratylus*, 386d-388d).

However, later it appears that Socrates retreats from his initial position. He mentions that custom and convention add something to a thing about which we are thinking when speaking, and the requirement for full resemblance between things and names is unreasonable (*Cratylus*, 435b); and afterward he argues that we do not need words to learn what things are, and it is possible and even desirable to learn about things without the help of names (*Cratylus*, 438d-439b).

It appears, therefore, that at least according to *Cratylus*, Plato's position about natural language theory is unclear. Nonetheless, I maintain that even if he rejects it, from his discussion a characteristic line of thought emerges, which testifies to his view of the relationship between language and the world and underlies all his philosophy. To see this line, one must return to the initial premises presented above, which state that:

- a. The world is composed of things who have their own nature, and their existence does not dependent on their relationship to us.
- b. By calling it a name we signify something and separate things according to their nature.

In other words, Plato's position is that there are things in reality that do not depend on people or their recognition (simple realism), and that name-calling is signification of these things, according to the order in which they exist in the world. That is to say, names are linked to reality, because they signify things existing in it.

We learn that this is Plato's fundamental position from the first question he raises in *Cratylus*: Plato does not ask whether it is true that names represent things in the world or not, but whether there is a natural correspondence (that can be called imitative correspondence) between names and things they represent. Consequently, even if the answer to this question is negative, we still remain with the view that names represent things in the world, which exist independently of language. Only now we say that it is possible that the names given to things – the syllables from which they are built, the way they are pronounced, etc. – are arbitrary. Yet, using names means signifying things in the world, and distinguishing between names is carried out according to the state of things in the world.

This position of Plato is also apparent in his argument that the person who should supervise name-making is the one who best knows how to use language, he who “knows how to ask questions” (*Cratylus*, 390c) and answer them, that is, the dialectician or philosopher. It is

furthermore manifested in *Euthydemus* (284c; see, e.g., Scolnicov, 2006), where it is claimed that speaking falsehood means talking about things as they are not, and it arises again in the *Sophist*.

In the *Sophist*, Plato addresses various issues: defining the sophist, the problem of being and non-being, and the related problem of false statement. It is the latter which is relevant to the current discussion. To understand how a false statement is possible, Plato first analyses the general structure of sentences:

Stranger: For when he says that, he makes a statement about that which is or is becoming or has become or is to be; he does not merely give names, but he reaches a conclusion by combining verbs with nouns. (*Sophist*, 262d)

A sentence is verbs and nouns (or names) combined into a general statement about the world, and what are names and verbs?

Stranger: The indication which relates to action we may call a verb. . . . And the vocal sign applied to those who perform the actions in question we call a noun. (*Sophist*, 262a)

Names and verbs signify states of affairs in the world, and hence they get their meaning. How is a false statement possible and how does it differ from true statement? Two conditions must exist for false statement to have meaning:

1. The subject must be true (being in the world).
2. The predicate is also real in itself, but not applicable in relation to the subject. Hence, the sentence “Theaetetus flies” is false, because it connects a true subject, being in the world, with a true predicate – also being – although this connection does not exist in reality. In contrast, the statement “Theaetetus sits” is true because both its subject and predicate as well as the connection between them are true; they signify an existing state of affairs in the world (*Sophist*, 263a-d).

Therefore, we see that for Plato of the *Sophist*, like Plato of *Cratylus*, words (in the present context, names and verbs) get their meaning from the reality to which they are associated and which they signify (see e.g., Wiggins, 1971). Every meaningful discourse refers to the world and derives from it, because the words signify the same part of the world that exist separately from it.

And yet a puzzle remains: Platonic ontology, as usually understood (e.g., Hunt, 2003), espouses that the Material world is nothing but a constant flux. How, therefore, names signify the world while there is nothing to signify, if everything flows? The answer is found in Plato’s theory of ideas (or forms); Those abstract, perfect, and permanent beings, which are the cause of everything in the world, which exists by taking part in them. Plato can hold that names signify actual things, if he assumes that the names correspond with the ideas, as things in the world take part in them and hence, through their connection to the ideas, names can signify the Material world. Thus, as stated, Socrates points to the philosopher (who knows the ideas) as the one who should supervise the legislation of names, and so the existence of false statement is also possible: the parts of false discourse (verbs and nouns), are true in that they signify ideas and only their combination is false.²

² Mouzala (2019) points out that according to Ackrill (1971), for Plato any meaningful statement should include at least one universal (idea) as a predicate, while according to Hamlyn even proper names are “a disguised version of a collection of names of Forms” (Hamlyn, 1955, as cited in Mouzala, 2019, p. 39). This explains how statements like “Theaetetus flies”, which includes proper names, are still connected to the sphere of ideas.

Therefore, the Platonic position about the language-world relationship can be summarized as follows: The world and its diverse parts exist independently of human recognition, and the distinctions made in language are not random but reflect this world, which in itself reacts to the sphere of ideas. In other words, language is subject to the world and signifies its parts and the connections between them. Every meaningful discourse is about the world, and its meaning derives from its relationships with what there is in the world.

Zhuangzi: Language Creates the World

Zhuangzi is hardly certain that when we say something, our words contain meaning beyond mumbling:

Words are not just wind. Words have something to say. But if what they have to say is not fixed, then do they really say something? Or do they say nothing? People suppose that words are different from the peeps of baby birds, but is there any difference, or isn't there? (Zhuangzi, ch. 2, Watson, 1968, p. 39)

Birds' peeping and wind blowing are not language. They do not represent anything in the world. Is human language different? According to Zhuangzi:

Words have value; what is of value in words is meaning. (Zhuangzi, ch. 13, Watson, 1968, p. 152)

Here it appears that Zhuangzi indeed believes that words, contrary to nature's voices, have meaning, but he continues and says:

Meaning has something it is pursuing, but the thing that it is pursuing cannot be put into words and handed down. (Zhuangzi, ch. 2, Watson, 1968, p. 152)

Words seek meaning but are not capable of articulating it; language seems to be too narrow to contain and convey meaning. Perhaps, if words were simple representations of the world, then it would be easy to understand the meaning behind them. However, it appears that Zhuangzi does not accept the picture theory of language, the view according to which words stand for real things in the world:

A road is made by people walking on it; things are so because they are called so. (Zhuangzi, ch. 2, Watson, 1968, p. 40)

Zhuangzi holds that it is language that determines how the world appears to us, how we perceive and judge the world. This is a conventionalist theory of language and language-world relations, which espouses that knowledge is an outcome of a system of name-giving that is fundamentally random and does not necessarily correspond with reality. We learn to distinguish between things through a language learning process. Since we think with the help of language, it makes us feel, define, "and act in certain ways" (Yearley, 1983, p. 126), and hence people are governed by the language they employ and depend on what it allows them to think and do. To "know" does not mean to know something about the world, but to act and react according to a language system. There is no objective truth to which language corresponds, rather there are different languages by which different groups describe the world.

This is the ground of Zhuangzi's (language) skepticism: because many types of discourse are possible and what is conceived as correct or true in one is not necessarily correct or true in another; absolute discursive truth does not exist. "Truth", "false", "good", "bad", are judgments we make within a certain language framework, and they, like the division of the world into objects, actions, and qualities, are given to differences between different languages (Graham, 2001; Yearley, 1983).

From the outset, language places restrictions upon us, making us perceive the world in a certain way, which does not reflect it, but rather divides and limits it. Hence, for Zhuangzi, it is not only that language does not reflect the world as it is, but creates it for us, and a failure to understand this process of creation gives rise to a misleading picture of reality:

So, in fact, does he [the sage] still have a "this" and "that"? Or does he, in fact, no longer have a "this" and "that"? the Way (Dao) makes them all into one. (Zhuangzi, ch. 2, Watson, 1968, p. 40)

Chad Hansen and the Theory of Mass Nouns

If Zhuangzi is a conventionalist, then he is in opposition to Plato: while the latter, as argued above, sees language as reflecting the world, the former sees it as creating in it boundaries and distinctions. Chad Hansen (1983) presents some of the strongest arguments in favor of this view, basing his arguments on the differences between Chinese and Indo-European languages.

Hansen, who assumes there is a direct association between language and thought, language and worldview, argues that the Chinese language is built from nouns that are parallel to mass nouns in Western languages. Mass nouns are nouns such as 'water' and 'rice'. They are different from common nouns in Western languages – count nouns – in that they cannot be multiplied or counted, and are associated with the much-little dichotomy, in contrast to the one-many dichotomy that developed in Western culture against the background of count nouns (Hansen, 1983, pp. 30-54).

The mass nouns theory explains, according to Hansen, differences in Chinese and Western philosophical tendencies: In the former, an ontology of stuff-like developed according to which the world is a collection of elements penetrating one another, and "naming is just making the distinctions, and the distinctions themselves are merely conventional – socially agreed-on ways of dividing up the world" (Hansen, 1983, p. 62). This ontology is different from the ontology which has dominated Western thinking since Plato, in which the world is seen as made up of separate objects, with their own qualities. Consequently, according to Hansen (1983; see also, e.g., Moody, 2016) a conventionalist and nominalist view of language governed classic Chinese ontology, whereas Western ontology was dominated by a realist view of language, and mental and idealistic views developed, arising from the one/many dichotomy: How, for example, Plato asked himself, are all particulars we call 'dog' connected; and thus the road was paved for the creation of another world – a world of ideas, or abstract forms.

Hansen argues, therefore, that the difference between the languages led to a difference in worldview and language-world relationships. His argument reinforces the view according to which Zhuangzi was a conventionalist, for whom there are many possible ways to divide the world, which in itself cannot be divided in an absolute or correct way; and can be also seen as

reinforcing the claim about Plato's lingual realism, which postulated that the material world is made up of things – which represented by language – whose existence is possible owing to their connection to the ideas.

Writing, Writing Style, and Language

Plato and Zhuangzi write. Writing serves them to express their positions and passing them on to other people. One can always ask the Daoist, if presented as conventionalist and language skeptic: Why write at all, if words do not describe the world, if they are only an arbitrary social convention? In contrast, one can expect from Plato – as a language realist – to praise the word, written or spoken, as a tool to understanding the world. Nevertheless, in practice it is not so. Especially, Plato criticizes the written word (Dickinson, 1931):

Writing, Phaedrus, has this strange quality, and is very like painting; for the creatures of painting stand like living beings, but if one asks them a question, they preserve a solemn silence. (*Phaedrus*, 275d)

The written, unlike the spoken, word allegedly produces a certain imperviousness; readers cannot ask an author what he meant, or argue with him, possibilities that only appear to exist in speech. It is possible that this is the reason for Plato's writing style, the dialogue, as a tool attempting to maintain the spirit of speech and, in general, the philosophical spirit. If philosophy is in search of the ultimate truth, raising questions and seeking answers, it appears that it can be best realised in the framework of dialogue.

For the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1967/1978), Plato's preference for speech over writing is a symptom of Western culture expressing simultaneously repression and hopeless aspiration. The repression is the suppression of death; death as the change and disappearance of all being, and the aspiration is for an absolute, unchanging permanent being. The immediacy of speech, the seeming continuity in every spoken act between talk and thought, create a sense of words having a single, correct meaning. In writing, in contrast, the absence of both writer and reader is revealed, and moreover, the absence of the signified to which words appear to refer. This absence, Derrida (1967/1978) argues, is inherent in every representative system and, in fact, enabling it. The aspiration for being, the attempt to correctly define things, means ignoring (or repressing) the lack of absolute meaning, lack of separation between the signified and the signifier; and they are what underlie, according to Derrida, Plato's writing and his preference for the spoken over the written (Jasper, 1988).

To a large extent, it appears that both Zhuangzi's writing style and content are close to Derrida's position. Regarding style, a mix of short stories, dialogues, allegories, and myths presented without any clear order. Regarding content, ambiguous themes, ideas that can be interpreted one way or another, such as the fragment presented above: Does Zhuangzi want to say that words have no other meaning than birds peeping or that they do? According to Zhuangzi's view of language presented here, it is just natural for him to present an argument and contradict it, to seek the meaning of words, but to play with the assumption that such meaning does not exist (Graham, 1989).

The understanding that words do not have an absolute meaning, that they do not describe reality itself, does not concern Zhuangzi. It is precisely the variety of possible interpretations and meanings, or, put it differently, the metaphoric level of language, which attracts him. Language is seen by Zhuangzi as a game, that change and flux are its rules and the pleasure

derived from it is not from winning an argument or reaching a final conclusion, but part of the game itself (Wu, 1990). It is exactly the aspiration for precise and clear-cut saying, for language absolutism – and therefore, moral and philosophical absolutism – which confuse and interrupt the flux of life:

Those at the next [historical] stage thought that things exist but recognized no boundaries among them. Those at the next stage thought there were boundaries but recognized no right and wrong. Because right and wrong appeared, the Way was injured, . . . (Zhuangzi, ch. 2, Watson, 1968, p. 41)

Conclusions

There are two conclusions that can be drawn on the basis of the above. First, that philosophical concern with the relationship between language and the world is not a characteristic feature of modern philosophy alone, but already existed in the early stages of world philosophy, or at least Chinese and Western philosophies. Second, language customarily used in a certain culture influences its philosophical discourse and the worldview of thinkers who are members of this culture.

The second conclusion indicates another important point, which arises also from Hansen's and Derrida's positions, according to which the effect of language and language structure on its speakers, and thus on the philosophy of a certain culture, is to a large extent unconscious. In this sense, one can argue that there is a symmetry between the philosophies of different cultures, and specifically, between Plato and Zhuangzi. Nonetheless, it appears to me that this claim is not accurate. Distinct from Plato, Zhuangzi discusses words with profound skepticism, and it appears that he seeks to neutralize the effect of language on our worldviews and the ways we act. It is not that Zhuangzi wishes to be silent, and Plato seeks to speak, but rather that Zhuangzi wishes to emphasize the limitations of words whereas Plato is asking to arrange the world through them. And perhaps this is the difference between the Platonic sage who searches for the "absolute constant" and the Daoist who follows the chaos.

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