

“Chuang Tzu would have not condemned or looked down on Bartleby, as he would recognise a similar attitude towards the transience of things. However, Bartleby may represent a chrysalis, understanding the ‘unity of the ten thousands things’, but numbed by his experience in the Dead Letter office, and yet to emerge as a being capable of interacting without investment. Bartleby chooses not to interact at all, but his fragile emotional state is revealed when he rejects the consolation of the lawyer, responding, “I know you ... and I want nothing to say to you”. He has internalized the futility of ambition, but has yet to find the joy of ‘Free and Easy Wandering’ or mastery over a skill to grant him a sensation of unity with the oneness.”

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The Talent of a Sage and The Way of a Sage

One year ago, I wrote my final submission for *Perspectives on the Good Life*. In the course, I had been introduced to a number of perspectives that I had never considered before. I could feel myself accumulating dirt as I waded the muddy waters of meaning, hardship, ease and wandering. I developed tools for discussing and understanding different viewpoints on what qualifies a good life. In the cover page quote from last year's final essay, I explained the apathy of Bartleby as a halfway point to Zhuangzi. We spent a relatively short time studying the Zhuangzi last year, but I felt then that Zhuangzi highlighted a path to enlightenment, and by following it, one can emerge from the Bartleby chrysalid, as a spiritually enlightened Zhuangzi. At the time that I started writing this essay, I had forgotten that this was a central theme to my essay last year - I thought that this was an entirely fresh thought. Indeed, this thought has continued to pervade my understanding of the Zhuangzi, specifically his attitude towards spiritual enlightenment.

Spiritual enlightenment is a dominant topic in the Zhuangzi. It is so dominant, that it would be a fool's errand to attempt to define Zhuangzi's concept of spiritual enlightenment - doing so would require retelling the whole book. Instead of arguing the specifics of enlightened characteristics, it is more practical to look at the common threads that connect

enlightened characters in the Zhuangzi. This essay first explores what connects characters in the Zhuangzi that have begun the journey to enlightenment, then what links characters who appear to have come close, but are stuck in purgatory, and finally what suggestions Zhuangzi seems to have for the practicalities of such a journey. Rephrased in the words of Zhuangzi in Chapter 6, this essays discusses: those with the Talent of a sage, those with the Talent but not the Way of a sage, and those with the Talent and the Way.

To understand Zhuangzi's picture of the journey to spiritual enlightenment, one must attempt to frame what enlightenment might be represented by in a character. Throughout the Zhuangzi, the enlightened appear in unlikely guises, such as the Crippled Shu. Crippled Shu is a free rider - embracing the opportunities for gain that come his way, without striving to give back in equal measure. What does this suggest about spiritual enlightenment? He seems perfectly content with this way of life - he waves at the soldiers as they leave to fight in his stead, and readily accepts all the handouts he is given. We might expect a member of society who is given as much as the Crippled Shu is given to be possessed by a strong desire to repay his debts to society. Instead, he looks after himself and then some. The final line of the story questions if Crippled Shu takes enough; if he had crippled virtue, what a life he might live! Zhuangzi suggests that Shu is enjoying only half of what he could - without trying he is reaping the rewards of his inutility, but if he tried, the rewards might double.

Crippled Shu embodies a freedom of movement and lack of concern for conventional morality that is thematic of the Zhuangzi. In Chapter 5, Huizi asks Zhuangzi, "Can a man really be without feelings?", to which Zhuangzi replies yes, that it is very possible to be human and not allow "likes or dislikes to get in and do him harm. He just lets things be the way they are and

doesn't try to help life along.” Similarly, in Chapter 6, the Woman Crookback explains enlightenment as a peace-in-strife. Zhuangzi’s enlightened characters seem to share a willing transience, and a way of treating all things the same - accepting what you are given. Amidst all the characters that struggle with morality, illness and death, there exist these characters who appear to have transcended these human worries - these are the enlightened. There is also a motif of wisdom arising from unlikely sources - Chuang Tzu often has his greatest wisdom spring forth from the aged, decrepit or irrelevant. For a woman in Zhuangzi’s time, and a physically warped woman at that, to profess knowledge about sageliness - this alone is extraordinary. This theme of unusual sources for real understanding has real significance - the truly downtrodden and weary possess a knowledge that is totally alien to their better-off counterparts.

This knowledge is the vital connection between all characters who embody the Zhuangzi. It is a knowledge that stems from hardship - it is not hard to imagine that this knowledge might be a bleak realisation about the world, for it can have many sources. It could take the form of extreme social exclusion such as the Woman Crookback and Crippled Shu, or the death of a loved one, such as Meursault. It could result from a lifetime in a soul-destroying occupation, such as Bartleby in the Dead Letter Office. The majority of the characters who appear to us before enlightenment experience a difficult event that opens them to Zhuangzi’s interpretative paradigm shift. This is the Talent of a sage - it cannot be taught, only acquired. The Woman Crookback berates Nan-po Tzu-k’uei for asking if the Way can be learnt, explaining that he is ‘not the man to do it’, and that it is easier to ‘explain the Way of a sage to someone who has the Talent of a sage’ - strengthening the suggestion that Talent is unteachable. Even the word

‘Talent’ implies that this quality is something intrinsic and natural - something you cannot choose to have or not have.

If this knowledge or this Talent is unteachable, it would be difficult to distill for the purposes of this paper. However, examine these characters in the context of Zhuangzi’s most fundamental teaching - perpetual change, and the transience of meaning. In Chapter 2, after describing the impermanence of earth, man and heaven through their various pipings Tzu-ch’i describes those who fail to understand the impermanence of their actions thus: “Sometimes clashing with things, sometimes bending before them, he runs his course like a galloping steed, and nothing can stop him. Is he not pathetic?” It is not hard to see how these untalented people diametrically oppose characters like Crippled Shu, and Zhuangzi, who understand the paradox of struggling to achieve. This is where the majority of people lie, and where the majority of characters in the Zhuangzi and other texts are. The cicada, the little dove and the quail who mock the great bird P’eng possess neither the Talent nor the Way. Their minds are bounded - they are not open to the great infinities of the world, of suffering or of change. The persecutors of Meursault, who relentlessly attempt to place meaning on his actions, do so because they have no understanding of Talent, and such knowledge scares them. Perhaps pain, suffering or loss liberated characters like Crippled Shu - demonstrated to them how meaningless conventional morality and values are in an uncaring world. However, for some characters, it might have been better if they could have chosen to not have this harrowing understanding, because it causes them only pain and confusion.

Many of the characters who are possessed by the Talent of a sage never find the spiritual enlightenment of Zhuangzi, or Crippled Shu. These characters are opened up to the full reality of

life, but are stuck without the machinery to translate that reality into free and easy wandering. Unfortunately, these characters appear to be numerous. Bartleby is a canonical example of someone who has been stripped of his primitive notions of the world, and left a shell, with no means of survival. After gaining his Talent through mortifying work in the Dead Letter Office, he floats with no means of survival in the real world. He has seen the impermanence of mortality and the only option left for him is to do nothing, because what would be the point?

Similarly, in the *Zhuangzi* we find examples of characters who appear to have gained their Talent, but lack the framework to survive with it. At the end of Chapter 6, Master Yu visits Master Sang, and finds him crying out against his mother, father, heaven and man. Sang explains that he is trying to understand how he has fallen into such a dreadful state - he has tried blaming all of the above, but cannot find fault with any of them. Indeed, it is 'fate' that has condemned him. Sang has found his Talent in poverty, by realising that the world is unordered and uncaring, and that ill fortune is merely poor luck. It would be wrong to describe the dazed detachment of Bartleby or the pitiful wailing of Sang as free and easy. However, they have discovered the fundamental building block, their Talent - they have lost it all, and are now blank of conventional morality, which bound them before to the Talentless existence of the common person.

Another character who appears stranded with his Talent, is Meursault. The similarities between Meursault and Bartleby are numerous - both are devoid of conventional emotions or morality, and both are destroyed because of it. If we read *The Stranger* as Meursault reflecting back on his experiences, from the viewpoint of his immediate death, we can see how his initial Talent was gained through the death of his mother. In loss, he loses his grasp of the world around him, and his motivations. He does not care if he marries Marie, or if he does not. He does not

care that he shot Raymond's mistress's brother. He is drifting, but as his fate looms at the end of the story, Meursault is overcome by a sense of calm and acceptance. He appears to have realised or learnt something new. His understanding of his mother taking another lover, and his reconciliation of the brink of death with the brink of freedom, is very reminiscent of some passages from Zhuangzi, especially those of the old men embracing their illness in Chapter 6. Meursault appears to have discovered the Way. He has pulled himself out of the bleak depths of his realisation, of his Talent. Disturbingly, many more characters appear to us with Talent, but no Way. To possess only the Talent of a sage, is to have your conventional view of the world ripped from you, and to have nothing to put in its place. How then, do characters like Crippled Shu, Zhuangzi, and in his final hours, Meursault, wander free and easy?

To graduate from this grim half-life, one must learn the Way of a sage. Looking again at the words of the Woman Crookback, to learn the Way of the sage, first one must separate themselves from the world, and then things, and finally life itself. Pu-liang Yi seems to then become something more primeval, akin to the sunrise, and then in his solitude, relinquishes his attachment to time, and the divide between life and death. Once one is in this state, where you have put everything outside yourself, you can wander free and easy. Free because you have liberated yourself of your shackles, and easy because how can you experience difficulty without anything tying you down? In this way, one can achieve "peace-in-strife", and then "there's nothing it doesn't send off, nothing it doesn't welcome, nothing it doesn't destroy, nothing it doesn't complete." As already stated, Crippled Shu, Zhuangzi and Meursault are good examples of this - they wander free and easy, at peace with the impermanence of the world.

Given that the Way is so important for those with the Talent, we must reflect briefly on

what Zhuangzi considered as a means of acquiring the Way. The Woman Crookback describes this process of achieving 'peace-in-strife' as taking many days, and something that she 'kept at him' as a means of progress. 'Kept at him' suggests that it is not easy, it required considerable chiding from the Woman Crookback to ensure that Pu-liang Yi completed the process. Acquiring the Talent requires undergoing true hardship, so it is no surprise that these people have a willingness to meditate for long periods of time, and sacrifice their physical and mental bounds. This is a good way of understanding why one must possess the Talent before one can learn the Way - to put everything outside yourself, and subject yourself to a gruelling meditational practice, you must be willing to give up a lot. Only those who have experienced real loss, and gained their Talent can learn the Way, reaffirming that recurrence of wisdom coming from the downtrodden. In Chapter Two, it is shadow, not penumbra, that pokes at these questions, "How do I know why it is so? How do I know why it isn't so?" Shadow, the character who lacks light, understands while his more illuminated companion does not. There is also a repeated theme of teaching the embracing of change, when underlings approach their mentors asking for guidance. Confucius explains to Yen Hui in Chapter 6 that Meng-sun, "in the process of change, has become a thing [among other things], and he is merely waiting for some other change that he doesn't yet know about... Meng-sun alone has waked up." Again, there is a theme of loss accompanying this passage - Meng-sun has just lost his mother, but he has awoken, attuned to perpetual change.

At the beginning of this course, I was ready to martyr myself on Zhuangzi's cross. Having dwelt on many of the concepts that we had handled in the introsem, I picked up the Zhuangzi looking for pain, suffering and sacrifice behind every door. I thought that Zhuangzi

presented us with grim truth - that eternal change meant that no meaning, a nihilism that required extreme sacrifice to reach, and then represented an emotionless drift through life. Now I think that Zhuangzi represents quite the opposite of that - he is the cure to this state of mind. This interpretation holds Zhuangzi as a saviour for the downtrodden. By encouraging the embracing of change, of taking when things are offered and not self-sacrificing to give back, Bartleby can rediscover fractal beauty. The destruction which I had search for, and feared, lies in the half-truth: Talent without the Way. And as characters like Sang show, this is a bleak fate indeed. Luckily, Zhuangzi exists - his skill is to teach the Way, to offer this escape for those that are willing to learn. I do not believe that the fate of a sage in today's society is to die, like Meursault. I think that texts like Zhuangzi (and the Stranger) offer a way to survive as a sage.

I believe that it is possible to characters in our texts in the context of their involuntary acquisition of a Talent, and their voluntary adoption of the Way. Certainly this approach misses a lot of subtlety, but it does provide some framework for beginning to understand why certain characters seem to thrive in the face of adversity, and why some appear to lose all place in the world around them, and are subsequently destroyed. By attempting to remain as neutral as possible about what the specifics of the Way, hopefully this essay leaves room for important topics that are missing, such as skill. This interpretation is also very hopeful. Zhuangzi's Way is an escape rope for those who have been slayed by suffering - it can mean survival, maybe even contentment for those who have lost a great deal.

Addendum:

This was an ambitious topic; I am sure that I didn't do it full justice, and I risked ignoble failure by choosing this topic. Nonetheless, it is the only topic that would have been right for me to write about. This essay represents my personal cumulative understanding of Zhuangzi - he has taken many shapes since we have been introduced, and I am sure that he will take many more, but this is how I understand him now. I can personally see the connections between all of the characters that I group together very clearly in my mind - those with the Talent but not the Way - they are drifters, not wanderers, they are not free riders because they do not take. Those with the Way and Talent - they have rediscovered purpose - and this purpose is what I avoided covering. I think it might have something to do with embracing of change, of the infinite nuances of the world. This is far less clear to me than my belief that Zhuangzi offers a spiritual unlocking for the most downtrodden in society. I am sure our thoughts on Zhuangzi diverge - absent from this essay is of course the concept of skill, a topic that I know you believe to be integral (perhaps skill could be one of the ways of acquiring the Way).

Essays like this are always written self-reflectively. I avoided including where I considered myself in the essay, because that fill an entire essay of itself, and probably contain a lot of self-indulgent waffle. I think that I once possessed the Talent, when my pain was at its most acute. If Zhuangzi had found me at that time, it is likely that things would have taken a different path. Now I think that the sharp edges of Talent have been dulled in me, but I feel safer knowing that Zhuangzi is always near. It might be an odd thing to think of this book as a comfort, and the sacrifices required to attain the Way are certainly great, but if you need it, chances are you are ready to sacrifice. As stated in the essay, this is why I believe that Talent

must precede the Way, because the sacrifices that are required to attain the Way are too great. I would like to have elaborated more on this.

The time has come again for me to thank you for another engaging and enlightening class. I made the mistake of scheduling classes over both of your office hours - I would have liked to have visited you more often and discussed the readings more with you. I wish you the very best, if only there was a third Zhuangzi class for me to take next year.