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## Book Review on *Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings*

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### Abstract

This brief article is a review of *Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings*, which was published in March of the last year by Hackett Publishing. Subsequent to a concise explanation about the contextual circumstances in which the new and full translation of the ancient Chinese text ought to be perused, I, in order to give an instance of its possibility, pointed out that one of its famous passages could be interpreted as an allegorical vignette that symbolically but straightforwardly communicates the same truth which contemporary French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux has proved, i.e., that the primordial principle framing the whole world is contingency.

**Keywords:** Philosophy, Eastern Philosophy, *Zhuangzi*, Taoism, Quentin Meillassoux

**Reviewed Work:** Zhuangzi. (2020). *Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings* (B. Ziporyn, trans.). Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.

Most of those who presently study Western philosophy would agree that the discipline has been at an impasse for a long time and that they should find a way to break the stalemate. Various causes have brought about the situation; nonetheless, it is indubitable that one of the gravest problems is the implicit postulate that Quentin Meillassoux (2008) named

“correlationism”, i.e., “the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other” (p. 5). Even if one has not read Meillassoux’s renowned analysis of the premise that has remained orthodoxy since Kant’s Copernican revolution, one can facily recognize why it is enormously problematic. It, first, makes philosophers categorically unable to accept a scientific statement concerning what is outside the correlation, and, second, peremptorily incapacitates them from rationally disproving irrational, fanatic, and impressionistic contentions (see Meillassoux, 2008, pp. 1-49).

Considering these circumstances, one would deem it as natural that those aspiring to resolve the deadlock are required to visit not only Western intellectuals before Kant but also Eastern thinkers. Therefore, we should regard this new and full translation of *Zhuangzi* as highly timely because, as many scholars have proclaimed (Ropp, 2010; Höchsmann, 2004), it is one of the most outstanding and significant texts which Asia has ever produced. Moreover, we should heartily rejoice that the work was conducted by a thoroughly qualified scholar in Brook Ziporyn, a full professor of the University of Chicago. His translation admirably conveys the spirit of the original with fidelity and clarity, and the succinct introduction and rich textual notes would strike the reader as quite informative and helpful.

Of course, a brief review cannot comprehensively critique this nearly three-hundred-page volume; yet, to evince part of the *Zhuangzi*’s trans-temporal profundity as well as the superb quality of Prof. Ziporyn’s rendition, I quote its most famous passage, that often goes by the appellation of the “Butterfly Dream”, inasmuch as methinks it incisively displays the deepest insight that we can glean from the classic:

Once Zhuang Zhou dreamt he was a butterfly, fluttering about joyfully just as a butterfly would. He followed his whims exactly as he liked and knew nothing about Zhuang Zhou. Suddenly he awoke, and there he was, the startled Zhuang Zhou in the flesh. He did not know if Zhou had been dreaming he was a butterfly, or if a butterfly was now dreaming it was Zhou. Surely, Zhou and a butterfly count as two distinct identities! Such is what we call the transformation of one thing into another. (Zhuangzi, 2020, p. 21)

Everyone can apprehend that *transformation* constitutes the theme in this figurative vignette. However, it is certain that, in its raw form, it would come across to most as too abstract to fathom its import. Hence, I consult an illuminating exegesis by Takahiro Nakajima, a prominent Japanese philosopher who has provided innovative but persuasive interpretations of *Zhuangzi's* abstruse lines. Below are two sentences wherein the quintessence of his construal of the snippet manifests itself: "Transformation is not only that an entity alters into another entity but that the world the entity has hitherto constructed transmutes into a totally different world.... Through transformation, the world to which the entity has ever belonged itself metamorphoses" (Nakajima, 2012, pp. 156-157).

Now it would be obvious that the pivot of the episode is its radical and unique conception of transformation, and here I cannot help but point to a subtle but momentous resonance with Meillassoux's theory wherewith he has potently identified sheer fortuity as the absolute necessity of the world. In concluding this essay, let me elaborate on this point.

As some may know, the philosopher did not content himself with foregrounding the constitutional aporia of Western philosophy. Instead, he embarked on a quest to logically overcome it and, after a series of impeccably deductive arguments, cogently proved that the *world in itself*, which is, by

definition, ontologically external to the correlation of thought and being, is ultimately framed by pure facticity, or rather unconditional contingency that is, as the first absolute, positively independent of anything and thus capable of transforming the whole world at any time and without any reason (see Meillassoux, 2008, pp. 51-81). In my estimation, the allegorical passage of *Zhuangzi* is a superlative parable which, on the one hand, indicates the same truth uncovered by Meillassoux, and, on the other, complements his stoically methodical argumentation by, as a narrative, straightforwardly communicating its very marrow to the reader.

Needless to say, the foregoing is only a small-scale and grossly insufficient foray into the gigantic text with almost inexhaustible potential. I hope that this exquisite English edition will find a wide readership and further instigate a multiplicity of intellectual intercommunications between Eastern and Western philosophies.

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