

From “Vanity” to “Freedom” :

A Comparison of the Philosophy of *Zhuangzi* and the Book of Ecclesiastes

(An abstract)

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The respective authors of *Zhuangzi* and the book of Ecclesiastes were born amidst war and oppression. Hence, it must have been the purpose of these authors to teach people how to live freely in such days of “vanity.” This paper attempts to look at the philosophy of *Zhuangzi* and Ecclesiastes, with a comparison and critique of the two.

To start with, both *Zhuangzi* and Ecclesiastes see “the world” and “life” as forever changing. *Zhuangzi* believes that everything in this world is “born naturally and can self-transform” while Ecclesiastes uses “vanity” to tell us that “life” is both short and out of man’s control. In addition, both *Zhuangzi* and Ecclesiastes view the world and life as unintelligible. However, in this respect, the two books differ in that *Zhuangzi* thinks everything changes according to a natural order (i.e., the operation of *Dao*), but Ecclesiastes puts the reason for such changes to the one God who acts as He wishes.

To address the question of how one can live out a joyful life in this ever-changing and unintelligible world, both *Zhuangzi* and Ecclesiastes think that man should follow the natural order, be optimistic and yield to one’s destiny. But

“destiny” according to *Zhuangzi* is “determined” by a *Dao* which has no consciousness and is not purposeful. On the other hand, in saying that “there is a season for every activity under heaven,” Ecclesiastes is referring to a just and loving God.

Secondly, both *Zhuangzi* and Ecclesiastes point out that man should view knowledge lightly and let go of fame and fortune because these things are relative and have no eternal value. It should, however, be noted that there is a difference in the “relativism” in these two books: Ecclesiastes tells us that although man cannot distinguish between good and evil and between blessings and woes, God can see the difference clearly. Therefore, man should place his hope on the judgement of God which is just. On the contrary, *Zhuangzi* says that man is not only unable to tell the difference between good and evil and between blessings and woes, but should not make such a distinction. Only then can man be unified with *Dao*.

Lastly, both *Zhuangzi* and Ecclesiastes say that there are two levels of “happiness.” *Zhuangzi* points out that man will feel “happiness” if he can develop and use his natural inborn talent and ability. However, he can only achieve “the Perfect Happiness” if he can be unified with *Dao* and reach a “selfless” state; Ecclesiastes says that happiness is when man enjoys the reward from his toils under the sun because this is the “portion” given to each man by God. However, one has to fear the Lord and obey His commandments in order to be able to enjoy eternal joy. Hence, both *Zhuangzi* and Ecclesiastes believe that real happiness could only be found through the transcendental aspect. But they differ in that the former requires the spiritual transcendence of oneself, while the latter asks man to rely on the transcendental God.