

Topic II

“Death and life, survival and perishing, success and failure, poverty and wealth, superiority and inferiority, disgrace and honor, hunger and thirst, cold and heat- these are the transformations of events, the proceedings of fate... So there is no need to let them disrupt our harmony.” Zhuangzi, 5:15. In Brook Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi: the Essential Writings*

The Metamorphoses of a Single Human Being

ABSTRACT

Goethe's Henry Faust, the main character of probably the most known work of Goethe, "Faust", explores the metamorphosis of a single human being, from an academic framework of reference to a metaphysical horizon of expectations. It is the volatile aspect of one's existence that is so interesting about this matter, meaning that, in order to get away from the academic ennui he embraced something so spectacular. This underlines my own perspective upon the human existence and fate altogether: that one craves for spectacular "transformation of events", how Zhuangzi calls them and that there is a natural chaos in everything, as opposed to Zhuangzi's philosophical statement. In other words, human beings are creatures of many possibilities- able of absolute altruism or obscene evilness, able to live in the now or in the imminence of the future.

In this philosophical essay I will deal with Zhuangzi's personal perspective upon fate and its ramifications, but I will mainly have an existentialist approach towards this issue that concerns ontology, as the science of the being qua being. In this fragment I can decode two major premises:

1. There is a coincidentia oppositorum in every aspect of the human existence.
2. This cannot alter the intrinsic harmony of the human being and one should try to permanently achieve it.

My philosophical inquiry will rely on three major parts that compose my **personal thesis**:

1. There is no harmony in the human existence- the human life is a perpetual struggle between internal and external factors.
2. There is no fate, we are ultimately free, hence we are responsible of those "transformations of events".
3. The underlying nature of man can be decoded only in a small proportion by using the doctrine of Coincidentia Oppositorum.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Before I will get into the argumentation part of this essay, I will like to clarify the main concepts that Zhuangzi is using in his philosophical paper. Firstly, he sees the proceedings of fate as every major turn that occurs in one's life. Life and death are compounds of the natural process of becoming and living in the world. It is not the physical aspect relevant to him, but rather the effect that produces over one's inner beliefs and ways of existing in the world. It is the volatile aspect that makes one truly exceptional and makes life worth living.

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The part that I find mostly interesting is the concept of harmony, for there is a wide debate on this matter. Zhuangzi treats harmony like an intrinsic property of the human existence, that is not affected by coincidentia oppositorum, used in the way that Cusa presented it. On the other hand, Christian Wolff, one of the 18th century German philosophers, sees harmony like a connection of multiple objects, like a perfect symmetry. Harmony is an intrinsic property of beauty, and only beautiful objects can have inner harmony. It is debatable whether the human being is beautiful in itself or not, but this is not necessarily relevant to the topic of this essay.

SUBSTANTIAL DENOMINATIONS

Part 1- Looking the transformation right in the "I"

In 1905, Albert Einstein published his **special theory of relativity** that, simplistically put, was something like this:

$$E=mc^2 \text{ (energy equals mass times the speed of light squared)}$$

Beyond its scientific importance, it also came to have a great philosophical meaning, given the fact that, armed with relativity, the human being managed to break all the conventions and accept the courageous project of Einstein: re-think everything around you. When Nietzsche previously declared that "**God is dead**", Europe especially was tormented with the philosophical implications of the "**degodification**", as Heidegger calls it, that became slowly a main character of the 21st century civilisation. It was a sign that the human thinking was slowly turning to a philosophy and independency, denying fate and predestination and God's interference when it comes to the human behaviour.

Let us consider the absurdist philosophy of Albert Camus. **Sisyphus** is punished by the gods to roll a stone on a mountain in a perpetual effort to succeed in accomplishing his task. He is doomed to fail each and every time, and doomed to continue doing the same thing over and over again. Camus said that this depicts accurately the human existence- our urge to find a purpose in life, even if there is none.

Another existentialist philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre, finds **hope** as the biggest evil that mankind ever received from the gods. This idea can also be found in Nietzsche's "Human, all too human", when speaking about Pandora's Box- he states that hope is what drives people to seek for God, a meaning in life and to construct collective human conventions that are nothing but lies. Therefore, hope is perverting the human will and torment the individual into believing that there is more to its existence than it is in fact.

I find most relevant two major approaches on this subject- Sigmund Freud's explanation on the **psychological determinism** and Michel Foucault's analysis on social constraints and **societal determinism**. I find them relevant in order to argue for my first philosophical premise- that the human existence is a perpetual struggle, and thus there is no harmony in it, even if we need to believe that.

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Sigmund Freud argued that we are a product of the unconscious part of the brain, that drives our behaviour without us to have an actual call upon it. The main drive that he identifies is the sexual instincts or the libido, that makes physical pleasure one of the main incentives of our behaviour in the society. I find that legitimate, even though the unconscious impulses cannot be only reduced to sexual tendencies. Therefore, we can say that, according to Freud, we are the slaves of our minds and we act accordingly.

Passing to Michel Foucault, he comes up with a societal determinism theory that explains how we tend to act in a similar manner as the other members of one community. It is the imitation instinct that guides this kind of behaviour. Similarly, the anthropologist Michel Taussing wrote a very interesting book called "Mimesis and Alterity", in which he explains how the tribe of the White Indians or Cuna adapted some reminiscent symbols of the white populations without even realising that they were doing it. It explains how the human being tends to conform to the social norm (that Nietzsche was criticising as being nothing but a human convention that man came up with in order to dominate weaker wells of power).

On the other hand, philosophers such as Socrates found the human nature and life as a whole of harmony, that was guided by an intrinsic moral instinct towards goodness and acceptance. Even though that good nature could have been easily perverted, he also argued for this concept of harmony, that one has to try and find the **internal equilibrium**.

PARTIAL CONCLUSION 1

I can conclude as far in this essay that, even though we might accept that there is a certain harmony into the human existence, it is very hard, if not impossible to reach it. Even the physical laws of the nature indicate us the same thing. If we consider **Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty** (that states that one thing can both behave like a wave and as a particle at the same time), we can say that nothing is the way we perceive it and the universe is acting on some unestablished rules, that one cannot predict entirely. The same goes for **Clausius' theory of entropy**, that, basically, supports the fact that the nature is permanently heading towards chaos, things that were harmoniously ordered are desintegrating one piece at the time as I write and as you read this essay. Also, our internal struggle to become more than we truly are, depicted by Stendhal in "Le Rouge and le noir" through the main character –Julien Sorel– that represents a combination of ambition, determination, wickedness and psychological sensitivity to outer stimulus. **The stendhalian egotism** depicts the way in which one might search for achieving a greater social status, giving up his internal harmony and transforming his life into a continuous struggle (**the struggle of self-transcending ideal**, as Arthur Koestler called it).

Part 2- The proceedings of fate between Eros and Thanatos

Zhuangzi considers life and death as what precedes one's fate. It is, of course, arguably if he believes that life and death are the inertial referential frame for one's destiny or substantial and fundamental determinations of one's fate. I find very interesting the fact that he chose to put together death and life, on which one has no power upon, and success and failure, that can be regarded as natural consequences of our actions.

In Freud's conception, the individual is struggling between two basic instincts:

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1. **The instinct for Eros**- that is the equivalent of life, joy, love, sensations or amor fati, regarded from a nietzschenian perspective.
2. **The instinct for Thanatos**- the instinct for death, closure, intense sensual emotions and experiences.

Therefore, life and death are perceived as the sole ground of any human activity and denomination, that one has no control upon. One does not get to decide when to be born, and, obviously, when to die. For Freud, individual's life and decisions must take into account those two fundamental and given conditions or coordinates of action.

It is arguably which one matters the most or is taken into consideration more often. On this point, I will like to consider three main perspectives on thanatos, correlated to the harmony of one's existence:

1. **Aristotle's concept of catharsis**
2. **Dostoevski's interpretation of catharsis**
3. **Schopenhauer's pesimistic philosophy**

Firstly, let me consider Aristotle's position on this matter. In his fragmentary "Poetics" he described the phenomenon of **catharsis or katharsis** as a purification or purgation by means of suffering in order to reach an authentic moral status or a valuable work of art, when it comes to tragedies in particular. The ancient heroes of Homer, for example, are brave and, often, the sacrifice themselves for what we call today "the greater good". Following the ancient virtue ethics, greek tragedies depict people that embraced the four core virtues as a way of life in itself. We can find a similar concept in Porphyrius philosophical system- **the purgation**- that has an important role when it comes to reaching a higher **ontological status**. Therefore, Aristotle perceives Thanatos as a form that contains harmony and enriches the human experience and productions, namely art, with harmony.

On the other hand, Dostoevski offers in "The Brothers Karamazov" a different interpretation of catharsis. He clearly states that beauty has the ability to save the world but (and this is the most interesting part, in my view) he perceives beauty as a central denomination of catharsis. This means that beauty has a clear ontological status, meaning the power to change the ways of being in the world. By this, the human existence is losing the self-contained harmony, basically because Dostoevski did not believe that one had a harmoniously built human nature, but we are torn from the inside by a metaphysical evil and existentialist urge to find a meaning in the meaningless.

The third perspective that I proposed is **Arthur Schopenhauer's**. He believed that the human will is doomed to great suffering and loss and one has few ways to overcome this status- quo. For example:

1. Through aesthetic experienced
2. Through ascetic resignation

His philosophy on the role of tragedies and the sublime that tragedies contain is most relevant to this essay, as it underlines the fact that the human existence is chaotic and, if there is such thing as fate, we can definitely not find the harmony at all in the meaning of things. He believed that tragedies are sublime because, even though they thrill the one that perceives it, they produce a great deal of pain and suffering, thus making them authentic and real-life resembling. If we look at

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Sophocle's Oedipus, we can clearly see that the proceedings of fate could not led the main character to find the harmony of his existence, for there was none. Supporting the idea of blind fate, this tragedy only underlines the fact that, looking closely at the fundamental determinations of one's fate, one can find a rather scary truth- that he or she could never find the so called harmony.

PARTIAL CONCLUSION 2

I can conclude that life and death can hardly be seen as proceedings of fate, but rather as a general neutral framework of the human existence. Even though they come to shape one's thoughts and desires, they can be regarded as neutral for the fact that one has no control over them whatsoever. Therefore, having the **amor fati**, as Nietzsche calls it, or the inner desire to live in the world can be seen as the turning point that determines all the transformations in the human existence.

Part 3- Sartrean conception of absolute freedom

To Sartre, one is **absolutely free** and **entirely responsible** about each and every action he or she decides to do. Therefore, any context or determinants or fate are irrelevant. Sartre uses two major concepts in order to explain the idea of freedom- **bad faith** and **facticity**. To act in bad faith means to deny your freedom. When one is behaving in a non-authentic manner, he or she is acting in bad faith. He gives the example of a waiter that is behaving too "waiter-esque". He speaks, he acts like he is a waiter and as if this is more than a profession: it is a way of life in itself. Sartre is criticising this behaviour and he states that the facticity of the human freedom means that one is not able to not be free. To cease to be free means to cease to exist. Therefore, one has no choice but to take full responsibility of his or her actions.

According to this perspective, we are the authors of the "transformations of the events". Even though we might not have the ability to control the external factors- such as life and death, cold and warm etc, it is entirely up to us to decide upon the manner in which we respond to those stimuli.

PARTIAL CONCLUSION 3

I find Sartre's perspective appealing and I believe that it underlines the essence of this essay- that one should take full responsibility of his or her actions, even considering the psychological and societal factors that might determine one's behaviour. Even if, at the first sight, this might sound contradictory, I believe that what Freud and Foucault argued in favor of does not affect the free will of one, but it rather incentivises him to overcome the natural limits of the human existence or what Heidegger called **peras**. Heidegger believed that only when one finds its clear and distinct limits (**peras**), the **Dasein** is truly authentic.

Part 4- On the method of Coincidentia Oppositorum

Zhuangzi presented his argument by opposing fundamental principles of one's existence- death versus life, survival versus perishing, success versus failure, poverty versus wealth, superiority versus inferiority and so on and so forth. He is, basically, opposing those terms in a system of antinomy. However, the doctrine of Coincidentia Oppositorum, as it was upheld by Cusa, argues that everything is composed by fundamentally opposed elements, and from this they are complete and complex. Therefore, the human being is not solely good or evil, it is good and evil at the same

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time ; something beautiful is ugly at the same time, life contains death and success contains failure. More simply put, things are not just black and white, but there are also complex and debatable aspects and nuances of all things. But, beyond this point, even if this doctrine reveals the inner tension that is created in all the structures of the universe, it also states that this opposites are natural and that objects do have a harmony even in this situation (or especially in this situation). Similarly, **Heraclitus** believed that the human existence and the Universe in general is composed from completely different parts and that is the true harmony.

This perspective can be compared with Hegel's concept of **Aufhebung**, that comprises **self-conservation** and **sublimation** at the same time. Given the fact that the human being is the most abstract notion that one can use, Hegel only describes the being as a unity of two contradictory notions that can be regarded as the equivalents of Eros and Thanatos. Hegel also supported a **methodology of antithesis**. He believed that, by opposing concepts, one would eventually be able to decode and get a proper insight on the object of the inquiry. It can also be compared with Jacques Derrida's method of deconstruction and the first step of it, namely the binary opposites.

Partial Conclusion 4

Given the fact that Hegel argues that, by this means, one can achieve the truth about something, I believe that this method, even if it could be functional up to some extent, is not able to reveal essential features in what concerns the human existence and the human being in itself. I believe that this practice that can be clearly traced in philosophy, especially in the Western tradition, of dividing things into opposites concepts- take for example **Nietzsche's Apollinian and Dionysian** or **Freud's Eros and Thanatos**- is missing some important points about what Aristotle called mesotes.

In this part of the essay, my aim was to argue that Zhuangzi's claim that one should try to uphold the inner harmony of the being can be interpreted rather like seeking for a mesotes between these, not necessarily that in coincidentia oppositorum is an internal harmony. I believe that one would be unable to make abstraction of cold or heat, of disgrace and honor, of poverty and wealth etc, for these are social conventions that do have a clear impact on one's behaviour. Basically, in the 21st century, it is rather hard to picture the scenario under which one would try to seek for harmony and make abstraction of the external and internal factors. Superiority and inferiority, for example, can be regarded as stereotypes, if you want to. But if we consider **Zimbardo Stanford Prison Experiment**, one can say that in practical conditions people react to those stimuli and act accordingly to their position, without even questioning it.

FINAL CONCLUSIONS

At the end of this philosophical inquiry, I can conclude upon a certain number of things:

1. It can be regarded as legitimate to believe that our harmony is disrupted in the nature of things, and this is happening because one had the perpetual internal urge to struggle between opposites.
2. I find justified that one would believe that a state of harmony is achievable, for it works on the same mechanism as religious convictions and, like Dostoevski wrote in "The Karamazov Brothers", "if God does not exist, we should invent it".

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3. I could accept that Zhuangzi's concepts work as an initial referential frame, something similar with what Einstein used in his scientific inquiry. It means that we build judgements from this starting point, considering them as relevant (or as axioms and prime principles).

HOLISTIC VIEW

In Rene Magritte's painting, "The Human Condition", the artist painted the ball, the floor and the easel on the first perceptive plane and, after that, he used an internal framing device, namely the paint from the painting, that is positioned on the same horizon line with that of the ocean from outside, in order to underline the fact that, even though one might perceive the painting as depicting an ordinary room with a spectacular view to the ocean, the outside world is a distorted perception, as the **Panzo Illusion** is tricking us to believe that we can see things placed on different distances in the same way. Therefore, even though there is an apparent harmony in this painting, it is only relative and only a first impression. In the same manner, we can see Zhuangzi's harmony as something that can be achieved in appearance, but not in its essence. This is, in my opinion, the most important lesson that Henry Faust learns from Mephistopheles.

INSTEAD OF EPILOGUE

One evening, Rimbaud sat harmony on his knees...

He found it disappointing...

And he revealed it...