
THE PROBLEM OF LONGEVITY AND DEATH IN DAOISM

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IZVLEČEK

Problem dolgoživosti in smrti v daoizmu

Članek obravnava odnosa Zhuang Zi-ja in Lie Zi-ja do resnice na primeru njunih pojmovanj smrti in njune opise intuitivnega razumevanja Poti, do katerega sta pogosto prišla prek razsvetljenja. Poleg razumevanja jezika sta postavila v ospredje zanimanja smrt, saj njuni filozofski diskurzi ne gradijo na izkušnjah resnic pri razmišljanju o svetu, temveč na bivanju v svetu, ki pa, seveda, vključuje tudi probleme dolgoživosti, življenja in smrti (kot pomembnega dela procesa življenja) ter različnih praks, povezanih z eksistenco telesa, postajanja, spreminjanja in izginjanja. Zhuang Zi-jeva in Lie Zi-jeva pojmovanja so soočena z evropskimi modeli soočanja s smrtjo. Za slednje so značilni usodna zanemarjenost neznana magična sila, ki napravi človeka nemočnega, ko se sooči s smrtjo; na smrt se gleda kot na božjo kazen; proces je mogoče racionalno opazovati, vendar le, ko umira nekdo drug, ne mi sami; zadržani poskusi asimiliranja idej o smrti. Predstavljene so različne podobe smrti iz kitajskih filozofskih in religijskih virov. Posebna pozornost je usmerjena v Lie Zi-jevo sedmo poglavje, kjer poteka pogovor med mojstrom in enim izmed njegovih učencev o temeljnih dilemah človeške eksistence. Poudarek je na treh stopnjah te debate, ki je še vedno tako aktualna kot takrat, ko je bilo besedilo Lie Zi napisano:

- prva stopnja: o nezmožnosti doseganja nesmrtnosti
- druga stopnja: o absurdnosti poskusov doseganja dolgoživosti
- tretja stopnja: o danih perspektivah človeške eksistence in smislu ter nesmislu samomora.

Ključne besede: kitajska filozofija, daoizem, smrt, samomor, nesmrtnost

Key words: Chinese philosophy, daoism, death, suicide, immortality

The stories known under the names Zhuang Zi and Lie Zi present the masters as mystics to whom the emptiness and silence are their homeland and again next time as wise men who confronted with the basic existential questions that vividly burn everyone are staying very much down to earth while confronting the disciples who grow dumb at their answers.

This second side of Lie Zi - be it a real man of flesh and blood, or just a imaginary group of wise and unknown people who most probably at the time of their lives have not

even known for one and the other - will be presented here on the basis of one of the stories, or better a dialogue, which is given in the text known as *Lie Zi*.¹ I shall allow myself to construct also a commentary to the story in his style, not as an abstract philosophical tractatus, but as into our time (and into European world) moved image of a human being who is writhing with burden of existentials, which are not spared to anyone of us.

As for the problem of life in death, I would like, before moving to *Lie Zi* mention also two *Zhuang Zi*'s understandings of life and death.

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“So it is said, with the sage, his life is the working of Heaven, his death the transformation of things. /.../ His life is a floating, his death a rest. He does not ponder or scheme, does not plot for the future. A man of light, he does not shine; of good faith, he keeps no promises. He sleeps without dreaming, wakes without worry. His spirit is pure and clean, his soul never wearied. In emptiness, nonbeing, and limpidity, he joins with the Virtue of Heaven.”² or:

“Life is the companion of death, death is the beginning of life. Who understands their workings? Man's life is a coming together of breath. If it comes together, there is life; if it scatters, there is death. And if life and death are companions to each other, then what is there for us to be anxious about.”³

To reach the point where life and death become “unimportant” to us, so that we look upon them with equanimity, we have to dive into the Void. This idea we also meet elsewhere. With the Daoists and in Buddhism, it is not directly connected with the dialogue about Emptiness; instead, the debate is about Dao, Nothingness, the search for truth, and the meaning of life and death. At the beginning of all these quests, the illusion of a stable Ego that continues on and on appears as an obstacle. Around this illusion, a system of categorizing phenomena builds up, trapping a person in stereotyped evaluations of things and events.

This is also the case in the dialogue from the *Lie Zi*⁴ in which two persons appear:

Yang Zi - a learned and experienced man and **Meng Sun Yang** who could be also somebody from today's world, who might, although healthy, entering the advanced age feel and anticipate that his bodily and mental functions are slowly drying up. After the years spent in prosperity and in accumulation of learning, the life events have reminded him of a “a very simple, clear, and rather foolish truth, the truth, that is not easy to discover, and very painful to bear, namely, ‘that the people die and are not happy’”.⁵ When on horizon the death appears he starts the search for immortality. This is where the story begins:

“Meng Sun Yang asked Yang Chu:

“Suppose that a man values his life and takes care of his body;

¹ *Lie Zi ji shi*. Zhonghua shuju. Beijing, 1985. The quotations for this paper are taken from the English translation of *Lie Zi: The Book of Lieh-Tzu*, A.C.Graham (trans.). Columbia University Press, New York, 1990.

² *Chuang-tzu. The Inner Chapters*, A.C.Graham (trans.). Unwin Paperbacks, London, 1981, p. 168-169.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

⁴ *Ibid.* I., p. 147-148.

⁵ Camus, A., *Caligula*. Gallimard, Paris, 1984.

may we hope by such means to live for ever?’

‘It is impossible to live for ever.’”⁶

Meng Sun Yang might have, although with anxiety expect such an answer. As much as the religious Daoism (daojiao) after all its alchemical undertakings could not offer the magical elixir, which would enable the human being to reach immortality, did also the European science, although in a more concealed manner, nurture such aspirations. They were as unsuccessful as the ones of Daoists.

Freud has shown how deeply rooted this aspiration is⁷:

“Our relation (towards death) has not been sincere. During conversation we have been prepared to defend the standpoint that death is an unavoidable outcome of everything alive, that everybody of us by one’s nature is bound for one’s death and has to be prepared to settle the debt, since death is something natural and cannot be denied or avoided. However in everyday reality we usually behave as that it would be completely different. We have been very open to disclose the tendency to shove the death aside, to exclude it from life. We have tried to conceal it; since there exist even a proverb: ‘I have been thinking about this as much as about my own death.’ Namely, not at all. Our own death cannot even be imagined and as soon as we try it, we realize, that we are just the observers. According to this, in the psychoanalytic school we would risk such a formulation: In essence, nobody really believes in one’s own death, which is actually the same as: Subconsciously we are all sure into our own immortality.”

Anybody who is able to assimilate such an insight is already quite far, however, we are not sure if Meng Sun Yang succeeded in it, since he continues with his questions to the master, who patiently keeps on answering him:

“May he hope to prolong his life?”

‘It is impossible to prolong life. Valuing life cannot preserve it, taking care of the body cannot do it good. Besides, what is the point of prolonging life? Our five passions, our likes and dislikes, are the same now as they were of old. We have heard it already, seen it already, experienced it already. Even a hundred years is enough to satiate us; could we endure the bitterness of still longer life?’”⁸

Could Meng Sun Yang realize that with such questions he is still - although through the back door - pushing for immortality. In this regard one of Bible’s story, The Book of Job, is very instructive. It starts as:

“There lived in the land of Uz a man of blameless and upright life named Job, who feared God and set his face against wrongdoing. He had seven sons and three daughters; and he owned seven thousand sheep and three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred asses, with a large number of slaves. Thus Job was the greatest man in all the East.”⁹

⁶ Ibid. 4. 0

⁷ Freud, S., *Zeitgemässes über Krieg und Tod*. Gesammelte Werke. S. Fischer V., Frankfurt/M, 1972, X., p. 323-355.

⁸ Ibid. 1.

⁹ Study Bible. Rev. stand. version, Eyre Spottiswoode. London, 1980. The Book of Job.

God took a liking to him, but the evil spirit Satan, persuaded God to test Job again. Satan assumed that the man was showing honesty, justice and piety only to keep the big estate that he had been given, and together with this also the reputation which he was enjoying amongst his people. God followed Satan's inspiration.

Calamities now overcame Job: First, Caldeans stole all the cattle, the thunder bolt killed all the stablemen, a hurricane destroyed the house and killed the children that were playing there. However, this immense misfortune did not weaken the righteous Job.

"At this Job stood up and rent his cloak; then he shaved his head and fell prostrate on the ground, saying:

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Naked I came from the womb,
naked I shall return whence I came.
The LORD gives and the LORD takes away;
blessed be the name of the LORD.

Throughout all this Job did not sin; he did not charge God with unreason."¹⁰

This test still did not satisfy Satan. He persuaded God to strike Job also bodily. In the illness that followed, Job suffered many ulcers over his entire body. He could not remain in the house and retired to the rubbish-heap. Even his wife made fun out of him "Are you still unshaken in your integrity? Curse God and die!" But he answered, "You talk as any wicked fool of a woman might talk. If we accept good from God, shall we not accept evil?" Throughout all this, Job did not utter one sinful word.

His friends came for a visit to make some wise statements, such as, "he must have some heavy sins upon him", that he was so heavily stricken by God. They scolded him when he begged God to tell him what his guilt was and they said to fear God was wise and intelligent and if he did this he would avoid misfortune. He suffered such pains that he regretted the day he was born.

Finally God in his omnipotence was revealed to Job. "Who is blaming God is responsible", and to this Job could only answer: "I know now, that you are omnipotent. That is why I relent and I repent in dust and ash." The Bible concludes: "Furthermore, the LORD blessed the end of Job's life more than the beginning; and he had fourteen thousand head of small cattle and six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen and as many she-asses. He had seven sons and three daughters; and he named his eldest daughter Jemimah, the second Keziah and the third Kerenhappuch. There were no women in all the world so beautiful as Job's daughters; and their father gave them an inheritance with their brothers.

Thereafter Job lived another hundred and forty years, he saw his sons and his grandsons to four generations, and died at a very great age."¹¹

The lesson of this naive story, for which it is not clear how it came into the Bible is: you will live long and be blessed on the earth, if of course you will obediently believe into the anthropomorphic God, who not only is absolutely omniscient and omnipotent,

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

since he has all the time by his side advisor Satan, who can order various additional tests for the devotedness of single individual to the God. The reward for good behavior is, as we see, longevity and material prosperity. In Job's story the possibility that Job might have been rewarded for his loyalty with a period of longevity and prosperity, one hundred and forty years of life, several thousands of camels, and that the death would be moving *ad calendae Graecas*, is not denied.

This in fact, is well known psychodynamic mechanism of shoving aside of the unpleasant notions from the field of consciousness, which we saw was very familiar also to Meng Sun Yang. Once again Yang Zi placed him on ground while showing him, how monotonous everything what happens with us in this world from day to day and year to year is, especially if one sees the world and life from a little higher perspective. It is even harder for a person captured into the fringes of intrusive banalities which keep him in the whirlpool from which one cannot see any outlet.

Such was also Meng Sun Yang's situation who said:

"If it is so, and if destruction is better then prolonged life, you can get what you want by treading on blades and spearpoints, rushing into and boiling water."¹²

Seneca, as we know offered this model and has used it himself. "It is not important, if a person dies sooner or later, but only if one dies with dignity and has therefore all the rights to choose the death, which is most convenient for oneself", wrote Seneca in his 70th letter to "his friend Lucilius".¹³

However, if we imagine Meng Sun Yang as our contemporary who followed professional and social trends, we would know how the suicide rate, especially in Central Europe is growing and is becoming an entirely legitimate cause of death. Even suicidologists have started to talk about the right to suicide and recall a booklet with the title "Suicide, Mode d'Emploi-Histoire-Technique-Actualité?"¹⁴ Even International Association for Suicide Prevention (IASP) cannot do anything against such trends. Meng Sun Yang would know that the dictum by St. Augustine (354-430) "Qui se ipsum occidit homicida est"¹⁵ and all the reprisals, that have been carried in this early Christian era, are not of any use today.

Yang Zi has transcended such approaches by:

"No. While you are alive, resign yourself and let life run its course; satisfy all your desires and wait for death. When it is time to die, resign yourself and let death run its course; go right to your destination, which is extinction. Be resigned to everything, let everything run its course; why need you delay it or speed it on its way?"¹⁶

Yang Zi's views on life cannot be limited to a medical pragmatics which governs today's debate on life, death and suicide. He thinks, that when one is freed from doubts

¹² Ibid. 1.

¹³ Seneca, *Pisma prijatelju*. Obzorja, Maribor, 1966; VIII/70, p. 201-206.

¹⁴ Soubrier, J.P., *La prevention du suicide, est-elle encore possible depuis la publication autorisee d'un livre intitule: "Suicide. Mode d'Emploi-Histoire-Technique-Actualité?"*. *Crisis*, 1984; 5/2, p. 119-124.

¹⁵ Agostino, S.A., *La città di Dio*, C.Costa ed. Soc. editrice internazionale, Torino, 1939; I., p. 17-27, 91.

¹⁶ Ibid. 1.

of a kind under which Meng Sun Yang has suffered, also the questions of life and death (and by it also of suicide) are transcended. By this one is also ready to accept all what is left when the question of life and death are transcended. This, however, is a long path.

In the 7th chapter of *The Book of Lie Zi* (Yang Zhu) the basic problems of existence in classical China are discussed as relevant as we see them today. To ask a daoist philosopher for advice on how to become immortal might not have been, at the time when this was happening, naive or obviously absurd. Welch¹⁷ stated that although the daoist movement has always been a mixture of heterogeneous elements among which were philosophy, everyday hygiene, church duties and especially alchemy, they never really became a compound. In the realm of alchemist elements we can count also the stories about a mystical island Pen Lai, which at the time was searched for by various expeditions. It was believed that the people who lived there, did not know death, because they possessed the elixir of life which had been discovered by alchemist sciences. It is supposed that it was the otherwise poisonous compound of cinnabar and mercury-sulphide.

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C.G. Jung described the attitude towards death¹⁸ as: "Life is energy stream, which is in principle irreversible and very clearly orientated /.../ on standstill as its aim. /.../ As the curve of the projectile ends in its aim, the life ends in death, which therefore is the aim of all life. Even its ascent and climax are but the steps and means for reaching this aim, death namely." This is logical and acceptable.

In the time of classical Chinese philosophy there lived in Palestine an unknown teacher who described himself as Qohelet, which would mean in Hebrew "gatherer". He wrote a book which has been accepted into Biblical canon as "Ecclesiastes" and is since then an important chapter of the Old Testament. The frame of the book is the insight that everything is nothingness and that death is the border which destroys and unpredictably crosses all human plans and endeavors. The direct consequences of this are hatred to life and desperation¹⁹. In this connection it might be instructive to quote some of the thoughts from Ecclesiastes which are very close to Yang Zi's arguments against the striving for longevity:

"What do people gain from all the toil
at which they toil under the sun?
A generation goes, and a generation comes,
but the earth remains forever.
The sun rises and the sun goes down,
and hurries to the place where it rises.
The wind blows to the south,
and goes around to the north;
round and round goes the wind,
and on its circuits the wind returns.

¹⁷ Welch, H.: *The Parting of the Way*. Beacon Press, Boston, 1957, p. 216.

¹⁸ Jung, C.G.: *Seele und Tod* (1934). In: Jung, C.G.: *Wirklichkeit der Seele*. DTV, München, 1992, p. 117-127.

¹⁹ Sveto pismo, Stara zaveza II, Pridigar, 595-616. *Levantinski škofijski ordinariat v Mariboru*, 1958; *The Holy Bible*. Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, 1990, p. 614-626 (Ecclesiastes).

All streams run to the sea,
but the sea is not full;
to the place where the streams flow,
there they continue to flow.
All things are wearisome;
more than one can express;
the eye is not satisfied with seeing,
or the ear filled with hearing.
What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is
what will be done;
there is nothing new under the sun.”²⁰

Consequently Ecclesiastes discovers the vanity of the seeming values which are worshiped by people: Wisdom? “What happens to the fool will happen to me also; why then have I been so very wise?”²¹ Effort? “I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the wise who come after me - and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish?”²² Anyway: “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die,”²³ “a time for war and a time for peace;”²⁴ “nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it;”²⁵ “for the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other.”²⁶ “The same fate comes to all, to the clean and the unclean.”²⁷

The rich man, Ecclesiastes, has started to indulge in debauchery. No experience could reform his final judgement: Vanity beyond all vanity. Everything is vain!

Such certainly is one of the typical situations which invite thoughts of suicide. How would the doctors today perceive such a suicidal intention? If Meng Sun Yang would really commit such an act, they would describe it as “rational suicide”, committed in a lucid mental state. Medicine against the will of that person has no right to intervene. If it is so, we can ask ourselves if the real prevention of suicide is not actually in the field of philosophy and religion. This however cannot be put directly in the spirit of moral condemnation and prohibition, as it was in the case of St. Augustine. The repercussions of such an act were therefore extremely shameful in regard to the body of the deceased as well as to his family. It is strange, but true, that nowadays even the “International Association for Suicide Prevention” has to take a more tolerant approach to the phenomenon of suicide in a society which proceeds even to the gradual

²⁰ Ecclesiastes 1/3-9.

²¹ Ibid. 2/15.

²² Ibid. 2/18, 19.

²³ Ibid. 3/1, 2.

²⁴ Ibid. 3/8.

²⁵ Ibid. 3/14.

²⁶ Ibid. 3/19.

²⁷ Ibid. 9/2.

liberalization of euthanasia. All kinds of pragmatic approaches in regard to the prevention of suicide, as can be grasped from the statistical standpoint, remain sterile.

How did Master Yang Zi deal with Meng Sun Yang's provocation?

"Be resigned to everything, let everything run its course; why need you delay it or speed it on its way?"²⁸

It is worth analyzing these final words: the point of this final wisdom is that anyone who is about to retain one's essence and dignity has to accept one's own impermanence, without restraining the earthly pleasures when there is time for them. To combine these two approaches one has to take farewell of one's life at the time of one's life. Yang Zi however does not mean that one should commit suicide while still young but rather something close to Meister Eckhart's²⁹ "Abgescheidenheit" (or "Abgeschiedenheit"), translated as "detachment", but might be explained with the sense of separation, objectivity, self-reliance, equanimity. Some would describe this as a complete standstill, rest in oneself; to be with oneself in the soul, in regard to the people and the world to remain withdrawn. However this state is not the same as that practised by a stoic who has withdrawn from life and is keeping oneself far from the reach of any emotion, joy or suffering. "The detached person", according to Meister Eckhart is the way Jesus Christ was able to live his passion in complete detachment. He was able to live, suffer and rejoice while remaining detached (germ. "ledig") to everyday outer reality.

In the same way we can read Ecclesiastes in its basic lamentation. Not to deny reality as it is offered to us, but to accept it with a certain reserve. When we already think that Ecclesiastes transcended his pessimism, namely when he gives his toast to the young, encouraging them to take joy in life, he darkens this very stimulative pasus with the perspective that one has to pay for the joys:

"Rejoice, young man, while you are young, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Follow the inclination of your heart and the desire of your eyes, but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgement."³⁰

He remains bitter to the end of his life. The joys of life are darkened in advance with the perspective of death and final judgement after it. Since he was not able to accept the endless cycle of life and impermanence, the one that has been so clearly described by Rabindranath Tagore, an Indian philosopher and poet (1861-1941): " /.../ And because I love this life, I know I shall love death as well. The child cries out when from the right breast the mother takes it away, in the very next moment to find in the left one its consolation."³¹

As Meng Sun Yang has thought - when death approaches one has to perceive it as unimportant, as well, and give in. We can borrow the illustration of this phase in human life from the final days of Socrates as described in Platon's Phaidon³². When ac-

²⁸ Ibid. 1, p. 148.

²⁹ V: Maître Eckhart: Du détachement et autres textes. Jarczyk, Laborriere ed. Rivages poche. Payot, Paris, 1995.

³⁰ Ibid. 20, 11/9.

³¹ Tagore, R.: Gitanjali. Macmillan, London, 1913, 87.

³² Platon: Poslednji dnevi Sokrata. Slovenska matica, Ljubljana, 1988; Faidon, 117-238.

cused by the traditional, conservative stream in Athens in 399 b.Ch., it is obvious from his defense that his attitude is to let himself be killed and thereby fulfill his last mission.³³ That was the door into the Essential - the Real - all that for which he was striving in his life. However he did deny suicide and kept to the notions of orphics and Pitagoreans³⁴ that the people should be like guardians in life - and never leave the place until we are dismissed. His attitude was that one should not kill oneself until God notifies you, which was the situation that he himself was in. It is time to die - that was also what his inner voice (daimonion) had been telling him.

As to Yang Zi, who had been trying to describe the situation "when the death is approaching" to Meng Sun Yang, one could understand it also in the way how Socrates, under the influence of hemlock, was expecting his death and yet kept teaching, sometimes also in a very ironic way as when he told pragmatist Crito: "Crito, I owe a cock to Asclepius, will you remember to pay the debt?"³⁵ Why should he have any debts toward the god of medicine Asclepius and his subordinates? Because they found such a practical method of euthanasia?

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The above patterns of approaching human existence are although distanced in time and space, very similar in certain basic conceptions about life, death and suicide.

BESEDA O AVTORICI

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³³ Guardini, R.: *Der Tod des Sokrates*. Rowohlt, Hamburg, 1958, p. 171.

³⁴ Pitagora (570-496 b.Ch.).

³⁵ The works of Plato, p. 189. The Modern Library, New York, 1956.
