

Butterfly Dream: Allinson vs. Möller

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Zhuangzi's *Butterfly Dream*¹ could be read, especially by Westerners, as "out of body" interpretative perspective à la T.H. Whites' Wart in *The Once and Future King* or Nagel's *...to be a Bat*. Two influential interpretations, however, – one by Robert Allinson, the other by Hans-Geörg Möller – dig deeper. They use two significantly different approaches to probe the dream.

Allinson argues the generally accepted ordering of events in the story is illogical which leads to incoherent, muddled interpretations. He presents an argument for a reconstruction of the dream's sequence of events to interpret it as a metaphor for an enlightenment experience. Hans-Geörg Möller argues for a more traditional Daoist interpretation true to the Chinese text instead of the interpretation that has become popular among Western philosophers as the philosophical message of the dream.

Allinson's argument for a reordering of the dream's events is predicated on the supposition that the dream is a metaphor for the enlightenment experience. He contends that an enlightenment experience must first precede self-transformation, which is central to the Zhuangzi.² Allinson interprets Zhuangzi's act of awakening from a dream as a metaphor for the enlightenment experience, supported by the last line "物化," the transformation of things or rather a transformation of Zhuangzi from a state of dreaming and ignorance to a state of consciousness and enlightenment.

In examining the conventional order of the sequence of events in the dream, what he refers to as the "raw version," Allinson argues that the dream if interpreted as such is illogical and unnecessarily obscure. Allinson takes the liberty of reordering the dream's events by two reasonings: order of exposition and order of explanation.³ Order of exposition means that if an earlier argument is found later in the text and its arrangement cannot be supported by argument then perhaps the text was incorrectly edited or lines misplaced; order of explanation means that "if an argument can explain itself and another formulation of the argument, then it should be placed later in the text on logical grounds."⁴ According to Jung Lee, Allinson contends that the Butterfly Dream which follows the Great Sage Anecdote should in fact precede it, following the line of reasoning of 'order of explanation' since the Great Sage Anecdote explains itself and the Butterfly Dream more fully.

Allinson's actual reconstruction of the events in the dream centers around the sentence, "不知周之夢為胡蝶與，胡蝶之夢為周與。" In the raw version of the text, Zhuang Zhou is dreaming he is a butterfly, then "俄然覺" and begins to question whether he was Zhuang Zhou dreaming of being a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming he was Zhuang Zhou. But

1 Zhuangzi 莊子 (Chuang Tzū, Wade-Giles); Chapter 2, *On Equalizing Things*, "Zhuangzi dreamed he was a butterfly" 莊周夢蝶

2 Allinson, Robert. "A Logical Reconstruction of the Butterfly Dream: The Case for Internal Textual Realization." *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 15 (1988): p 319.

3 Lee, Jung. "What Is It Like To Be A Butterfly? A Philosophical Interpretation of Zhuangzi's Butterfly Dream." *Asian Philosophy* 17.2 (2007): p 188.

4 Idem.

according to Allinson, not knowing whether one is a butterfly or Zhuang Zhou is “post-awakening phenomenon.”⁵ For Zhuang Zhou to awaken and see that he is Zhou, “則蘧蘧然周也,” but still question whether he is a butterfly or Zhuang Zhou is an illogical time to question who he is and does not cohere well with the last declaration of the text, “此之喂物化,” this is what is called the transformation of things. If Zhuang Zhou is himself unsure of who he is, how can he be sure that there is any difference or distinction, “喂.” Thus, Allinson moves the line “did not know if he was Zhou dreaming he was a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming he was a Zhou” into the dream’s event so that after awakening and finding himself to be Zhuang Zhou, the declaration of a distinction between Zhuang Zhou and the butterfly follows.

If the text is left in its raw version, the interpretations that follow lead to two hypotheses, the confusion hypothesis, which states that one cannot ever know if one is truly awake and so one cannot be sure of knowing anything,⁶ a skeptical⁷ view (“out-Descartising” Descartes), and the external endless transformation hypothesis, where the self is continuously transforming into other selves. Following the raw text, the confusion proponents must argue in fact that there is no veracity between dreams and consciousness, appearance and reality, and ultimately that “the transformation of things...among things are not absolute.”⁸ Thus, the problem posed to the confusion proponents is, how can they be sure that a transformation is indeed occurring if their given hypothesis prohibits verifiable cognition in the first place. Allinsons’ response to the external endless transformation proponents is that a dream is not necessary to come to the realization that the self is in a state of continuous transformations since one does not need to fall asleep to realize that possibility.⁹ Furthermore, what is the use of stating that there must certainly be a division? Lastly, the external endless transformation hypothesis reaches the same skeptic ending as the confusion hypothesis since change can also apply to what we think we know and is subject to impermanence and thus unverifiable knowledge.

Allinson interprets the last line of 物化, the transformation of things, to be what occurs when one wakes up; dreams, illusions and ignorance are transformed into consciousness, reality and enlightenment.

Hans-Geörg Möller argues along commentator [Guo Xiang's](#) line of reasoning, which he states should not be read as *the* Daoist interpretation but *a* Daoist interpretation in light of other interpretations that have become popular in the West. Guo Xiang's interpretation is based upon the understanding “that there is no continuous substance underlying the different stages of dreaming and being awake.”¹⁰ Thus, Zhuang Zhou has no remembrance of a dream, nor does the butterfly have any awareness of who Zhuang

5 Allinson, Robert. “A Logical Reconstruction of the Butterfly Dream: The Case for Internal Textual Realization.” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 15 (1988): 322.

6 Feldman, Richard. *Epistemology*. New Jersey: Pearson Education, 2003. p. 51.

7 Popkin, Richard H. *The History of Skepticism*. Berkley: University of California Press, 1997. p. xiii

8 Allinson, Robert. “A Logical Reconstruction of the Butterfly Dream: The Case for Internal Textual Realization.” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 15 (1988): p 325.

9 _____ p 331.

10 Möller, Hans-Geörg. “Zhuangzi's 'Dream of The Butterfly' – A Daoist Interpretation.” *Philosophy East & West* 49.4 (1999): 440.

Zhou is: "The not-knowing about a butterfly at this moment is not different from the not-knowing about a Zhuang Zhou during the time of the dream."¹¹ This therefore necessitates that there is not a transformation in the sense that Allinson understands the term since there is no continuous self that underwent a change to transform into something new. Rather, each exists in their own right; the butterfly exists in the dream and Zhuang Zhou exists outside of the dream, and both are equally existent. This is in fact justified in the Great Sage Anecdote: "Is one of us right and the other wrong? Or are both of us right and both of us wrong? Neither you nor I can know, and others are even more in the dark."¹² This then leads to a polar position of the confusion hypothesis, one of absolute doubtlessness, where every thing and belief can be equally justified.

In his commentary, Guo Xiang parallels the state of being awake and the state of dreaming to life and death, where each has its own place and "everything is completely in accord with its intentions, the one that is alive belongs to life just as the one that is dead belongs to death."¹³ If being awake is no more real than dreaming¹⁴ then being alive is no more real than dead. This too harkens back to the beginning of the Great Sage Anecdote...

"How do I know that the dead may not regret their former lust for life?" and then earlier on in the chapter of 齊物論:

"Do you know wherein all things agree?"

"How could I know that?"

"Well, then, is it possible to know anything at all?"

"How could I know that?"¹⁵

As Guo Xiang notes in his commentary, "How could it be different with the change between life and death!? Why should one let one's heart be made heavy by being moved back and forth between them!? Only the stupid think they really know that life is something delightful and death is something to be sad about."¹⁶ Thus, the divide between dreaming and awakening and life and death is necessarily divided, 分, and there is no transference of self between the divides. What's more, there is no need to worry about the division, and the inability to know what lies beyond, perhaps because it has been given a name, 物化, and thus seems more natural, but also because there is no way to know what lies beyond the divisions and as Guo Xiang states, who knows if it is worse and something to lament.

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11 Idem; 今之不知胡蝶，無異於夢之不知周也。

12 Mair, Victor. *Wandering On The Way*. Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1994. p. 23.

13 Möller, Hans-Geörg. "Zhuangzi's 'Dream of The Butterfly' – A Daoist Interpretation." *Philosophy East & West* 49.4 (1999): 442; 然所在無不適志，則當生而係生者，必當死而戀死矣

14 Idem.

15 Mair, Victor. *Wandering On The Way*. Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1994. p. 22, 20.

16 Möller, Hans-Geörg. "Zhuangzi's 'Dream of The Butterfly' – A Daoist Interpretation." *Philosophy East & West* 49.4 (1999): 447.

Hans-Geōrg Möller goes further than Guo Xiang does in his commentary to include Zhuangzi, as the narrator, and interprets him as the Daoist sage. The Great Sage as he was referred to earlier in the text in the anecdote is referred to as one who will greatly awaken and explain that which we still do not understand since we are all still dreaming, not having been greatly awoken. Möller interprets the Zhuangzi as a non-presence in the text, and likens him to the empty space¹⁷ between the spokes of the wheel, conterminously present with the butterfly and Zhuang Zhou but not influencing them and certainly not validating one's existence over the other. This inclusion would seem to synthesize the Great Sage anecdote in with the Butterfly Dream, however....



...sometimes we may interpret our dreams while we are dreaming. Which, upon awakening leads to the complexity of interpreting not only the dream but the dreamed interpretation of the dream. And, so on.



As a math major and typical westerner, the two interpretations raised highly speculative questions about quantum entanglement; whether “multiverses” (or special regions with different “universal” constants) exist; and, whether cognition is a quantum process that can affect “reality.” The two interpretations would tend to approach such questions in different ways.

Literature often leaves readers hanging. In the last line of *Among School Children*, Keats asks, “How can we know the dancer from the dance?” Viewed one way it suggests the moment is an illusion. Viewed another way it’s an affirmation of poetic transcendence. Keats affirms neither interpretation leaving readers to savor the ambiguity. Digging deeper for a story the author does not tell may be searching for something that does not exist.

Butterfly is perhaps being over-thought as is, some would argue, philosophy. The ambiguity of *Butterfly’s* message and medium encourages conjectures that may lead to dead ends. Did Einstein’s brain, for example, really have special quantum properties that caused mass to suddenly begin distorting space?¹⁸

Finally, it is interesting to consider what Zhuangzi would think about *Butterfly* receiving so much attention two and a half millennia after it was written.



17 “Empty” is used here in the sense that “Non-being,” as in doors and windows, is as real and useful as “Being” – *Dao De Jing*, Chapter 11

18 ...to carry certain social constructionism conjectures, including Latour’s, to their logical conclusion. However, either of two Latour statements (about phantom Ramses II bacillus and Louis Pasteur’s “ferment”) can be used to trivially prove Latour’s proposed social constructionism model is inconsistent. Latour, Bruno. “Ramses II est-il mort de la tuberculose,” *La Recherche*, 307 (March, 1998) p. 84. Latour, Bruno. *Pandora’s Hope*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999. p. 311.