The Half-full and Half-empty Glass of Water:
The Theme of Joy in Existentialism and Classical Daoism
半虚半盈的水杯：存在主义与古典道家
对喜乐的论述

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Abstract

The article investigates the theme of joy in the philosophical traditions of Daoism and existentialism. The main purpose of the article is to highlight the existential significance and conceptual variety of joy, a hitherto ignored theme in the comparative studies. The comparative conceptual analysis reveals the differences and the meeting points of several concepts of joy in existentialism and Daoism, the Zhuangzi in particular. After surveying the rather emotional side of joy based on oppositional evaluation, the exploration of the theme goes on to the notion of joy as an essential existential mood. The article concludes with an analysis of the idea of an empty joyful serenity.

Keywords: Joy, Serenity, Daoism, Existentialism, Zhuangzi, Heidegger
Introduction

Recent developments in the cultural interaction that were caused by globalization have heightened the need of more careful study of Eastern and Western philosophical notions. The comparative analysis of essential philosophical ideas enables us to understand better not only the peculiarities of particular authors but the very essence of human thought. Some important publications in the field of comparative studies have shown the possibility and importance to find and compare different receptions of the same or similar ideas. The investigations into the texts of different cultures and ages became especially relevant for the understanding of perennial existential concerns such as happiness, suffering, death, and self-identification.

Daoism is one of religious and philosophical traditions of the East which became highly popular in the West. It is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the spread of the Daoist practices and ideas in the European and American culture. The Daoist tradition of thought became equally popular as a topic of scientific investigations, especially in the field of philosophy. In the West, the classical texts of Daoism, the *Dao de jing* and the *Zhuangzi*, are the most well-known representatives of this rich and long-lasting tradition. It is most likely

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that the experiential character of the Daoism conditioned the choice of many authors to compare the mentioned texts with the works of existentialists such as Nietzsche,² Kierkegaard,³ and Heidegger,⁴ despite of the obvious differences in size, style and purpose of the texts, not to mention fundamental differences of cultures and religions.

The concepts of Nothingness, Emptiness, and ‘Empty-Self’ are most often taken as a basis for comparative analysis of Daoism and


Western philosophy. The hermeneutical problems are another popular theme for comparative research. So far, however, there has been little discussion about other aspects of comparison, for example love, joy, and happiness, between Daoism and existentialism. Notwithstanding this omission, the theme of joy is a striking feature of the Daoist philosophy. Joy is a notion articulated from different perspectives in Daoism. It manifests itself clearly in the style and basic ideas of many Daoist texts, and especially in the Zhuangzi.

In the case of existentialism, the similar affirmation about joy cannot be made. Therefore, we may notice this ignorance of joy not only in comparative studies but in general studies of existentialism as well. The existentialists usually do not talk directly about the joyful side of existence. We have to search for joy in their texts and hardly ever find it mentioned. John Rowan, a humanist psychologist, calls our attention to the pessimistic viewpoint of the existentialists. According to him, “existentialists do not have to be miserable”, however, the focusing on the tragic side of existence forms a general attitude towards life and death. It is true, that the existentialists usually emphasize the ‘tragic’ side of existence (suffering, guilt, absurd, despair, alienation and loneliness). In many texts, joy appears like mere emotion, mood, temporal and essentially worthless state, and even like expression of superficial inauthentic conception of existence. In this paper, I attempt to defend the view that all existentialists are concerned

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about the tragic side of existence. However, the research also shows that we can find another kind of joy depending on a general world view of the author.

The term ‘existentialism’ has multiple meanings since it refers to a multidimensional tradition. Existentialism embraces different and sometimes opposite worldviews and this will be apparent in the paper. Accordingly, we will see different and even contradictory notions of joy, suffering, life, and death in the texts of various existentialists. However, we can find some thematic equivalents for them in the Zhuangzi. In the article, I will examine the notion of joy by comparing the different forms of joy and by comparing different perspectives of various authors. The research begins by surveying the notion of joy in the philosophy of two atheistic existentialists, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, and by showing its meeting points with the philosophy of the Zhuangzi. It will then go to analyze the theistic understanding of joy by Søren Kierkegaard and Gabriel Marcel. The paper will conclude by a comparative examination of true and superficial joy in the philosophies of Martin Heidegger and Zhuangzi.

The paper takes a philosophical approach as a basis of analysis. Without rejecting the religious side of Daoism the paper focuses on the philosophical perspective. As Bo Mou asserts, in giving the philosophical dimension prominence we focus our attention to one method and aspect of Chinese culture, “and can do so without denying that other kinds of understanding and elaboration are possible”.6 The

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research is narrowed down to the text of *Zhuangzi* taking into consideration its multiple and perspective rich character, which makes the comparison of different Western authors with it more fruitful than with any other text. Throughout this paper the term ‘Daoism’ will be used to refer to the philosophical tradition of Zhuangzi.\(^7\)

1. A tragic joy of ordinary people

We can look at existence and anything else optimistically or pessimistically as we look at a glass of water that is half full. Anyone who looks carefully sees that our existence is far from being full or perfect (it is not self-sufficient; it is not without limitation, etc.). This perspective is our underlying presupposition or even existential decision how we evaluate life: as half-full or half-empty. In the case of atheistic and theistic (or religious) Existentialism, we find an apparent dividing line between these two world views. Regarding the theme of joy, so-called atheistic existentialists are much more skeptical about the possibility of existential joy than religious existentialists. For atheists or philosophers who do emphasize the ‘dark’ side of our existence, joy is a mere illusion and is not a core principle of life.

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\(^7\) Since the aim of this article is not a linguistic or historical, but a comparative conceptual analysis, the entire text entitled *Zhuangzi* (including its “inner”, “outer”, and “miscellaneous” chapters) is referred as one opus. It is not necessary to distinguish here, which concept was used by ZHUANG Zhou himself, and which one was added by his followers. The text of *Zhuangzi* therefore is considered as indicating one philosophical, cultural, and religious tradition that was formed on the basis of the thoughts of Zhuangzi. For the purpose of clarity, I will refer to the implied author of the text as ‘Zhuangzi’.
Two of the most important philosophers of ‘tragic existentialism,’ as we may call it, are Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. They bestowed little attention on the theme of joy, and their texts hardly sowed a lot of happiness in their readers’ hearts. This notwithstanding, both authors are writing about joy. Sartre referred to joy like to an unstable and unessential state. For him, joy is an emotion first of all. Sartre compared emotions to the state of dreaming or madness, though he understood the influence of emotions upon human existence. He emphasized consistently, however, their conditional importance.  

Any ontological conception of joy is impossible for Sartre. He considered joy to be a nonessential aspect of existence which can be comparable to the clouds in the sky. The essence of existence stays unaffected by emotions, according to him. Hardly anyone would assert that emotions are long-lasting or that they essentially influence general attitudes towards life. The emotions are not formative, rather they are influenced by underlying existential moods. For Sartre, the fundamental existential mood is a nausea which presupposes the meaninglessness of everything, whereas joy supposes more or less essential meaning. According to Sartre, a human being can create a meaning for himself, thus a person is able to experience satisfaction. However, such a triumph that arises from perception of one’s freedom and self-realization embraces only a part of existence and cannot be its substance.

Joy’s connection with time is another reason why joy is not

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important for Sartre. Any emotion can be in the past or in the future, but not in the present, because a present is a ‘perpetual hole in being’, as Sartre stated. Joy as an emotion is inferior and unwarranted. Rivca Gordon remarks upon this question: even if I name my condition as being joyful at present, according to Sartrean philosophy, “my joy is still in-question, in suspense. Such a situation of constant questioning rouses feeling of lack and frustration.”

The notion of consciousness is the third reason why I cannot be essentially joyful following the Sartrean philosophy. Joy is possible only because of something concrete as the consciousness is always consciousness of something. So I can rejoice at any concrete reason but not at existence in general. Such joy cannot be a fundamental existential mood, of course.

We may find similar thoughts in the Zhuangzi. The Daoist sage understands that people usually experience joy because of temporary, material things, not because of existence as such. Honor, wealth, health, or career is a nondurable thing. People mostly strive for such things or grieve after loosing them. Zhuangzi talked about people in a way which later existentialists named ‘inauthentic’: “If what is temporarily with us now leaves us and our joy (乐 le) is lost, then although it brought joy, it must have been false. Therefore it is said, ‘Those who forsake

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themselves for things, who and lose their nature for vulgarity, are called topsy-turvy people” (Zhuangzi 16; Mair 151).  

Similar to Sartre, Zhuangzi considered temporal materialistic pleasures to be an illusion. Both Zhuangzi and Sartre saw that people’s joy is determined by the oppositional evaluation of what is good and of what is bad. This subjective evaluation is dependent on concrete situations. Quite often people give prominence to such superficial and temporary joy and turn their back to the real face of existence. Sartrean critique is directed against this thinking and behavior. 

For Sartre, however, there is no other kind of joy possible. There is no ground for joy, meaning or hope beyond the subject and that meaning the person creates him – or herself. There is no loving and care-giving God. The relationship with other people is a permanent fight trying to escape the object-state. There is no ground for joy beyond the person. Death cannot be a reason of joyful hope as well. This is a mistake of Christianity, as Sartre said. Consequently, we can think about joy as mere temporal emotion. Sartre’s understanding of human existence is therefore quite clear: “The being of human reality is suffering because it rises in being as perpetually haunted by totality which it is without being able to be it. […] Human reality therefore is by nature an unhappy consciousness with no possibility of surpassing

12 All quotations are from Mair’s translation: Victor H. Mair, Wandering on the Way. Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu (Honululu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998). For clarity’s sake, I will indicate the chapter number of the Zhuangzi and the page number of Mair’s work in brackets in the main body of the article.

its unhappy state.”14 Such a statement is hardly compatible with Daoist philosophy. The Sartrean notion of joy accords with only one aspect of joy that we find in the Zhuangzi.

Another important author of existentialism, namely Albert Camus, is not as uncompromising as Sartre. The last words of the “Myth of Sisyphus” sound almost optimistic: “One must imagine Sisyphus happy.” This happiness, however, is not that which ordinary people are striving for, taking into consideration the peculiarity of Sisyphus’s way. Already in the very first texts of Camus, joy is inseparable from sadness and despair (L’Envers et l’endroit, written in 1935; Nuptials, written in 1938). It is obvious that in the “Myth of Sisyphus” Camus is also more concerned about the tragic side of existence: “There is no sun without shadow, and it is essential to know the night.”15

For Camus, it was very important to accept the tragic side of existence in order to see whole existence and to live authentically. Suffering is not the prerequisite of joy or worth by itself, or a goal in Camus’ philosophy. It is rather a reality that we have to recognize. The man of absurd, however, knows that there is no end for the existential night. Does Camus himself absolutely turn away from the shiny and cheerful side of existence while calling people to remember the tragic side of it? Most likely, he did not. He understood very well that “it would be a mistake to say that happiness necessarily springs from the

The notion of joy or happiness is subordinated to the absurd, nevertheless. Or, in other words, the only possible joy is an ‘absurd joy’ which is associated exceptionally with the subject, like in the Sartre’s philosophy.

“All Sisyphus’s silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him,” Camus says. In his philosophy, there is some kind of joy, but no place for peaceful harmony or quiet feeling of completeness. The absurd joy is the joy of fighting. The whole exterior world is related to danger, not to harmony. The world is total and overwhelming otherness that is inaccessible to human mind. The only true joy originates in the understanding that I am not able to destroy this otherness and in accepting the permanent state of revolt against the absurd. Following this idea, Camus says: “War cannot be negated. One must live it or die of it. So it is with the absurd: it is a question of breathing with it, of recognizing its lessons and recovering their flesh. In this regard the absurd joy par excellence is creation.” The very concept of ‘absurd joy’ is ambivalent. The absurd is meaninglessness, whereas joy supposes one or another kind of meaning. Camus leaves this dialectical tension in words as he sees the same dialectical tension in the world.

The notion of joy in Camus’ philosophy can serve as a tool for showing the main opposition between atheistic existentialism and Daoism. The essential difference consists in the conception of being.

For Camus and for Sartre, the world and man are totally hostile to each other. The determinate conclusion of Sartre is the gloomy declaration of the tragic side of existence and the negotiation of any kind of transcendence. Camus refuses any source of joy outside the human consciousness too. The joy in Daoism, on the other hand, is a sign of harmonious relationship not only with oneself but with the ‘ten thousand things’ (万物 wan wu) as well.

As we will see, joy in the Zhuangzi is essentially concerned with the transcendent and at the same time immanent Dao. Dao is the source and the essence of this joy and joy is not a result of a strong-willed endeavor. The highest achievement is described as follows: “To make the mind placid and free-flowing without letting it be dissipated in gratification, causing it to have springtime with all things day and night uninterruptedly, this is to receive and engender the seasons in one’s mind” (Zhuangzi 5; Mair 48). The source of joy and harmony with the world is Dao which embraces human being as well as the world but does not unfold itself in anything.

The Daoist attitude with respect to the relationship between the human being and the world is quite opposite to the alienation emphasized by Sartre and Camus. The underlying presupposition of these fundamental differences is an attitude towards evaluation. The philosophy of Sartre and Camus is dualistic: subject–object, I–the world, good–bad, past–future, and so on. Daoists consider that it is exactly such a mode of thinking that hinders a person from experiencing true joy. In the Zhuangzi, we may find several expressions saying like this: “Sorrow and joy (乐 le) are perversions of integrity;
happiness (喜 xì) and anger are transgressions of the Way; likes and dislikes are failings of the mind. Thus, when the mind is free from anxiety and joy (乐 le), that is the ultimate of integrity. When it is unified and unchanging, that is the ultimate of stillness. When there is nothing that irritates it, that is the ultimate of emptiness” (Zhuangzi 15; Mair, 146).

The attitude of non-evaluation is one of the conditions of real joy in Daoism. There is neither usual joy nor usual grief as an opposition to this joy, if there is no evaluation. Zhuangzi does not evaluate not because he is unable to decide what is good and what is bad and neither because he is afraid to choose. He just sees the conditionality of such oppositions and stays beyond them and beyond evaluation. Emotional joy and sorrow, good and evil are just different aspects of the whole. In chapter 18 of the Zhuangzi which is entitled, ‘Ultimate Joy’ or ‘Perfect Happiness’ (至乐 zhi le), it says:

“As for what the common lot do and what they enjoy, again I do not know whether their enjoyment (乐 le) is really joyful or not. I observe that what the common lot considers enjoyment is to rush headlong toward their goals in a flock as though they’d never stop. But I’m not sure whether what they all call enjoyment is enjoyable or not. […] I consider nonaction to be true enjoyment, but the common lot finds it greatly distasteful. Therefore it is said, ‘The ultimate joy is to be without joy’ (至乐无乐 zhi le wu le)” (Zhuangzi 18; Mair 168).

Zhuangzi does not assert that human life is entirely joy and pleasure. Equally, he does not assert that common people do not experience joy or experience a ‘false’ joy. He even uses the same word
Finally, Zhuangzi did not aim at creating new terminology or search for different linguistic expressions of joy. However, the usage of the same word can mean that Zhuangzi embraced the position of non-evaluation.

2. *Gaudium essendi* and the simplicity of being

We must acknowledge that not all existentialists are pessimists supposing that the only possible joy is ultimately dependent on the absurd, nausea or anxiety. A quite opposite notion of joy we may find for example in the philosophy of Gabriel Marcel. He was confident that “the central deficiency in existentialist philosophies of anxiety is the complete arbitrary overlooking of a fundamental experience […] the *gaudium essendi*, the joy of existing”.\(^\text{19}\)

Marcel’s conception of the existential joy is obviously different from that of Sartre and Camus. *Gaudium essendi* is neither a transient emotion caused by concrete reason, nor the joy of fight and creation in the face of the absurd. Marcel is writing about the unconditional and non-temporal joy. Such joy is not a mere long lasting ‘state’ of mind. It is a fundamental and all embracing experience, the ‘overflow of being’, as Marcel names it. In the conversation with Paul Ricoeur, Marcel asserted that such existential experience of joy and completeness is the main theme of his philosophy. He understood that such an attitude

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towards existence is an exceptional case in the main stream of existentialism. According to Marcel, the focus on the existential emptiness and anxiety shows the incapability of contemporary people to experience the existential completeness. Thus, Marcel understood existential joy and mood of completeness as preceding anxiety, alienation and existential emptiness.

Similar thoughts we find in the texts of Søren Kierkegaard paradoxically named ‘the gloomy Dane’ by John Rowan. As regarding joy, one of his most important writings is, “The Lily of the Field, The Bird of the Air: Three Devotional Discourses”. In this short but significant text, Kierkegaard contemplated joy as an underlying unconditional attitude towards whole existence. The lily and the bird enjoy every moment of their existence and their joy is independent of any conditions – exterior or interior. As such, joy does not create an opposition to suffering or sadness. We may say that the only condition for such joy is an openness and acceptance of anything that life may bring. As Kierkegaard stated, “the one whose joy is dependent on certain conditions is not joy itself; his joy, after all, is that of the conditions and is conditional in relation to them. But one who is joy itself is unconditionally joyful, just as, inversely, one who is unconditionally joyful is joy itself.” In Kierkegaard’s philosophy, the

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existential joy is unconditional, which makes it more akin to Daoism where the important feature of an existential satisfaction with life is its contrast with emotional and superficial joy: “One who is situated in timeliness and who dwells in favorableness cannot be affected by joy or sorrow” (Zhuangzi 3; Mair 28).

Kierkegaard emphasized the ‘being present to oneself’ in his notion of joy. This is joy of being ‘here and now’. This is certainly not a giddy-headed cheerfulness of the moment. Kierkegaard referred to it as “the joy of silence and obedience,” i.e. as admission of everything what life gives with the same existential serenity and confidence. This notion of joy is much closer to Daoist philosophy, where complete enjoyment means that nothing more is needed for the enjoyment and nothing is able to disturb it. Zhuangzi’s words are contiguous to Kierkegaard’s notion of joy and obedience: “Just ride along with things as you let your mind wander. Entrust yourself to inevitability and thereby nourish what is central. That’s the ultimate course” (Zhuangzi 4; Mair 35).

Thus, both authors put stress on the inner rather than the outer side of life. The unconditional joy supposes not the perfect and pleasant conditions of life but rather perfect humility and harmony with surroundings despite of any adverse conditions of life. The person, Kierkegaard is talking about, is not sheltered from hardship, diseases, senility, and death. This existential joy means the changed attitude towards suffering, not the unnatural living without suffering,
work, and emotions. Kierkegaard said therefore: “For the lily, to suffer is to suffer, neither more nor less. Yet when to suffer is neither more nor less than to suffer, the suffering is simplified and particularized as much as possible and made as small as possible. It cannot be smaller yet more because it is what it is”.

Such an attitude towards existence is quite opposite to revolt, concurrence, and fighting of tragic existentialists. It may be found in the Daoist tradition.

A Daoist sage has an ability to accept everything as it is and to enjoy the smallest thing as the biggest and the most perfect one without attaching him- or herself to it. As it is said about the true person of old times: “happily (喜 xi) he received and forgetfully he returned. [...] He was compatible with all things but no one knew his limits” (Zhuangzi 6; Mair 52). However, it is important to remember that the Daoist’s ‘ultimate joy without joy’ does not mean the disappearance of emotions. Similarly, ‘non-action’ (无为 wu wei) does not mean the restraint of any activity. Such existential joy means ‘not giving prominence to anything’, living in the harmony with the surroundings, and escaping the apparent split between subject and object.

Zhuangzi talks about sage’s harmonious relationship with man (‘human joy’) and with heaven (‘heavenly joy’). One may wonder why Zhuangzi does not emphasize ‘heavenly joy’ as more valuable. But we must remember that Daoist joy is related to non-evaluation and both ‘kinds’ of joy spring from the non-action. Dao is on earth just as in heaven. The existential joy in the Zhuangzi is not a euphoric towering

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above the world, but rather an immovable staying in the very depth of everyday life. The heart-mind (心 xin) of the sage stays unaffected by extraordinary situations just as by usual events. Existence becomes simple and fundamentally harmonized with the transcendence.

It is impossible to conceptualize, to explain, and to argue for such a notion of unconditional and all embracing joy. It would be difficult to argue against somebody’s assertion that such joy is just an illusion or a self-delusion. Both existentialists and Daoists agree that the very experience is much more important than its verbalization or conceptual analysis. Accordingly, we do not have to argue about existential joy, rather we have to experience it. Marcel called this joy ‘primordial existential assurance’ which is very hard to justify but at the same time nobody can refute it as an experience.25

Like the ‘happiness of fishes’ (鱼之乐 yu zhi le) in the seventeenth chapter of Zhuangzi, existential joy is not an object of logical critical discussion, because it is impossible to understand, prove or disprove without personal experience. This statement is valid not only for the notion of joy but also for the notions of the absurd and the nausea. We need to experience it in order to say we know what it is. However, the underlying attitude towards existence as a half-full or a half-empty glass of water is previous to the experience of joy. In that preconceived fundamental world view we can find the most subtle resemblance and the most substantial base for comparative analysis. Most likely this is the reason why Zhuangzi’s conception of joy is allied to the ideas of

religious existentialism despite the fundamental religious differences between Christianity and Daoism.

3. The existential serenity and the ‘joy without joy’

The notion of joy that is most comparable to Daoist philosophy we find in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. Heidegger is better known as the ‘philosopher of anxiety’ and was ‘not a cheerful person’, as John Rowan put it in his felicitous characterization. According to Heidegger, different feelings and moods hide the ‘nothingness’ (and accordingly, the whole image of existence) from us. Only the underlying mood of dread (or anxiety) unfolds it. It is obvious and, as Heidegger asserted, has nothing to do with the ordinary emotions of fear or sadness. Fear, love, joy, hate, etc. attach the person to the things. Anxiety (Angst) does not create any attachment but paradoxically releases a person from any restriction. This is not the usual dread of everyday life but rather the existential acceptance of the possibility of non-being. So, Heideggerian anxiety is opposite to the same notion of emotion that was criticized by Sartre and Camus and more alien to the notion of joy as a satisfaction with life in the philosophy of Kierkegaard.

In the philosophy of Heidegger, we may find a notion of joy related to the existential anxiety. Taking into consideration Heidegger's general thought we can easily understand that joy in his philosophy is

not a mere emotion. According to Heidegger, “along with the sober anxiety which brings us face to face with our individualized capability-of-being, there goes an unshakeable joy (gerüstete Freude) in this possibility.” This ‘unshakeable joy’ is directly connected with ‘nothingness’ and is more similar to the Daoist’s ‘joy without joy’ than to ‘joy of common lot’ caused by evaluation. The notion of true joy in the Zhuangzi is also related to ‘nothingness’ and ‘emptiness’ which is not a process or a result of the decline of being, but rather the source of it. Dao is often compared with emptiness (太无 tai wu or 太虚 tai xu) in which all things thrive. The emptiness is simultaneously the fullness of the heart-mind (心 xin) of a sage. This emptiness is the main objective of various practices, though there is nothing to achieve.

In the philosophy of Heidegger, the existential joy comes ‘along with’ anxiety – neither before it, nor after it. It can be possible, however, to interpret this joy as related only to anxiety and depending on it. This would be still the half-empty glass of water if the existential joy would be subordinated to anxiety. The Heideggerian notion of joy, however, is much more wide and deep, and is most comparable to the philosophy of Zhuangzi therefore.

Heidegger used other words for joy along with ‘Freude’, for example ‘Heiterkeit’. ‘Die Heiterkeit’ originally means a bright and joyful mood as well as the serenity of the sky. In his short text Der Feldweg (‘Country road’; written in 1949), Heidegger explained the notion of joyful serenity (die Heiterkeit) and used the old swäbish word ‘kuinzig’

that derives from ‘keinnützig’ (meaning–useless, valueless).28 The very
title Der Feldweg (‘country road’) is linked with the concept of Dao—the
Way. The concept of the serenity makes a clear distinction between
useless existential joy and common emotional joy related to useful,
pleasant, and funny things. This is one of the significant similarities
between the notions of joy in Zhuangzi’s and Heidegger’s philosophy.
Joy derives from worthlessness but it is of the greatest worth.
Worthlessness might have a twofold meaning here as joy has. There can
be a worthlessness of things commonly accepted as valuable by
ordinary people and there can be a commonly accepted worthlessness
that is of real value for a sage.

The worth of worthlessness is silence, serenity, and emptiness-fullness
of Dao or Being (in Heidegger’s philosophy). Thus, the emptiness and
the nothingness is another common feature of the true joy in
Heidegger’s philosophy and the Zhuangzi. The ordinary emotion of joy
is always full – it always has its reason and content. The opposite
emotions such as anger, fear or sadness threaten the stability of such
joy. Looking from the evaluating perspective, we strive for everything
related to joy and happiness and avoid everything related to the
suffering. Only existential joy can be empty, i.e. without any content.
According to Zhuangzi, we find only sorrow when we strive for the
temporary joy or are attached to it. We may achieve the completeness
of existential joy only, paradoxically, by renouncing common joy as a
goal of our existence.

28 Wolfgang Kienzler, “Keinnützig. Über Heideggers Umgang mit einem Wort”, Allgemeine
There is one more shared feature of the existential joy in Heidegger’s and Zhuangzi’s philosophy: naturalness and independence of human will. In his letter to Walter Zluhan, Heidegger gives an explanation of the earlier mentioned word ‘kuinzige’. Heidegger said that although it is an untranslatable word some explanations are possible: “It means friendliness for humans and things and real solicitude for them. It means something what is supposed to be the very high in different areas, what signs the deepest purport of Being though usually appears as poorness, what unifies all oppositions in the higher Oneness though stays in permanent motion. All this constitutes the mode of being of Swabian Dasein, which person has or has not.”

The last words point to another important feature of true joy. This untranslatable ‘kuinzige’ is not an offspring of human endeavor. We cannot obtain or earn it because it has no value (the very meaning of it is uselessness, valuelessness). This kind of joy is existential serenity (die Heiterkeit). A similar idea we find in the mentioned Kierkegaard’s text, where he talked about unconditional joy. We can experience it after we throw off sorrow entirely. According to Kierkegaard, both the throwing off of sorrow and the experience of joy depend not on our willpower but on unconditional humbleness. And this reminds us of another often used Heideggerian conception, namely, meekness (Gelassenheit). Like Kierkegaard, Heidegger asserted that we still can obtain existential joy despite the powerlessness of our will. According to Heidegger, the country road (namely the very life)

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can give it. This existential joy (*die Heiterkeit*) is not an element or aspect of life but a joyful way of being.

Contrasting authentic attitude with that of common people Heidegger noticed that usually people consider their mood of serenity to be a result of the experienced joy, and not the other way around. Heidegger, however, asserted the opposite: “The fundamental serenity (*das Heitere*) keeps human heart open to the Light that is the source of this serenity and *was fired up not by us*. We just *receive* this Light. We stand in the Light like enlightened ones”. Such words sound like those of a Daoist sage talking about the *Dao* as the source of ten thousand things and about ultimate joy which is ‘non-action’ and worthlessness. The position of Heidegger is quite opposite to the attitude of ‘tragic existentialism’ and may indicate a theistic world view. However, this is not necessarily so. In this case, Heidegger’s words show the acceptance of the transcendence in the immanence, the touch of Being and being, and the dependence of true joy on this perspective and attitude.

The last common feature of joy in the philosophies of Heidegger and Zhuangzi I would like to mention here, is the equality of life and death. Heidegger called our attention to death as all existentialists do. We cannot perceive whole existence without accepting death as part of it. Notwithstanding this point, Heidegger was not obsessed with death or mortality. The awareness of one’s mortality does not mean an escape from life to death. It rather helps us to understand death as a

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continual process, not just as a future event, and to live my life authentically. The authentically perceived death unfolds itself as mortality which overwhelms me totally already now. According to Heidegger, the real transparency (Durchsichtigkeit) of Being may be reached only after awareness of one’s mortality. Death is here and now as the essence of my life, though it will be in the future as the end of my existence. Life and death, therefore, are equal parts of our existence. Although we live every day with our death and mortality, it does not mean despair or that life is meaningless. To live one’s life means to live one’s death and vice versa.

Zhuangzi does not pay much attention to human mortality and talks about life and death as phenomena of equal value. Life is not better than death like morning is not better than evening. He looks at everything from the ‘null-perspective’ of Dao, so to speak. Dao is like a centre of the wheel for which all the spokes are of the same importance or equally inconsequential. A person is subject to the same laws of nature and transformation as every other thing. The sage arrives, lives, and dyes naturally, self-so (自然 ziran), being in harmony with all things. According to Zhuangzi, such was the true human being of old: he or she “knew neither fondness for life nor aversion to death, was neither elated by going forth nor reluctant to return. [...] his (or her) mind was forgetful, his visage calm, his forehead beamingly broad” (Zhuangzi 6; Mair 52). For Zhuangzi, it seems, there is no joy in this detachment. However, Wu Kuang-ming asserts, that Zhuangzi’s idea is

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joy which becomes possible while living with the heaven and earth: “living as we were already dead.” 32 In the philosophies of Heidegger and Zhuangzi, to live one’s own life and death means to live revealing the transparency of Being / Dao – to live in joyful serenity.

Conclusions

After this rather brief and initial inquiry, we could say that the attitude towards joy as a transient emotion and a kind of illusion expressed in the philosophy of atheistic existentialists is quite similar to one aspect of joy in the Zhuangzi: the joy of ‘common lot’ caused by temporal and material things is not the true underlying relationship with oneself and the world. However, the self-satisfaction and self-actualization of ‘tragic’ existentialism is conditional, for it depends on human will and has no transcendent source or ground. The imperishable outer and inner tension as well as the hostile subject’s relationship with the world is typical of the writings of Sartre and Camus. Their attitude towards existence may be characterized as a half-empty glass of water. It is opposite to Zhuangzi’s philosophy where the joy is not restricted to emotions.

The conception of joy found in the texts of the theistic existentialists such as Marcel and Kierkegaard is more comparable to the ‘true joy’ of Zhuangzi. The unconditional character of existential joy, harmonious relationship with oneself and surroundings, and the

quiet acceptance of everything that life brings do transcend the absurd, the alienation, and the nausea. As for religious existentialism, the attitude towards existence is more like an optimistic decision to see the ‘half-full’ glass of water. And again, the strongly emphasized monotheistic belief makes religious existentialists only partially comparable with Zhuangzi.

The research has shown that the concept of joy is subordinate to the essential position: to see Being as one whole or to look at everything from the perspective of oppositions (I–other, I–the world, subject–object, this world–the afterlife, etc.). The world view most comparable to the Zhuangzi’s philosophy is found in some minor writings of Heidegger. For Zhuangzi and Heidegger, a half glass of water is just a half glass of water—no part is better than another. For them, it is possible to experience existential joy and serenity only if we are able to see the Oneness of Being and Nothingness. The Heideggerian ‘kuinzige’ means the transcendence of all opposites in the higher oneness of Being. Similarly, the Daoist’s ‘joy without joy’ is based on the harmony of all things in the Dao. The underlying existential serenity is not identical with and not opposite to any emotion or mood. It is not dependent on human will-power. It reveals itself as openness to life and death as constituting one whole. And again, it is possible only as a living experience and not as result of academic discussion or theoretical consideration – the feature which connects the philosophies of Daoism and Existentialism despite their differences.
Bibliography


Agnė Budriūnaitė: The Theme of Joy in Existentialism and Classical Daoism


Neville, Robert Cummings. Ritual and Deference: Extending Chinese Philosophy in a
本文对道家与存在主义中的“喜乐”主题进行了考察。在比较研究中，人们常忽视对“喜乐”进行研究，因此本文目的在于对喜乐的重要性及其概念上的多样性进行研究。通过概念分析，可以看到存在主义与道家，尤其是《庄子》，之间的差异与相通之处。通过对喜乐的情感方面的正反评估，本文探讨了喜乐之为一种本质实存的状态的内涵，并在结论中分析了“虚空的喜乐安宁”这一观念。

关键词：喜乐、安宁、道家、存在主义、《庄子》、海德格尔