

# Language: A Problem of Particularity

Jeffery Culver  
DePaul University (Chicago, IL)

**Abstract:** In analyzing the problems of language, seeking the help of philosophers is an understated must. In *Language: A Problem of Particularity*, those inconveniences are relieved by taking a comparative view of the resolutions brought about by John Locke and the Chinese skeptic Zhuangzi. Based around the generalized problem that language has functioning due to particularity in the universe, the two authors are delicately probed for their insights to this issue. As a result an interesting, and multifaceted hybrid approach allows greater access to working with language, and as a result minimizes the inconveniences that plague all languages.

A skepticism of language can become highly problematic to address, especially in either spoken or written word, for that seems to fundamentally undercut the goal of any such skeptic. For both John Locke and Zhuangzi, the classical Chinese skeptic, it is apparent - especially in their texts- that there are some serious problems fundamental to language and so both attempt to address this in their own particular way. One must strive to take many factors into account when comparing and contrasting such diverse figures in philosophical history. Such considerations are significant between divergent figures even in the Western philosophical tradition, but when one considers that these two individuals are separated by both a physical (/cultural) span and by approximately two millennia,<sup>1</sup> this caution seems pertinent. Cultural differences must be considered to carefully examine whether or not a strong similarity can be posited between the two thinkers for it is difficult to represent texts that cover a skepticism of language in different times and ways accurately, especially in direct comparison to one another. It seems promising that by observing the similarities and differences that emerge within the comparison a better understanding of language problems will be discovered, and can therefore, plausibly be rectified.

The main, and therefore most troubling problem of language, that arises for both Locke and Zhuangzi is a problem of particularity. This problem is not with the particularity in language,

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<sup>1</sup> Although the exact dates are not known for Zhuangzi's life, Victor Mair estimates it to be 369-286 B.C.E.; by contrast Locke lived from 1632-1704 C.E. (a difference of 1,918 to 2,074 years)

but has to do with particularity as it occurs in the universe (which is then taken up by language).

This is of course not to say that there is not a problem with particularity as it occurs within and across languages, for Locke was keen on this idea and pointed out that

“A moderate skill in languages, will easily satisfy one of the truth[s] of this, it being so obvious to observe a great store of words in one language, which have not any that answer them in another. Which plainly shows, that those of one country, by their customs and manner of life, have found occasion to make several complex ideas, and [have] given names to them, which others never collected into specific ideas.” (Locke Essay III, V, 8)  
Any confusion that is created by comparing languages will be undertaken on an as needed basis.

That is to say as often as the difference in words or word meanings causes any confusion that needs to be explained to fundamentally compare Locke and Zhuangzi will be done.

The particularity that causes problems within (as opposed to between) languages is what needs to be addressed in order to see what problems arise from language. The specific problems that emerge due to particularity are caused because language aims to describe, or is presumed to describe objects in the world in a such a way as to classify or relate them to one another and describe particulars that are always changing. In addition language itself differs between cultures and in fact may even change within a culture. Language is also to its detriment vague and ambiguous because it aims to capture ideas between people by general consensus. These problems of particularity are the result of a hybrid of thoughts that arise between Locke and Zhuangzi that operate well around a central problem that neither necessarily defined as particularity. Particularity, however, fits well as a means to analyze both of their texts on a common ground that does not necessarily impose a bias onto either of them. It is critical to note that despite both of their obvious perceptions of the shortcomings of language(s), neither one is anti-language and so both attempt to rectify, in their own way, the problems of language. Locke is keen on opposing an anti-language position and feels “it would well deserve our most serious thoughts, to consider what remedies are to be found for [the] inconveniences [of language].” (Locke Essay III, XI, 1) Zhuangzi also, despite his criticisms, felt that “saying is not blowing breath, saying says something.” (Graham 52) While it seems clear that Locke and Zhuangzi

might agree on the salvaging of language, there is one cultural difference between the two that could create a problem in their comparison. This problem is the lack of a mind/ body dualism in Chinese culture.

A mind/body dualism presents a problem of particularity insofar as it denotes divisibility within human beings. This, however, is an issue that can be viewed here as non-problematic, for the mind body dualism is generally accepted within Western Philosophy, and it is not necessary for either argument, except insofar as it helps to explain some of the divergent views of Zhuangzi and Locke in a clearer scope. The first problem of particularity that needs to be addressed however, is the problem created by the differentiation and classification of objects. This becomes especially problematic for Zhuangzi, who is incredibly skeptical of differentiation in any capacity. Indeed he says, “to ‘divide’, then, is to leave something undivided... [and] ‘to discriminate between alternatives’ is to fail to see something’.” (Graham 57) What he means in this passage is not exactly clear, for it does not seem possible to deconstruct the world with just one metaphysical cut, and then not be able to account for everything in this dipolar classification. Zhuangzi clearly feels that it is not possible however to do this. In Graham’s analysis of this passage, he makes the argument that

“Chuang-tzu criticizes two supposed examples of describing in words the whole out of which things divide. He thinks that analysis always leaves an overlooked remainder, and that the whole cannot be recovered by putting the parts together again. According to the current logic, an object either is an ox or is not, so that having distinguished the alternatives we ought to be able to recover the totality by adding non-oxen to oxen.” (Graham 55)

There is some ambiguity in what Zhuangzi says, for the subtext of what he is saying here seems to stress the importance of not dividing totality into categories in the first place. At least, it seems useless to state that all things can be accounted for by saying something like the universe is comprised of only two things, oxen and all other things that are not oxen. While this in fact, is true, the type of differentiation that it creates is useless both because its definition is found by

characteristics of what an ox is not<sup>2</sup> and it means that you must define everything as either oxen or non-oxen (making the category of non-oxen too vast to even speak of). Another passage that Zhuangzi wrote may be of use here in helping to unpack what he says so concisely. Curiously enough, the passage itself seems reflective of Locke. Zhuangzi states “rather than use the meaning to show that ‘The meaning is not the meaning’, use what is not the meaning. Rather than use a horse to show that ‘A horse is not a horse’, use what is not a horse.”<sup>3</sup> (Graham 53)

What this passage is addressing is the realization that naming different things is essentially meaningless. Any word could be chosen to represent a horse. The word horse itself is only the clearest representation of the animal because of ideas attached to the general consensus. Along with this there is a caution in attempting to define objects by what they are not for a great number of things in the universe are not horses. Transition? Here, Locke might address this problem from the realization that definitions “signify only men's peculiar ideas, and that by a perfect arbitrary imposition, is evident, in that they often fail to excite in others .. the same ideas, we take them to be signs of...” (Locke Essay III, I, 8) Locke it seems would therefore agree with Zhuangzi on the fact that arbitrary naming causes a problem because it ultimately undermines the purpose of language, or the general communication of ideas. However, because of the mind/body dualism not found in Ancient Chinese thought, it is not likely that Zhuangzi would feel that people could have their own clearly defined ideas of objects without the generalized consensus of language. It seems like Zhuangzi also hopes in this passage to show that by naming different things in an arbitrary fashion, the meanings are useless, for defining a horse by everything that is not a horse is a useless and indeed absurd system of differentiation for it does not speak to the

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<sup>2</sup> This is also an example of an endless taxonomy, which Locke introduces and discredits for its uselessness.

<sup>3</sup> “‘When no thing is not the meaning the meaning is not the meaning’. Chuang-tzu thinks he was wasting his time; since all disputation starts from arbitrary acts of naming, he had only to pick something else as the meaning of the word, name something else ‘horse’, and then for him what the rest of us call a horse would not be a horse.” (Graham 53)

relevant characteristics of a horse in any manner. This might in fact be what Zhuangzi was attempting to say by “ ‘discriminat[ing] between alternatives’ is to fail to see something.” (Graham 57) We can see here however that one of the crucial factors to any language is the necessity for the general acceptance of terms in order for language to function.

After the initial problem of language arises from differentiating objects, a new problem stems from this and it can be observed that all objects are in a constantly changing environment and are themselves constantly undergoing change. Saying that objects are in a pure state of change or are constantly changing would be misleading due to the ambiguity imposed by that use of those words. Instead, it should just be considered that objects are never the same in the current moment as they were at any given moment before. This of course means that people are different every moment as well. This seems clearest when the sense perceptions of people are examined, for human beings are constantly receiving a torrent of new information about the world around them. This data is directly related to a human beings surroundings and is therefore temporally tied to the world of particulars. What is not clear however is the degree to which the idea of human beings in an ever-changing state seems true, for such change is not immediately perceivable. Zhuangzi expresses “the reclining man here now is not the reclining man of yesterday,” through one of the characters in his text. (Graham 48) In the context of the story, the man describes the feeling that he is having as feeling like he has just lost his ‘other’. This ‘other’ is ambiguous, but the connotation given to it is not as important as the man’s sense that he is now different because of his loss. A life-changing event happens here, and since the man has lost some part of him it seems as though he is now a completely different person. This perception on his part illustrates that the environment and people alike undergo change, yet there is more to change than just the perceptions of people. Indeed, it also helps to remind us that all particulars are undergoing change and this only helps to exacerbate the problems found within the system of

taxonomy that people naturally create by trying to order and understand the world. This was self evident for Zhuangzi, for he wrote, “Judging ‘That’s it, that’s not’ is what I mean by ‘the essentials of man’.” (Graham 82) Locke, it seems would have to agree with this, for he feels “it is impossible, that every particular thing should have a distinct peculiar name... [for] it is beyond the power of human capacity to frame and retain distinct ideas of all the particular things we meet with... [and] if it were possible, it would be useless because it would not serve to the chief end of language.” (Locke Essay III, III, 2-3) In this way, it is obvious that people classify different objects to better understand the world around them. Locke fears that if people were to individually classify objects, such as naming each individual ox within the entire species, it would both fail to serve the chief end of language and “*if all were definable, ‘twould be a process in infinitum.*” (Locke Essay III, IV, 5) To compound this process in infinitum, or an endless taxonomy, it would seem then, given that everything changes from one moment to the next, a person over the course of a lifetime could just attempt naming and renaming themselves in order to accurately depict their particularity. It should be agreed that this is not only useless but indeed foolish, for nothing substantive seems to arise from it, especially given that people do not observe particularity in such a radical fashion.

The necessity for language to arise out of a general consensus, that ascribes meaning to meaningless terms, is one of the problems of language that can be overlooked because it is the foundation of any system of language. It is however necessary to note how a general consensus works and why it is critical to agree on arbitrary words for the purpose of language. Disagreement on such an issue leads one to retreat to the use of personal words, which Locke saw as possible yet ridiculous<sup>4</sup>. To agree to disagree as Zhuangzi sees as possible is also useless. As a result one must endeavor to form a consensus around words and execute them to the best of

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<sup>4</sup> (Locke Essay III, VI, 51)

their ability. In one passage Zhuangzi shows how there are many alternatives to placating disagreement, but only finding a common sense of agreement leads to any positive outcome, for Zhuangzi knew agreeing to disagree meant that no one could benefit. In fact he said

“You and I having been made to argue over alternatives, if it is you not I that wins, is it really you who are on to it, I who am not? If it is I not you that wins, is it really I who am on to it, you who are not? Is one of us on to it and the other of us not? Or are both of us on to it and both of us not? If you and I are unable to know where we stand, others will surely be in the dark because of us. Whom shall I call in to decide it? If I get someone of your party to decide it, being already of your party how can he decide it? If I get someone of my party to decide it, being already of my party how can he decide it? If I get someone of a party different from either of us to decide it, being already of a party different from either of us how can he decide it? If I get someone of the same party as both of us to decide it, being already of the same party as both of us how can he decide it? Consequently you and I and he are all unable, I know where we stand, and shall we find someone else to depend on?” (Graham 60)

Without just ceding consent to the whole for the sake of language, one has no right to access language, and in this way they have removed themselves from any others who wish to participate in such a system.

Locke is very clear in his attempt to fix the problems in language, and like Zhuangzi is concerned about the problems created by a general consensus. He clearly lays out a few precautions people should take in order to prevent such abuses of words that cause them to have ambiguities or that cast them into doubt. Locke says, “the imperfection of words is the doubtfulness of their signification.” (Locke Essay III, IX, 4) This cannot be entirely true however, because Locke feels that words naturally have no significance, and so, what he must mean here is that in having a system of language, one just must accept that whatever words are ascribed to ideas or objects in order to describe them are significant insofar as they are the best way for any one person to communicate their thoughts. This must be so for “any words will serve for recording,” objects or ideas that occur on a completely interpersonal level. (Locke Essay III, IX, 2) From this it is clear to see why Locke must feel that the idea of a generalized consensus is so important for without it language would not be possible in any regard.

In order “to remedy the defects of speech,” Locke sets out to establish several critical guidelines that he feels will help cure the ambiguities and relieve the doubtfulness cast upon

language, but what he does address with these guidelines does not relieve language from the problem of particularity. (Locke Essay III, XI, 8) Locke's guidelines can be addressed all within the problem of particularity, for as is evident they all fall short in this capacity. For one, it is clear that people must accept that words have no inherent meaning or they will not be able to trust or even use language in the first place<sup>5</sup>, and this of course acts counter to the sole purpose of language, which is the communication of ideas. After people accept that words are essentially meaningless, except for the meaning imparted to them by a general consensus, one must strive to always know the signification of the words they use<sup>6</sup>, and if need be, are able to show that empirically<sup>7</sup>, and be consistent, to the best of their ability in the application of words.<sup>8</sup> None of these, while clearly useful for helping people understand how not to err in language, addresses this problem in regards to particularity, the root cause for most problems in language.

On the other hand, it is clear that Zhuangzi is, if not keenly aware of the problem of particularity, able to posit a solution that does seem to rectify the problems of language. This can be observed as a natural extension of what is called in his text 'the skill stories.' These skill stories aim to show, in almost an anti-Aristotelian way, how the ultimate wisdom is possessed not by those who can explain or even articulate methodologies, but instead by those who are masters in their craft. Language, while not explicitly addressed in this section of skill stories, can be dealt with in a very interesting way, once view as a skill. As a precursor to this it may be

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<sup>5</sup> "Now since sounds have no natural connections with our ideas, but have all their signification from the arbitrary imposition of men, the doubtfulness and uncertainty of their signification, which is the imperfection we here are speaking of, has its cause more in the ideas they stand for..." (Locke Essay III, IX, 4)

<sup>6</sup> "[People] shall take care to use no word without a signification..." (Locke Essay III, XI, 8)

<sup>7</sup> "the only sure way of making known the signification of the name of any simple idea, is by presenting to his senses that subject, which may produce it in his mind, and make him actually have the idea, that word stands for." (Locke Essay III, XI, 14)

<sup>8</sup> "to instruct or convince another, [one] should use the same word constantly in the same sense: if this were done... many of the controversies in dispute would be at an end" (Locke Essay III, XI, 26)

necessary to further inundate ourselves with the concepts that critically underlie the skill stories, and show how they work out in Zhuangzi's ideology.

In Daoism, as addressed by both Laozi and Zhuangzi, it is clear that both spontaneity, and non-action, or wu wei are critical and important issues that clearly illustrate a way in which both texts believe people should act in the world. In the text, spontaneity is exhibited in the case of Zhuangzi by introducing characters that are able to use spontaneous action to their benefit, as it is shown to be a benefit in the Daodejing's goals. These stories often include people who are masters of their crafts while demonstrating that the actions that bring them great fame and/or success, are done exclusively by acting in a way that is spontaneous. One of the clearest examples of this is the story of a cook/ butcher that is found in the inner chapters of Zhuangzi. What the butcher says on his methodology is that he "rely[s] on the Heavenly patterns, strik[ing] in the big gaps... following what is inherently so" (Ivanhoe 225). Several things are critical to this story in proving that following natural patterns and likewise spontaneity are good and clearly beneficial. For one the butcher only relies in patterns, patterns that are provided to him by nature. This can be taken to mean most clearly that the patterns that the butcher follows come to him naturally, for if he follows the natural patterns (the anatomy of an animal) he does not strain in his efforts. Secondly, the butcher cuts in areas that nature has provided and because he follows nature's lead, the butcher is seen as not only a master at what he does, but the results are flawless. Notice that without letting these patterns emerge and letting nature take the lead in determining his action, the man would most certainly be doomed to be one of the many average butchers who "changes [his cutter] every month because he brakes it," by simply going against what nature dictates (Ivanhoe 225).

Another example of these natural skill related stories is that of the old man who was seen swimming in a torrent of water, strong enough to wash fish away. When asked how it was

possible the man could be such an excellent swimmer the man replied, “I have no special way. I began with what was innate, grew up with my nature, and completed my destiny” (Mair 182). Clearly the idea of what is innate speaks to this man’s nature, a nature that he was able to use without exhausting himself and it helped him to survive the torrent. By appealing to nature explicitly, was and by not attempting to do anything he already had not done, or felt was innate, he received the benefit of remaining in the water and staying alive. When taken in the abstract, seemingly odd context presented here, it seems that these stories present a reality that while applicable is not exactly realistic. However, it is clear that what Daoism has in mind is an active, and highly practical approach to applying spontaneity and non-action in ways that directly affect all people positively.

One final way in which nature and all events that happen spontaneously, work as a force in the universe, is that they seem to show how acting spontaneously will never lead someone far from the center, and so there is a more natural balance in the world, one not brought about by simply a large scale vacillation between two possible extremes. Chapter 7 of the Daodejing examines both why it is that Heaven and Earth outlast man, and why it is that one is able to get what they want by putting themselves behind others. What the text says is that “Heaven is long lasting;/ Earth endures/ Heaven is able to be long lasting and earth is able to endure, because they do not live for themselves/ And so, they are able to be long lasting and endure.” (Ivanhoe 166) It is evident here that the reason that these things are able to be long established in the universe is because they are not living for themselves, and because of this their reward for being this way is that they endure. It is fair to assume here that the beneficence of both Heaven and Earth are meant to show that nature is good, not for its own sake, but it is a good. In much the same way it would be fair to assume that this is a message to people on how it is that the Daodejing is eternal and long lasting for it is its message that is good. In the Daodejing it also stresses that one who is

in accordance with the Dao, will long endure like Heaven and Earth, for it is the way of nature that what is beneficent should be lasting and what is not is condemned to an early demise. Being in accordance with Dao brings about a longer life, something that is seen as highly valuable. Chapter 44 in the Daodejing stresses finding moderation, and in this way it says that one will long endure. In this passage it is also clear that the Daodejing stresses that nature is a balanced force in the world and in that way finding either great excess or deficiency is likely to only bring about bad things in the world. “Know contentment and avoid disgrace, / know when to stop and avoid danger;/ and you will long endure.” (Ivanhoe 184)

It seems very clear that Daoism, and the notion of spontaneity can be effectively used in order to make life better for people, and that spontaneity is good for those individuals, often bringing with it success and long life. It also can help those who have experienced a death rationalize that death, and not forget the individual, but do no damage to them by mourning (especially in excess). It also helps to show that those who act in a spontaneous manner are more likely to be the least altered by the spontaneous nature of nature itself, and in this way, even though they will not be able to know what is coming in the future, they will surely know how to respond to it when challenges arise. With the idea of Wu Wei, “One does less and less until one does nothing;/ One does nothing yet nothing is left undone.” (Ivanhoe 185) In this way, it is the non-action of things that allows for the greatest amount of things to get done; in a way it seems to be saying let nature take its course. It is pointless to fight against what is unnatural, and it seems to say that having selfish desires, and not being satiated with wanting only what you need is unnatural. The only way that this can be achieved is by acting spontaneously.

One facet which has not yet clearly been addressed by these skill stories is the possibility of using language as a skill, as was posited as not only a possibility but the only way yet conceived to work with language in terms of its particularity, and we can discuss this in terms of

the performative aspects of language, or language as a performance skill. It seems that this is how Zhuangzi would want to remedy the problems of language. Zhuangzi would want to embrace particularity in the use of words, in order to use them in the best possible manner. Sometimes it is not possible to conceive of any word in a given moment to adequately describe how a person is feeling, however one must note that language is always lacking in this capacity, for it is never certain that any existing word can accurately depict the broad range of particularity. In this way it is easy to see how people could find themselves speechless, for by not knowing the particulars of what they are experiencing they cannot put it accurately into words. One skill story, not yet mentioned, discusses a cart builder who stated “speaking for myself, I see it in terms of my own work. If I chip at a wheel too slowly, the chisel slides and does not grip; if too fast, it jams and catches in the wood. Not too slow, not too fast; I feel it in the hand and respond from the heart, the mouth cannot put it into words, there is a knack in it somewhere which I cannot convey to my son and which my son cannot learn from me. This is how through my seventy years I have grown old at chipping at wheels.” (Graham 140) In the same way, Zhuangzi feels that speech can be spontaneous, acting through the heart, for the heart (xin) is just a vessel through which a naturally occurring spontaneity can act. This type of nature is quite different of course from Locke’s pre-linguistic state of nature, but Zhuangzi views language as entirely natural, as if no different from “the twitter of fledglings.” (Graham 52) Locke disagrees saying that humans are extraordinary, ‘rational corporeal beings’, and because of this human speech is entirely different from the speech of animals. Locke however struggles to find where it is then that speech originates from, and it seems that Zhuangzi’s response would be to point out how natural speech truly is.

As far as a skill in language is concerned, as in any of the skills that Zhuangzi demonstrates, it is clear that greatest skill comes from the greatest attention to particularity.

Following are two translations of the same passage in the *Zhuangzi*, and aside from continually reconfirming the notion that translation is one fault of human communication, it may help to reinforce that the greatest insight into language comes from the attention to particularity.

“Great speech is flavorless, Petty speech strings words.” (Graham 50)

“Great speech blazes brilliantly; Small speech is mere garrulousness.” (Mair 12)

While both of these translations are perfectly acceptable, one seems curious, for it speaks in such a way as to confuse a more westernized readership. In Graham’s translation the role of the mouth as an organ of speech, and as the means of tasting seem to be confused, they are in fact not however. For one, the mouth to *Zhuangzi* would have both craved great food and desired to speak well.<sup>9</sup> It is more important to note however that it is the desire of the mouth to speak well, just as much as it desires good food. This desire to speak well does not emerge when one examines Mair’s translation, and so while his may seem to capture a thought that is more immediately accessible, it is not clear that he possess the same skill as Graham when translating the passage, for it is the attention to the particularity that helps to reveal something incredibly interesting and curious in Graham’s but not Mair’s translation, for it has a greater appeal to what is essentially human, desire.

In comparing and contrasting the ideas about and remedies for language that Locke and *Zhuangzi* have, a clearer understanding of the problems of language can be gained. Fortunately there are several ‘inconveniences’ created by language that allow an analysis of language to move forward and reveal several problematic facets. For one, it is clear that a large portion of language conflicts and ambiguities are caused by the interaction of two different people, with differing conceptions on what a word means and when and how it should be used. This emerges as a problem for both philosophers and so it’s safe to say that it is one of the problems of

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<sup>9</sup> Remember that there is not mind/body distinction and so each organ in a way thinks for itself on what it wants and what it must do.

language. Insofar as rectifying any such problems caused by this, or for that matter by particularity (which in and of it self cannot be relieved), Locke's advice offers a good foundation for fixing the problems of the disagreement of words based on definition. However, given that this does not fix all the problems that arise out of language and its dealings with particulars, it makes sense to follow Zhuangzi's argumentation and not fight particularity. Indeed by adding Zhuangzi's methodology on top of Locke's, one can try to work with particularity.

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