

NAVIGATING EXISTENTIAL REALMS.
A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF BORGES AND ZHUANGZI'S
PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract. This paper offers a comparative philosophical analysis of Jorge Luis Borges's *The Garden of Forking Paths* and Zhuangzi's *Butterfly Dream*, arguing that both texts extend Heidegger's concept of *authenticity*. It introduces *ontological authenticity* in Borges's work where authenticity involves an active engagement with one's existential conditions despite the ontical multiplicity made available by the cosmos. Similarly, it examines Zhuangzi's *structure of presence*, a term coined by Hans-Georg Moeller, advocating for experiencing existence directly and without the intermediary of fixed identities.

This analysis challenges traditional views on time, self, and death, proposing concepts raised by both texts: time is not fixed, but interferes with subjective perception; individuality as such is not real but illusory; and death should be treated equally with life because differentiation between life and death is unreal. Ultimately, this paper seeks to enrich cross-cultural dialogue and expands contemporary discussions on authenticity by delving into the philosophical depth of Borges's and Zhuangzi's texts, which are often overlooked for not falling into mainstream Western discourse.

Keywords: Borges, Zhuangzi, authenticity, structure of presence, mainstream Western discourse, comparative philosophy, existentialism

INTRODUCTION

This essay conducts a comparative analysis of Jorge Luis Borges's *The Garden of Forking Paths* and Zhuangzi's *Butterfly Dream* to explore their existential and philosophical thinking. It investigates how these texts use abstract philosophical concepts of time, self, and death to derive real-life insights about existential authenticity. This paper first

presents a close reading of Borges's work, also introducing the notion of *Borgesian existentialism* — a form of *ontological authenticity* demonstrated by the protagonist, Yu Tsun. This concept revises and expands upon Heidegger's *authenticity* in the story's proposed ontology of the existence of multiple timelines, forking from other timelines, suggesting an engagement with one's responsibilities, emotions, and existence on the timeline he has, despite the recognition of multiple potential realities. This paper then analyses how the readers' reading experience of GoFP parallels the existential challenge of multiplicity and confusion that Yu Tsun faces. Then, the paper moves to a close read of Zhuangzi's *Butterfly Dream*, examining its *structure of presence* — the subject focuses on *simply being present*, stripped of worldly concerns and associations — and its implications for self and death, which advocate for a dissolution of the self and a dismissal of the fear towards death. Lastly, the essay moves to compare and contrast both texts' take on central themes of time, self, and death, focusing on how they challenge the traditional notion of time as linear, self-existing in individual-as-such, and death to be feared.

In both *The Garden of Forking Paths* (GoFP) and *Butterfly Dream*, the concept of time is not linear nor fixed but a cosmic time intertwined with individual cognition-based time. Borges introduces an ontology of multiplicity with his notion of time as forking paths, illustrating how an individual can lead an authentic life within a single timeline despite the existence of multiple possibilities. In contrast, Zhuangzi advocates for the dissolution of the self to harmonize with the Dao, the cosmic time. This philosophical approach intertwines the concept of self with time; while Borges views the self as illusory yet promotes living authentically with this recognition, Zhuangzi encourages a complete relinquishment of the self to align with the Dao. Furthermore, both texts suggest that death should not be feared: in GoFP, death is depicted as illusory due to cosmic multiplicity, and in *Butterfly Dream*, death is portrayed as indistinct from life, as both are merely different segments within the continuous structure of presence.

This research sheds light on the cross-cultural and cross-time dialogue between the Ancient Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi and the contemporary Argentine writer Borges and emphasizes how real-life existential insights can be derived from seemingly purely abstract philosophy. This study doesn't only enhance the understanding of how these abstract philosophical concepts are treated in different cultural contexts but also provides insights into how these texts encourage readers to confront and engage with their own existential realities.

I. *THE GARDEN OF FORKING PATHS* (GAFP)

The Garden of Forking Paths is a short story by Jorge Luis Borges that initially presents itself as a spy thriller set during World War I. The protagonist, Dr Yu Tsun, is a Chinese professor living in the United Kingdom who doubles as a German spy. He discovers that his cover has been blown and that he must convey critical military information to his German superiors before he is captured by Captain Richard Madden, an Irishman working with British people. Yu Tsun's objective is to communicate the location of a new British artillery park. The narrative itself is framed as a deposition by Yu Tsun, later discovered by the story's narrator in a World War I military trial. He decides the only way to send this message is by killing someone whose name is also a location, thereby alerting German superiors to his target. He chooses Stephen Albert.

Dr Yu Tsun arrives in Ashgrove to find Stephen Albert, who is later revealed to be a sinologist studying Ts'ui Pên, Tsun's ancestor who had attempted to write a novel and build a labyrinth simultaneously, both ultimately intertwined as one project exploring infinite timelines. Albert reveals that the novel represents a maze of forking paths, each depicting possible futures stemming from moments within the story, essentially crafting a narrative about the complexities of time. This "symbolic labyrinth" reveals the ontological structure of the universe as constructed of multiple

timelines “forking” from one moment of choice (Borges 1941, 5). During their conversation, as Tsun realizes Captain Madden is approaching, he deceitfully asks Albert to turn around and then shoots him, using Albert's name to covertly relay the location of British artillery in Albert, Somme to his German commanders. Tsun reflects on his actions from his cell, acknowledging his success in sending the message, but burdened by “infinite penitence and sickness of the heart” over his deeds.

The plot unfolds through a series of coincidences that seem almost orchestrated. For instance, Yu Tsun ends up at Stephen Albert's house due to a random suggestion from a stranger on the railway. Further deepening this theme, Albert, remarkably, is deeply familiar with Yu Tsun's own family history and the work of Ts'ui Pên, Yu Tsun's ancestor, who authored a novel titled *The Garden of Forking Paths* and designed a labyrinth. In short, this coincidence is pivotal because it shifts the story's focus from a spy plot to an exploration of philosophical concepts. The central metaphor of the story, the labyrinth, is a direct reference to Ts'ui Pên's work, which Albert interprets not as a physical maze but as a novel where all possible outcomes happen simultaneously. This interpretation reflects the non-linear notion of time. His narrative, filled with regret and reflective introspection, underscores the tragedy of his choices and the personal cost of his actions.

The Garden of Forking Paths presents a dual-layered narrative: the short story itself proposes an ontological supposition of the labyrinthine nature of the cosmos because it proposes the ontological structure of time in the inner narrative — “*The Garden of Forking Paths* was the chaotic novel itself; the phrase ‘to various future times, but not to all’ suggests the image of bifurcating in time” (Borges 1941, 6). Simultaneously, the text induces a labyrinthine readers' response to the intentionally perplexing reading experience. All the philosophical characteristics — philosophical themes of this story — are echoed by the reading experiences created by the labyrinthine story.

The story commences with a statement that resembles a factual,

non-fictional historical recount of WWII stating that the following text is a “deposition, dictated by [...] Dr. Yu Tsun”, which has “the first two pages missing”, setting a tone that blends detective fiction with historical narrative (Borges 1941, 1). Through this narrative choice, Borges cleverly constructs suspense right from the outset, mimicking the process of uncovering a hidden truth about WWII. This approach aligns the readers’ experience with navigating a labyrinth — filled with implications and unknown paths that enhance the labyrinthine nature of the story.

Yu Tsun, as the narrator, provides a deceptive narration. He selectively reveals information, especially regarding the fact that this is a self-reporting deposition, initially concealing his true motives and his role as a spy, then later evolves to justify his subsequent actions of espionage and murder saying it’s for “[proving] to [the Chief] that a yellow man could save his armies”, with his whole actions and narration driven by desperate circumstances and extreme inner turmoil of “hatred and terror” (Borges 1941, 2). This deceptive narration complicates the story, leading the readers through a plot replete with unexpected twists and hidden meanings — for example, his identity as a spy - a symbol of deception and multiplicities itself, and the unexpected final homicide of Stephan Albert — akin to navigating a maze with multiple paths. The uncertainty and ambiguity generated by Yu Tsun’s narrative compel readers to question the reliability of the narration and, thus, the realities of the events described, creating a disorienting experience, parallel with confusion and disorientation. A subject in a labyrinth feels like deciding which way leads to the true exit or “answer”. While the readers are engaged in the story because of the suspense and ambiguity, the readers’ active participation makes the reading experience similar to the exploratory nature of traversing a labyrinthine path — thinking about the “truth” and trustworthiness of one path in a labyrinth and doubting the trustworthiness of segments of Yu Tsun’s narration. Thus, the story also inherently revolves around epistemic scepticism, as in their reading experience, readers have to doubt the truthiness of Yu Tsun — while they could

never know, as readers, whether the narrator is actually trustworthy or not.

From Yu Tsun's perspective, the day is laden with symbols and premonitions of the "implacable death" — like the shooting of Richard Madden and the only serendipitous but not certain moments that allow his temporary escape (Borges 1941, 1). He merely escapes Richard Madden by "an accident of fate" (Borges 1941, 3). All lead him to ask: "Was I to die now" (Borges 1941, 1)? Furthermore, at Albert's house, he sees the Chinese garden that parallels his childhood memory that "[he] had accepted fully". In Chinese folklore, people before death would see their own life and childhood flash past like a rapid sequence of slideshows, also known as "Zou-Ma-Deng"; the flashback of childhood memories when he sees the garden is thus a literal premonition of death. Yu Tsun, however, could only recognize these as harbingers of his fate retrospectively, adding another layer of complexity to his labyrinthine day filled with riddles and puzzles while introducing the theme of the limitedness of subjective, individual experience — just like how in a labyrinth, a subject could only see from his own perspective and see the path in front of them, "not all".

The inner narrative further complicates the story's labyrinthine quality by presenting a view of reality that is indefinite and subject to the constraints of individual consciousness: "At that moment I felt within me and around me something invisible and intangible pullulating. It was not the pullulation of two divergent, parallel, and finally converging armies, but an agitation more inaccessible, more intimate, prefigured by them in some way" (Borges 1941, 7). Because Yu Tsun only perceived his own consciousness, thus only existed on his own single timeline, he could not see the whole picture of the cosmic multiplicity but only "felt within [them] and around [them]" — it's a moment of epiphany: one commits to a timeline and navigates through this multiplicity by doing the action, or actualizing the potentialities offered by the cosmos. Every decision spawns divergent realities, and the narrative suggests that no version of events is cosmically definitive. As the ontological

supposition is unfolded by the inner narrative, revealing the simultaneity and convergence of all past and future events, it challenges any definitive understanding of Yu Tsun's existence, drawing the readers deeper into the cosmic labyrinth where not all paths are revealed — existence is only in some, and because the cosmos is “not [...] absolute and uniform, [...] an infinite series of times, in a dizzily growing, ever spreading network of diverging, converging, and parallel times. This web of time [...] embraces every possibility”, so that “we do not exist in most of them” (Borges 1941, 7). Moreover, the ontological premise is portrayed not as a formal theory but as a literary construct, akin to Ts'ui Pen's model of the universe. Just as Tsui Pen's creation mirrors Borges's own storytelling, where no ontological assertion is presented to be a confident formal theory but with whimsicality and uncertainty, the reading experience itself becomes a labyrinthine journey, fraught with complexity and uncertainty, while the philosophical theme of cosmic scepticism and epistemological uncertainty — the inherent philosophical implication of a labyrinth — is presented again.

Furthermore, GoFP is a revelation beyond the whimsical ontology but it allows an existentialist reading to shed light on insights for real-living experiences. Yu Tsun's decision-making within the labyrinthine cosmology of *The Garden of Forking Paths* exemplifies existentialist themes of freedom, responsibility, and the burden of choice, paralleling the reader's experience as they navigate the story's complex structure, and suggesting that a living of authenticity can still be reached in the labyrinthine cosmos. In Heideggerian existentialism, authenticity¹ is the individual's confrontation with his own existence rather than conforming or adhering to societal norms. Heidegger argues that authenticity arises when one actively engages with their own *being-towards-death* — realization of limitation and one's own *thrownness-into-the-world*. *The Garden of Forking Paths* sheds light on a *Borgesian existentialist* interpretation of authenticity in a somewhat ontological sense: unlike Heidegger, *Borgesian authenticity*, or *ontological authenticity* is less merely about faithful acting in accordance with the subjects'

own desires and non-conformity, but it's about one's commitment to engage with their own existence even in the ontological chaos of cosmos, where multiplicity of existence is allowed.

In exploring the existential implications of Borges's writing, this paper will employ Heidegger's concept of *authenticity*.

Yu Tsun's decision to become a spy, seemingly conforming to Nazi expectations, also represents his struggle with identity and recognition in the world. His actions are driven by the desire to change perceptions about his race, which are also an attempt to assert his agency and redefine his existence in a context where his choices are limited. This conflict is a nuanced form of Heideggerian *authenticity*, and his later actions, when he acknowledges the cosmic ontology, illustrate it: it's about his engagement with his own timeline while recognizing the ontological multiplicity of the cosmos. He confronts his struggles, responsibilities, and emotions within his timeline instead of acting randomly or being indifferent to his actions and the outcomes — “norms” or patterns of living, which the ontological presence of the myriad alternatives allows. Because of the multiplicity of the cosmos, on the individual level, many concerns seem illusory, for the self that a subject perceives is “in yet another [timeline], [...] an error, a phantom” (Borges 1941, 7). This cosmic ontology of multiplicity implies that multiple possibilities and realities coexist simultaneously, potentially leading to a sense of existential indifference as individual actions seem inconsequential in the grand scheme — all potentialities could be actualized in other ways. Moreover, one timeline “is forever dividing itself toward innumerable futures” (Borges 1941, 7). Thus, the sense of any single action's significance can diminish. This multiplicity allows for existential indifference because each choice is just one among countless others, each leading to different realities. The impact of one's actions might seem diluted; if all possibilities exist simultaneously, the consequence of choosing one path over another might appear less critical. It leads to a norm of indifference: personal agency and responsibility are less emphasized, encouraging a passive acceptance rather than active engagement with the one-timeline life

— for that seems like “an error, a phantom” (Borges 1941, 7). When Yu Tsun knows that “in one of [timelines] I am [Albert’s] enemy” — which means that he doesn’t need to take responsibility for his homicide as cosmically it doesn’t matter, he still engages with his feelings of “penitence and sickness” in regret and sorry (Borges 1941, 8). Thus, Borges’s authenticity regards being authentic — being responsible and fully engaging with — as the one “timeline”, or the path, that the subject sees, regardless of the existence of other paths and the multiplicity of existence, which potentially allows for indifference.

Again, this is the manifest of the dual narrative — philosophy is gained from the reading experience paralleling the story’s philosophy. The Borgesian existentialism in response to the proposed ontological structure is completed by the readers’ responses — the proposed ontological structure and its perplexity is experienced by the readers when they are reading this text because the text is itself so labyrinthine, deceptive, and confusing (as afore-discussed). Engaging with a multitude of labyrinthine myths, readers must exercise their rational and interpretive power to navigate through the expanded possibilities of interpretation. The narrative structure itself mirrors a labyrinth, filled with instabilities and tensions that challenge readers to discern reality from fiction. This engagement forces readers to confront interpretive challenges and broken expectations, enhancing their awareness of the radical freedom inherent in interpretation and rationality — there are so many possible ways to interpret the same text, and one must use rationality to identify which interpretation is to follow, just like in real life, there are so many ways to interpret the same event and act according to the interpretation, and one must exercise the power of rationality to identify what they commit to. This celebration of human capacity in navigating in a chaotic landscape of the world — here in how the readers realize they can use their interpretive capacity to navigate through the chaos of the text — is an existential confirmation. Moreover, this blurring of reality and fiction underscores the creative liberties taken by Borges, prompting

readers to recognize the aesthetic order he crafts within the narrative chaos.

The story itself explores existential freedom, presenting a universe where the future unfolds from choices made in the past. This theme of radical freedom reveals an open sea of possibilities, emphasizing the existential condition of human existence. Yu Tsun personifies the intertwining of choice, freedom, responsibility, and possibility. He must accept the consequences of his actions, illustrating the existential burden of his decisions — he is “condemned to hang”, emotionally suffering in “infinite penitence” (Borges 1941, 8). The concept of *forking paths* highlights the moments of decision-making that define Yu Tsun's fate, emphasizing that while outcomes are uncertain. One must still take responsibility for their choices. His existential journey, fraught with concern and desperation, symbolizes the broader human condition of navigating a world filled with unknowns.

Though the story is perplexing and confusing, the readers receive real intellectual and emotional engagement with the reading because of the suspenseful plot. Such dynamics between labyrinthine suspense and authenticity could be a further revelation of Borgesian existentialism: why don't we consider the world in such a way? The world is confusing and full of multiplicities, especially with regard to the labyrinth of ontological possibilities — the labyrinthine cosmology presented in the inner narrative. Concerning the *forking paths* of time, we still have authentic engagement with the world, just like how Yu Tsun has to pay back for his actions and how he goes through all concerns and desperation instead of being indifferent, like one would do knowing that there might be other universes present. Though what we experience is “not all”, we just need to engage with the one path we have.

II. ZHUANGZI - THE BUTTERFLY DREAM

Zhuangzi's ontology revolves around the concept of Dao — the fundamental, indescribable, and ultimate both ontic and ontological

entity that underlies all reality. Dao represents the ultimate source and natural order, which is constantly changing and spontaneous: it provides a non-static harmony that naturally grows from things when they act and exist following their natural properties. Zhuangzi advocates for a life of simplicity and spontaneity, finally in alignment with Dao, which promotes a sense of freedom and detachment from rigid societal norms and personal desires, encouraging individuals to embrace Wuwei, which harmonizes with Dao and gains ultimate freedom. The ultimate goal is the intrinsic, unmediated connection between the individual and Dao — unobstructed engagement with existence as it is; when existing in this pure existence, the subject is manifesting the Dao through their very being (Moeller). Qi Wu Lun is Zhuangzi's musings on this alignment and merging, which condenses itself in *Butterfly Dream*.

The central concern of Zhuangzi's philosophical argument is the exploration of presence, a concept well-articulated by Moeller based on Guo Xiang's reading of Zhuangzi as "accord with itself, only itself and nothing else" (Moeller 1999, 5). It is the existing as the pure presence of simply being². Understanding Zhuangzi's structure of presence is crucial to grasping the philosophical depth of the text and all the following ponderings. This reading underscores Zhuangzi's intent not to dwell on representational philosophy but to provoke a reconsideration of the distinction between reality and fiction, akin to Borges's narrative techniques. This structure of presence is proposed from level to level: plot level, allegorical level, and existential level.

First, at the plot level, the importance lies not in whether Zhuangzhou remembers the dream but in the indistinguishability of his wakeful state from his dreaming state. This reflects the absence of a continuous "I" in the original text, emphasizing a state of "doubtlessness", where Zhuangzhou and the butterfly exist without an anchored self-construed identity. At the allegorical level, Zhuangzi uses the analogy between wakefulness and dreaming to parallel life and death. Each state exists as a segment in the linear progression of life, where being awake is as final as being dead, each

perfectly aligned with its nature. This level suggests that distinctions, while perceived, do not alter the inherent authenticity of each segment.

Lastly, at the existential level, it is where Zhuangzi's philosophy culminates in the idea of pure presence: phenomenologically, the subject is fully “present” in one's experience without the interference of artificial distinctions and intellectual constructs, which are unavoidable if the subject remains personal. Zhuangzhou achieves enlightenment not by transcending his identity but by immersing fully in the present moment, devoid of distinctions or personal bias. This stage represents a complete engagement with being, where existence is accepted as it is without the need for representation or doubt: there is no doubt in the phenomenon because the subject is simply present.

This central idea and pursuit of alignment with Dao is echoed by the Zhuangzian view of the ancillary philosophical themes — death and self.

For him, death is not to be feared, for it doesn't serve as the end: death and life are both segments on this line of pure presence, and thus though life and death are separated from each other, they possess no significant distinction. Thus, life and death are mutually dependent, co-arising modalities of Dao — Dao equalizes both in its ontological oneness while demoting the other. Death leads to freedom of an ontological order: the wholeness of being stems from what precedes it, which is non-being, or cosmic nothingness, and death is thus antecedent of life. Death thus brings people closer to Dao: death *qua* nothingness is both a literal and metaphorical of Dao because it resembles Dao's state of emptiness (Chai 2016, 8). Thus, in chapter eighteen of *Zhuangzi*, in Zhuangzi's wife's death and having Huizi, another renowned philosopher, mourns over her, Zhuangzi doesn't grieve but rather responds: “I looked back to her beginning and the time before she was born. [...] In the midst of the jumble of wonder and mystery, a change took place and she had a spirit. [...] Another change and she was born. Now there's been another change and she's dead. It's just like the progression of the

four seasons, spring, summer, fall, winter” (Zhuangzi 369-298 BCE, 517).

Similarly, in the Zhi-Le passage of *Zhuangzi*, he “pillows a skull” and falls asleep on the skull, being “perfectly happy”, honouring the nature of Dao.

Zhuangzi emphasizes the notion of death, encouraging people to embrace it; yet, Zhuangzi does not stress the need for a self — he is to de-subjectivise himself. “Xiao Yao You” is a tale about “losing self” — about having an identity but no form, and the saint should lose himself, being “no-self”. Self is not a fixed, isolated entity as commonly perceived, but fluid, ever-changing, and interconnected with the cosmos. The boundaries between self and the external world are illusory, encouraging a detachment from the ego and personal desires, so a life of spontaneity and naturalness can be achieved, and the subject aligns with the Dao. Similar to accepting death, Zhuangzi wants to let go of worldly attachments by emphasizing the notion of “non-self” — Zhuangzi uses the metaphor of “the fasting of the heart” (Xin Zhai) to describe a mental state where one lets go of preconceived notions and biases, thus achieving a state of mental and emotional emptiness that is receptive to all experiences without prejudice.

III. THEMATIC COMPARISON OF PHILOSOPHY

This section is going to compare Borges and Zhuangzi on time, self, and death — the major philosophical themes of their works. Borges’s philosophy of GoFP is mainly revealed through the fictional ontology of labyrinthine time, then derived to self and death, while Zhuangzian philosophy on the three themes is all manifestations of and narrative mediums to carry his *structure of presence*. Borges and Zhuangzi have nuance in their textual effect: Borges’s texts raise “ontological enigmas” meanwhile giving birth to “ontological existentialism”, while Zhuangzi illustrates the Daoist

worldview and way of living; still, both of them challenge the conventional conception of time, self, and death in a similar manner.

GoFP and the *Butterfly Dream* share a similar interpretation of time, and both talk about the tension between cosmic time and individual cognition-based time. Borges's narrative structure creates a complex interplay between perceived time and cosmic realities, eliciting not only sceptical reverence but also providing the possibility for an existentialist reading. This ontology intertwines the subjective experience of time with the notion of an infinite labyrinth of possibilities, emphasizing that while individuals experience time linearly, they are part of a vast, interconnected cosmic tapestry:

The Garden of Forking Paths is a picture, incomplete yet not false, of the universe such as Ts'ui Pen conceived it to be. Differing from Newton and Schopenhauer, your ancestors did not think of time as absolute and uniform. He believed in an infinite series of times, in a dizzily growing, ever-spreading network of diverging, converging and parallel times. This web of time - the strands of which approach one another, bifurcate, intersect or ignore each other through centuries - embraces every possibility. We do not exist in most of them. In some you exist and not I, while in others I do, and you do not, and in yet others both of us exist. In this one, in which chance has favoured me, you have come to my gate. In another, you, crossing the garden, have found me dead. In yet another, I say these very same words but I am an error, a phantom (Borges 1941, 7).

Borges's concept of time in GoFP challenges traditional notions of linear and singular progression. He suggests that all possible outcomes and realities exist simultaneously, though individuals perceive only a linear progression of time — what he calls “the experienced time”. Beyond the experienced time, there exists a cosmic labyrinthine time, only revealed to the subjects if they communicate with each other or propose the unperceivable cosmic ontology. In this way, “mankind is using multiple records to ‘re-establish’ the total experienced space-time manifold into a geometer's space-time manifold — trying to figure out a cosmic time structure by communication of experience” (Agassi 1970, 4), while transcending limitations of phenomenal individual perception.

The tension between the limitations of individual perception and the mystic cosmic order further highlights how limited individual perception is, and this mystic multiplicity elicits cosmic reverence as well as existential conflict. While the universe contains an infinite array of outcomes and realities, the individual experiences time through a singular, subjective lens. This juxtaposition highlights the existential struggle of the individual—acknowledging the boundlessness of time and possibilities while grappling with the constraints of personal experience and choice, and also the sense that when people go beyond their limited cognition, they still have to stay on the same timeline — almost tragic. Yu Tsun embodies this existential conflict. He is aware that in some cosmic version of events, Albert may not be killed, yet in his experienced reality he must proceed with his actions, which are authentic to his perceived temporal and moral context. This highlights the existential responsibility individuals hold over their choices, despite the awareness of other possible realities. Borges uses Yu Tsun's narrative to underscore the notion that individuals must navigate their paths authentically, even when faced with the overwhelming complexity of a multiversal existence.

Borges invites the readers to consider the profound existential implications of living within an infinitely complex universe. Each decision, while seemingly singular, is part of a broader cosmic dialogue, making the existential engagement with one's choice both a personal journey and a universal interaction, further giving meaning to individual actions and allowing authenticity.

Zhuangzi's take on time also involves dissolving the self in the cosmic time. The first level is a mental level as cognition-based time, indicating the existence of linearity of time in individual perception. Then, on the phenomenal level, there is experience-based time. The ontological level of time is the world-based time, or "Dao-based time". Dao exists as the ultimate foundation of time. In the *Butterfly Dream*, Zhuangzi proposes a way to transcend an individual's limitation of perception by being simply present and in accordance with Dao.

When Zhuangzhou dreams of himself as a butterfly, he cannot know the existence of Zhuangzhou outside its limited perception, and so does Zhuangzhou, who does not know the butterfly. When they cannot distinguish themselves, their individual consciousness of being an individual as such diminishes significantly, fostering a unique unity of subject and object: Dao is the ontology that underlies everything — both the subject and the object, embracing Dao allows one to see through the artificial distinctions and recognize the interdependence and interconnectedness of everything, thus dissolving the distinction between subject and object. Zhuangzi and the butterfly cannot distinguish themselves. This unity extends beyond Zhuangzhou and the butterfly, synchronizing him with the surrounding environment, and altering the dynamic state of conventional perception.

The conscious control and reflective doubt of identity or reality are replaced by the state of simply existing, indicating a transformation in the subject's state of consciousness — a flowing state. This experience thus reflects a shift from a mundane experience of time to one that approaches the Dao, because it is an integration with the universe. This emergence with Dao is further implied by the omission of time-indicating words in the original text, further implying the dissolving of cognition-based individual time. When individual perception is dropped out, the subject is closer to Dao.

Phenomenologically, time is perceived by a subject with a sense of self. Thus, the philosophy of self is interwoven with time unavoidably. Both Zhuangzi and Borges suggest the illusory nature of the self; Borges encourages authenticity with this even illusory self, while Zhuangzi proposes an embrace and ultimately forgetting self to align with Dao.

Deriving from Borges's labyrinthine time ontology, GoFP proposes the multiplicity of self, because of the multiplicity of existence. Such multiplicity, again, creates a tension in the cosmic reality of the self—self and individuality as such as illusory — and the individual perception of the self. Yet, Yu Tsun's choice-making

and authentic engagement with his responsibilities and such choice underscores, again, the possibility of individual authenticity under such a cosmos. On the other hand, Zhuangzi reveals a similar interpretation of self—self as illusory, and he proposes that, for a sage, the self is best to be forgotten.

Borges has different interpretations of self in different works, while this research focuses mainly on his take on the “self” proposed in GoFP, deriving from the multiplicity of existence. In his other works, especially “Borges and I” and “Labyrinths”, he reveals that the self is illusory. GoFP, echoing the overarching Borgesian interpretation of the self as illusory, reveals his metaphysical unreality.

Firstly, in terms of time and space, the concept of cosmic multiplicity challenges the notion of self at a cosmic level. There are multiple versions of oneself coexisting simultaneously, each diverging due to different past choices and resulting in various *forking paths*. It is thus impossible to objectively define an individual or “identity” matching a perceived self. In one timeline, Yu Tsun is imprisoned and successfully communicates critical information, while in another, he may assume a completely different identity or circumstances, and in yet others, he might not exist at all. In Stephan Albert’s explanation of the labyrinth to Yu Tsun, he introduces the variability of the seemingly very same individual:

We do not exist in most of them. In some you exist and not I, while in others I do, and you do not, and in yet others both of us exist. In this one, in which chance has favoured me, you have come to my gate. In another, you, crossing the garden, have found me dead. In yet another, I say these very same words but am an error, a phantom (Borges 1941, 7).

This variability means that one cannot definitively assert Yu Tsun's existence across all timelines, nor can one firmly identify what constitutes Yu Tsun, as his identity, appearance, or name may vary significantly. Due to this indefinability and the inherent uncertainty, the individual self, in a cosmic sense, is effectively non-existent.

Moreover, even within a single, linear timeline, the self exhibits a cyclical nature. The whole plot development of *The Garden of Forking Paths* relies on Yu Tsun's ancestral lineage. The ancestral lineage is, of course, a linear progression in which each individual represents a segment of existence. Biologically, descendants share physical characteristics with their ancestors, because our flesh is a medium for the DNA — the continuum of lineage; our rational thinking is inevitably impacted by familial teachings, making us “inside and out” continuation of the ancestral lineage. Moreover, in Chinese culture, it is believed that descendants will invariably find an ancestor with whom they share similarities, and the descendants are, in a way, reincarnations of their ancestors. Even in a linear timeline, individual as such is illusory: the Chinese ancestral elements in the story allow reading that we are cyclical continuums of ancestry — the ancestral traits and probably specific ancestors, for all our physical existence, thoughts, and characteristics are the continuum of what comes before us. This interpretation of lineage within the story trivializes individual differentiation, and thus again underscores the illusory nature of individuality as such even within a linear perspective: the sense of individuals being continuums of their ancestry blurs the end and start of each “segment” of the lineage line.

Yu Tsun's self-awareness and his continuous self-referencing demonstrate that, on a phenomenological and subjective level, the self can indeed be perceived. *The Garden of Forking Paths* illustrates various perceptions of self through Yu Tsun's experiences. Initially, when detected by Richard Madden, Yu Tsun experiences nervousness, reflecting the self as a series of mental states. At the train station, his explanation of his motives and goals reveals the self as an abstraction used to scaffold memories and rationalize actions. Finally, in his interaction with Stephen Albert, the self serves as a pivot for social interactions and memory recall. These examples show that, at the individual level, the self feels very real and tangible.

This perplexing dynamic, where the self is ontologically unreal yet perceived as real by individuals, is vividly illustrated and

embodied by Yu Tsun's identity as a spy. In his role, Yu Tsun exemplifies the multiplicity of self: his identity is undefinable and fragmented as he oscillates between his Chinese heritage and his role as a German spy. The very nature of being a spy necessitates multiple identities. Therefore, from an external viewpoint, Yu Tsun lacks a fixed identity; only he can perceive himself as a definable individual. His consistent "self" exists solely through his own phenomenological experience.

In this dynamic tension where the self is both tangibly experienced and ontologically uncertain, an existentialist interpretation becomes viable. Yu Tsun actively embraces the self he perceives, fully engaging with his singular timeline and existence despite the potential multiplicity of his "selves". Even as he recognizes that other versions of himself might not have committed the act of killing Stephen Albert — rendering Albert's death ontologically ambiguous — Yu Tsun still experiences genuine remorse and engages with his emotions authentically. He could have rationalized away his guilt by considering the existence of other Alberts who survived, yet he chooses not to dismiss his responsibility, highlighting the possibility of authentic existence within a cosmically multiple and uncertain ontology. This choice illustrates to readers that, although the self may be ontologically elusive, we can and should still engage authentically with the self as we perceive it.

In contrast with Borges's dynamic view of the self, Zhuangzi sees it as a container and proposes that the sage shall forget himself, within this *structure of presence*.

In Zhuangzi's *Dream of a Butterfly*, the notion of self is explored through a profound philosophical lens, emphasizing the transient and illusory nature of individual identity. Zhuangzi presents the idea that the truest form of self-existence is achieved when one is fully "present" and in harmony with oneself, without the constraints of empirical judgment or societal expectations. This state is exemplified by the sage who forgets himself, embodying the concept of "Nonself" and self-embracement.

The story famously depicts Zhuangzi dreaming he is a butterfly, floating on the whims of existence, only to awaken and question whether he was a man dreaming of being a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming of being a man. This narrative challenges the reliability of the self and the empirical world, suggesting a perspective where the self is seen as a container of experiences, yet not limited by them.

Further philosophical analysis such as by Wang Bo, highlights the idea of 天心 (Tianxin) or “Heaven's Heart”, which suggests an alignment with a more universal, cosmic perspective where personal desires and biases are transcended. This leads to a discussion about perspectivism, the unreliability of empirical judgment, and the conflicts and boundaries created by the “self” in contrast to the “other”, revealing deeper layers of conflict inherent in the self's definition.

Moreover, in reference to the linear progression of being — death, life, existence, self, or the perception of self-consciousness are ephemeral. It's only one segment on the linear progression of presence, so all are phenomena produced by the illusion of self-perspectives, intentionality, etc.

Zhuangzi's work invites readers to reflect on the nature of identity and existence, encouraging a detachment from the conventional understanding of the self to embrace a broader, more interconnected existence. This philosophical journey through Zhuangzi's narrative challenges and enriches our understanding of self and otherness, emphasizing the fluidity and interconnectedness of all things.

The last concern, both theoretically and chronologically for readers of the two texts, is death. In *The Garden of Forking Paths*, the proposed ontology of multiplicity and the existential call to authenticity allows for a blurring of the distinctions between life and death, akin to Zhuangzi's perspective that the differentiation between life and death is forgettable. Both Borges and Zhuangzi encourage living fully and authentically regardless of death.

Ontologically, the concept of death, or elimination, is challenged

by the existence of multiple timelines where death may not occur, underscoring its non-absoluteness. Since multiple potential existences are always possible, death on one timeline does not equate to cosmic-scale elimination. This renders death “unreal” on a cosmic scale; it does not signify the end universally because alternative timelines where the subject continues to exist are conceivable. This existence of possibilities, allowed by the cosmic multiplicity, renders death and elimination *inabsolute*.

Furthermore, conceptually, death is also unreal. Since death and elimination no longer exist on the cosmic scale, they can only be perceived as phenomena by the subject experiencing them; however, within the cosmos of *The Garden of Forking Paths*, the self is considered illusory. Death and elimination, which are inherently tied to the self, also become illusory concepts. Most importantly, from the subject’s limited perspective, even on a specific timeline, death is merely coincidental, as exemplified by Ts’ui Pen’s story. Thus, death, stripped of its traditional fear-inducing power, is presented as nothing to dread.

Zhuangzi similarly views the fear of death as unnecessary, a concept he articulates in *Pillowing the Skull by the Road* and through the allegorical interpretation of the *Butterfly Dream*. While sharp distinctions exist between life and death—mirroring the contrasts between dreaming and wakefulness, as well as between Zhuangzhou and the butterfly—these are perceived boundaries that Zhuangzi challenges, suggesting that such fears are grounded in misconceptions about the nature of existence.

The dream is allegorical to death. Falling into a dream without awareness mirrors the unconscious state of death, as both represent a departure from conscious experience. Zhuangzi likens this to segments on life’s continuum, where death and life are just phases much like dreaming and wakefulness are parts of a day. This perspective challenges conventional views of life and death as distinct, emphasizing their continuity in the existential journey.

In Zhuangzi’s philosophy, each state of being—whether living or dead—exists perfectly within its own realm, aligning entirely with its

inherent nature. Life and death, while vastly different, are interconnected segments of existence, each complete and authentic in itself. This view suggests that life flows seamlessly into death, with each segment independent and not carrying over into the next. Therefore, preoccupations about death during life, or thinking about dreams while awake, disrupt this natural order and the purity of present experience.

Death should be even celebrated. For example, death is inspiring, as it unravels the complexities of life — just like Zhuangzhou starts to think about what it's like to be a human after the dream. Recognizing the finiteness of life prompts introspection about our deepest attachments, enabling us to let go. In the ontological sense, life and death are mutually dependent, co-arising modalities of Dao. Dao equalizes both in its ontological oneness while demoting the other, while death *qua* nothingness is both a corporeal and metaphorical embodiment of Dao in that death and nothingness reflect the natural praxis of Dao to be still, empty, and quiet. Death, thus, is the antecedent of life. Life and death, existence and annihilation, are one body, just like a dream and awake.

Death is similar to Zhuangzi's emission of self in the *Butterfly Dream*: he doesn't identify with Zhuangzhou (himself), there's no first-person narrator, but he just thinks along with Dao — no predilections, loses himself in the midst of the present world, and dwells there – involved in it, yet not attached to any definite present form of being there, achieving great awakening. Thus, death is an analogy for being a Taoist sage.

Moreover, death can reveal the state of the sage. In Zhuangzi's philosophy, death represents a de-subjectivized version of the self, where personal sensation and subjective consciousness cease, yet continue within the linear progression of existence and flesh stays in the world. Death is similar to Zhuangzi's emission of self in the *Butterfly Dream*: he doesn't identify with Zhuangzhou (himself), there's no first-person narrator, but he just thinks along with Dao. Zhuangzi's emission of self is “wu-wo” sage. By losing himself in the present world without clinging to any fixed state of being,

Zhuangzi embodies the Taoist ideal of the sage, suggesting that death is analogous to the enlightened state of a Taoist sage—detached yet deeply integrated with the natural flow of life.

NOTES

1. Heideggerian existentialism emphasizes the concept of "authenticity" and "Being-towards-death." Heidegger posits that to understand one's authentic self, one must confront their own mortality, an idea he elaborates on in *Being and Time*. This confrontation with death awakens individuals to their true potential and the finite nature of existence, encouraging them to live more genuinely and responsibly. This perspective contrasts with living in *inauthenticity*, where individuals conform to societal norms without acknowledging their personal choices and responsibilities. Heidegger argues that understanding and accepting our temporal existence allows us to live more authentically, fully engaging with our own being and choices in the world.
2. Seemingly, Zhuangzi's proposal to live *unintentionally* goes against the existentialists' teachings about avoiding everydayness, but Zhuangzi's end is in letting go of all human-constructed intentions after reflection, so one could be living naturally, stripped of worldly concerns, in alignment with Dao.

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