Lost in the Way: The *Zhuangzi* and the Potential for Immorality

The *Zhuangzi* is one of the most important texts on the philosophy of Daoism and is heavily influential in China and beyond. Its metaphorical style and mysterious stories and imageries make it the subject of widespread debate and analysis. One widely accepted theme in *Daodejing* is the acceptance of others' points of view. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (SEP) entry says that "*Zhuangzi* emphasizes the plurality of natural stances or points of view from which one may see paths of possible behaviour" (Wong, "Chinese Ethics"). By advocating acceptance and accommodation, the *Zhuangzi* is a reminder to re-evaluate one's beliefs and respect alternate perspectives.

However, in emphasizing this acceptance, the philosophy does not provide any guidance on *which* moral framework, virtues or characters to ascribe to. I argue that the *Zhuangzi* presents an 'amoral' philosophy, and that the amorality can lead to immorality in certain situations, which is harmful. It ends by considering the aims behind the *Zhuangzi*'s amorality, and whether it is possible to mitigate the issues which stem from amorality, while ensuring that the underlying aims are still fulfilled.

Zhuangzi's Amorality in Terms of Normative Ethics

Before arguing for how the *Zhuangzi*'s philosophy is amoral, we should first clearly define the notion of morality, and consequently, amorality. Broadly defined, morality for the purposes of this essay refers to normative ethics, which is a set of guidelines one can follow towards ethical decision making. There are currently three major approaches to normative ethics. The first is virtue ethics, which places emphasis on certain character traits, ideals or "virtues" one should

strive towards. The second is deontology, which views ethical behaviour in terms of a set of duties and obligations all of us must follow as human beings. The final approach is consequentialism, which views morality in terms of the consequences our actions have – an action is moral if the good consequences outweigh the bad ones (Hursthouse and Pettigrove). While there exist other conceptions of morality (such as descriptive ethics and metaethics), normative ethics is the one we focus on since it closely relates to how human beings are supposed to *act*. It is precisely this that the *Zhuangzi*'s philosophy fails to prescribe due to its amoral nature.

A key characteristic of the *Zhuangzi*'s philosophy that leads to its amorality is its treatment of different conceptions of morality as equal, with none being superior to another. This skepticism is best seen in Chapter 2 of the *Zhuangzi*, aptly titled "Discussion on Making All Things Equal":

> *Where there is recognition of right, there must be recognition of wrong; where there is recognition of wrong, there must be recognition of right. Therefore the sage does not proceed in such a way but illuminates all in the light of Heaven. He, too, recognizes a "this" but a "this" that is also "that," a "that" that is also "this."... A state in which "this" and "that" no longer find their opposites is called the hinge of the Way.*

The passage highlights how the Zhuangist sage recognizes that there is both right and wrong in opposite positions. In its pursuit to avoid distinctions, the *Zhuangzi* also avoids idealising any duties as necessary for a moral life, since that would mean that they are ascribed some form of superiority. This is agreed upon by scholars like Danto and Lee, who believe that Daoism "endorses a view of human flourishing disconnected from a 'network of demands and responsibilities'" (Lee 18, "Daoism and Morality"). The same goes for idealising any virtue or

consequence as inherently "good". Scholars like Moeller believe that "the Daoist sage in the *Zhuangzi* is amoral – and avoids being infected with morality whenever possible" (Moeller 34).

There is one 'guideline' which stands out in the *Zhuangzi* on how to go about making decisions. Lee calls this an "ethics of attunement, which identifies normative action… with the agent's conformity and harmony with the *Dao*" (35, "Revisioning Ethics"). However, I argue that even this guideline is amoral. This is because there are several interpretations for *Dao*, and none extol a morality in the way we have defined it. One possible interpretation of *Dao* is a "single, constant, correct way of life that cannot be expressed in practices" and requiring superhuman capabilities to be understood (Hansen). Such a conception is amoral because neither does it provide any set of virtues, duties or metrics to judge consequences, nor is it something the average human can access to make ethical decisions. A second popular interpretation focuses on a sort of effortless action or "natural spontaneity" (Hansen), which is not supernatural and accessible to all humans. A good example is the story of Cook Ding in Chapter 3 of the *Zhuangzi*, who is idealised as having mastered spontaneous action. However, this conception is amoral too, since the *Zhuangzi* does not articulate specific principles which can help one achieve spontaneous action. This much is accepted by Lee himself, and it leads to actions based on a case-by-case basis which are not really guided by virtues, duties or notions of consequences (47, "Revisioning Ethics").

Immorality as a Consequence of Amorality

The amoral stance of the *Zhuangzi* in terms of any normative ethics can promote immoral behaviour, in the sense that one pursues actions which go against a set of justified normative standards.

The first possibility for immoral behaviour comes in the form of 'weakness of the will', where the agent chooses to act "freely and intentionally, contrary to his better judgement" (Stroud and Svirsky). Due to weakness of the will, an agent may intentionally pursue behaviour which is against his moral standards. Holton argues that "weakness of will, arises… when agents are too ready to reconsider their intentions" (241). The reconsideration of intention becomes likelier with the *Zhuangzi*'s skeptical position towards moral standards, since it implies to the agent that their initial moral intentions are not necessarily superior to any other, making them more open to exploring alternate intentions. As a result, it becomes all the more easier for the agent to reconsider and go against their initial judgement, which could have been the better judgement. An example would be an alcoholic who wants to abstain from drinking alcohol, but reconsiders the position because of valid reasons, such as the need to socialise and belong to a group where everyone else is drinking. Holton also mentions that to display weakness of will, an agent must have done something which "by the standards of a good intender, he should not have done" (259). This notion of doing something which should not have been done also becomes very possible when considering the lack of a normative ethical framework in the *Zhuangzi*.

It is possible that following the spontaneous attitude, which the *Zhuangzi* can be interpreted as encouraging, would make an agent go with their initial, morally sound judgements. In that sense, it seems that following the spontaneous attitude would help with the weakness of will problem. However, there is an assumption here that the initial judgements of the agent would be morally correct in the first place. Since the *Zhuangzi* is amoral, it is possible that the initial judgements of the agent are impulsive and against their moral intentions. Here, the alcoholic would choose to pursue the impulsive desire of getting a drink even after recognising its harms.

In such a case, following the spontaneous attitude would actually exacerbate the lack of self-control, which is a cause many scholars associate with the weakness of will (Doucet and Turri). The *Zhuangzi*'s amorality opens both possibilities – one where an agent acts against their initial, morally sound judgements, and the other where they decide to spontaneously follow an immoral impulse due to lack of self-control.

Following one's spontaneous attitude becomes more clearly problematic and leads to the second possibility where an agent has incorrect notions of what is moral and immoral behaviour. The notion is accurately captured by Ronald Milo as "perverse wickedness", where the agent believes that immoral acts are actually morally required or permissible (Milo 29, "Perverse Wickedness"). Research in psychology has shown that there are many possible reasons for such a condition, such as trauma affecting adult moral decision-making (Larsen et al) or poor childhood upbringing (Turiel). In cases of perverse wickedness, one might follow their "natural spontaneity" as encouraged by the *Zhuangzi* and yet commit actions which are immoral, because their notions of what is moral in the first place is distorted. The lack of any normative ethical framework in the *Zhuangzi* again exacerbates the problem here, since the immoral agent is not provided a direction towards any ethical framework to correct themselves. There is an assumption that following one's natural spontaneity will necessarily lead to moral behaviour, but there are no strong reasons for why that should be the case.

A third possibility in the *Zhuangzi* is the possibility of wrongdoing simply due to amorality, where for the agent "moral considerations play no role in his practical deliberations and… motivation for acting" (Milo 56, "Amorality"). This possibility is subtly different from the previous cases, where immorality arose either due to agent's immoral beliefs or failure to abide by the agent's moral beliefs. Milo details this notion in his book *Immorality*, where a person

commits moral wrong without actually believing that the act is either moral or immoral, or possibly even caring about it (56, "Amorality"). An amoral agent in that sense chooses to pursue actions for reasons beyond morality or immorality. The *Zhuangzi*'s stances of avoiding distinctions, and placing seemingly opposite values on an equal pedestal, would encourage this kind of amoral-turned-immoral behaviour.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have argued that the *Zhuangzi*'s philosophy is amoral, in the sense that it does not idealise any normative ethical framework of virtues, duties or consequences. The amorality is problematic because it can potentially allow an agent to pursue immoral behaviour while sticking to the teachings of the philosophy. However, that is not to say that the *Zhuangzi* does not serve *any* purpose in helping one live the good life. Perhaps the most important point in the *Zhuangzi* is that it argues against imposing our own objective interpretations on this world, advocating instead for an ethic whose primary characteristic is the recognition and acceptance of the other perspectives. Scholars sympathise with this ethic, especially in a globalised world like ours where we interact daily with people having different ideals, habits, customs and cultures (Huang). Different ways of life lead to different notions of what is moral, which means an ethical framework which argues for the objective superiority of certain morals in all possible cases is problematic in its own way. The *Zhuangzi*, by emphasising the equality of different notions of morality, does a good job at highlighting this problem.

However, an ethics of acceptance and accommodation in isolation cannot help an agent in daily ethical decision making, precisely because it asks to consider all possible decisions as equally morally justifiable. When Wong says that Daoism encourages us to "retain our own

commitments… but also expand our view to what other commitments have a similar status" (236, "Natural Moralities"), there is an implicit assumption that the agent retains *some* moral commitments of his own. Although the *Zhuangzi* can help with expanding our view, it cannot really help us with forming *any* set of commitments at all, since the point is to not extol any sort of moral framework. To understand the different frameworks one can use to make ethical decisions, they need to go beyond the *Zhuangzi* and read philosophies which do offer normative ethical frameworks. This mitigates the possibility of immorality, because the ideal agent can evaluate different frameworks of morality, and apply these frameworks "more specifically to particular circumstances on a case-by-case basis" (Lee 47, "Revisioning Ethics"). The true Daoist sage is, after all, one who has knowledge of all moral frameworks but does not extol any, and employs whichever framework helps him act in accordance to the Way.

(1993 words)

Bibliography

Doucet, Mathieu and John, Turri. “Non-psychological weakness of will: self-control, stereotypes, and consequences.” *Synthese*, vol. 191**,** 2014, pp. 3935-3954. https://doi-org.libproxy1.nus.edu.sg/10.1007/s11229-014-0508-0.

Hansen, Chad. "Daoism." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Spring 2020 ed., edited by Edward N. Zalta, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/daoism/.

Holton, Richard. “Intention and Weakness of Will.” *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 96, no. 5, 1999, pp. 241–262. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2564667.

Huang, Yong. "Respecting Different Ways of Life: A Daoist Ethics of Virtue in the Zhuangzi." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 69.4 (2010): 1049-069. doi: 10.1017/S0021911810002913.

Hursthouse, Rosalind and Glen, Pettigrove. "Virtue Ethics." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* Winter 2018 ed., edited by Edward N. Zalta, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/ethics-virtue/.

Larsen, Emmett M et al. “Effects of childhood trauma on adult moral decision-making: Clinical correlates and insights from bipolar disorder.” *Journal of affective disorders,* vol. 244 (2019): 180-186. doi:10.1016/j.jad.2018.10.002.

Lee, Jung H., and SpringerLink (Online service). “Revisioning Ethics in the *Zhuangzi*” *The Ethical Foundations of Early Daoism: Zhuangzi’s Unique Moral Vision.* 1st ed. Palgrave Macmillan US, New York, 2014.

Lee, Jung H., and SpringerLink (Online service). “Daoism and “Morality”.” *The Ethical Foundations of Early Daoism: Zhuangzi’s Unique Moral Vision.* 1st ed. Palgrave Macmillan US, New York, 2014.

Milo, Ronald D. “Amorality.” *Immorality.* Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J, 1984.

Milo, Ronald D. “Perverse Wickedness.” *Immorality.* Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J, 1984.

Moeller, Hans-Georg. “Negative Ethics.” *The Moral Fool: A Case for Amorality.* Columbia University Press, New York, 2009.

Stroud, Sarah and Larisa, Svirsky. "Weakness of Will." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* Fall 2019 ed., edited by Edward N. Zalta, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/weakness-will/.

Turiel, E. “Moral Development in the Early Years: When and How.” *Human Development,* vol. 61 (2018): 297-308. doi: 10.1159/000492805.

Wong, David. "Chinese Ethics." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* Summer 2020 ed., edited by Edward N. Zalta, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/ethics-chinese/.

Wong, David. *Natural Moralities: A Defense of Pluralistic Relativism.* Oxford University Press, New York;Oxford;, 2006.