

10 Zhuangzi

Zhuangzi: Virtues and Vices in Daoism

General picture

- Dao (the Way): the natural, ever-changing flow of the world.
- Human problem: we cling to fixed views, roles, and plans; this makes us rigid, anxious, and out of sync with the Dao.
- Solution: cultivate certain virtues (dispositions or skills) that let us move with the Dao, and avoid certain vices that block us.

The Wheelwright story (key background)

- An old wheelwright sees a ruler reading “the books of the sages”.
- He says:
 - His own craft (making wheels) depends on a knack:
 - * If he carves too slowly → wheel is brittle.
 - * Too fast → wheel is spongy.
 - * Just right → “it fits hand and heart”.
 - This knack:
 - * Cannot be fully put into words.
 - * Cannot be transmitted just by explanation.
 - * Exists as a lived, embodied skill.
- His punchline about the classics:
 - What the sages really knew died with them.
 - Their books are just “dregs” of that living understanding.
- Lesson:
 - Words and rules alone can’t teach you how to live well.
 - You must practice living in harmony with the Dao until you develop a flexible, responsive knack.

This same idea underlies Daoist virtues and genuine pretending: the point is not to follow explicit rules, but to cultivate fluid, skillful responsiveness.

Virtues in Zhuangzi

These are traits that help you attune to the Dao.

1. Openness

- What it is:
 - Willingness to see from multiple perspectives; not locking into one “this is absolutely right” standpoint.
- Textual support:
 - “Illumination of the Obvious”: the sage recognizes that “this” and “that” (right/wrong, mine/yours) arise from particular standpoints.
 - The sage “lets them all bask in the broad daylight of Heaven” instead of clinging to one side.
- Function:
 - Makes you receptive to how things actually are now, rather than forcing reality into your preconceptions.
 - Basis for tolerance: “each thing is just so, each thing is right” from its own perspective.

2. Adaptability

- What it is:
 - Ability to shift views, plans, and roles as situations change.
- Examples:
 - Monkey/Chestnut story (“three in the morning”):
 - * Trainer: “3 chestnuts in the morning, 4 at night.”
 - * Monkeys angry.
 - * Trainer: “Fine: 4 in the morning, 3 at night.”
 - * Monkeys delighted.
 - * Nothing really changed, but he flexibly adjusted to their current standpoint (“the rightness of their present ‘this’”).
 - Sage “walking two roads”:
 - * Uses varying “rights and wrongs” to harmonize with people.
 - * Yet stays “at rest in the middle of Heaven’s potter’s wheel” (keeps an inner center while adapting outwardly).
- Function:
 - Lets you live effectively in a world where values and perspectives constantly shift.
 - Opposite of stubbornness about one correct way.

3. Spontaneity

- What it is:
 - Natural, unforced responsiveness; acting from a deeply trained knack rather than from tight, self-conscious control.
- Connection to Wheelwright:
 - The wheelwright’s cutting is not calculated step-by-step; it flows from “hand and heart”.
 - This is trained spontaneity: practice + letting go of rigidity.
- Connection to Ziqi “losing me”:
 - Ziqi says he has “lost me”:
 - * He no longer clings to a fixed, controlling ego.
 - * He is moved by the “piping of Heaven” (the natural processes that blow through “the ten thousand differences”).

- Function:
 - Prevents overthinking.
 - Allows alignment with the Dao as it manifests right now.

4. Attentiveness

- What it is:
 - Sharp awareness of subtle changes in self, others, and environment.
 - Examples:
 - Listening to the “piping of Heaven”:
 - * The wind blows through different hollows; each hollow gives a distinct sound.
 - * Attentiveness = hearing the specific situation rather than imposing one sound on all.
 - Stories about dream/awakening:
 - * Recognizing how different states (dreaming/waking, life/death, joy/sorrow) arise and pass.
 - Function:
 - Makes you responsive instead of automatic.
 - Enables openness and adaptability: you can’t adjust well if you don’t perceive what’s actually happening.
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Vices in Zhuangzi

These are patterns that block harmony with the Dao.

1. Rigidity

- What it is:
 - Insisting on one fixed doctrine, one identity, one way of life, or one “true” right/wrong.
- Examples:
 - Debaters (Confucians vs Mohists) each claim to own “right” and “wrong”.
 - Zhuangzi shows any position can be affirmed or denied from some standpoint.
- Why it’s a vice:
 - The world is constantly changing; rigid stances soon conflict with reality.
 - Leads to dogmatism, conflict, and inner tension.

2. Being Stuck or Blocked

- What it is:
 - Getting trapped in one role, mood, or self-conception; inability to move on.
- Examples:
 - People “continue along the same ruts... held fast as if bound by cords.”
 - Zhao Wen’s son endlessly grappling with his father’s zither strings, never moving beyond that narrow skill.
- Why it’s a vice:
 - Blocks transformation of self and perspective.
 - Makes you brittle and unable to cope with new situations.

3. Inattentiveness

- What it is:
 - Moving through life on autopilot; not noticing how all things and evaluations are constantly shifting.
 - Examples:
 - People spend life “drowning in their own activities,” never asking what any of it amounts to.
 - Fools assume they are “already awake” to reality, not seeing they’re in a “vast dream”.
 - Why it’s a vice:
 - You miss chances to adapt.
 - You cling to illusions about yourself, others, and what really matters.
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Embracing Uncertainty, Change, and Transformation

1. Uncertainty

Basic claim

- Uncertainty about the future and our place in the world is built into human life.
- Zhuangzi does not try to remove this uncertainty; instead, he teaches how to live well within it.

Relativity of right and wrong

- “This” and “that”, “right” and “wrong”:
 - Are generated together from particular standpoints.
 - From one perspective, X is right; from another, X is wrong.
- Examples:
 - Different animals “know” different right foods, right habitats, right beauty.
 - Humans prefer certain foods, homes, lovers; fish, birds, deer have totally different standards.
- Conclusion:
 - There is no single, final, objective standard accessible to us that settles all disputes.
 - Our words and arguments are inherently limited and “obscured”.

Zhuangzi’s response: “Radiance of Drift and Doubt”

- The sage’s only “map” is the Radiance of Drift and Doubt:
 - Drift: letting viewpoints and situations flow, not freezing them.
 - Doubt: not clinging dogmatically to any single fixed judgment.
- The sage:
 - “Goes by the rightness of the present ‘this’.”
 - Entrusts judgments to the “everyday function of each thing”:
 - * What works for this being in this context.
- This is not nihilism:
 - He still acts, speaks, and cares.
 - But he does so with humility about his own standpoint.

2. Change and Transformation

Fundamental idea

- The world, our circumstances, and we ourselves are in constant transformation.
- Zhuangzi urges us to embrace this, including:
 - Changes in fortune.
 - Aging and disease.
 - Death.

Key stories and arguments

1. Ziqi “losing me”

- Ziqi says he has “lost me”:
 - His rigid, ego-centered self has dissolved.
 - He is like a hollow that wind passes through: the “piping of Heaven” produces many sounds.
- Suggests:
 - The self is not a fixed substance but part of a larger process (“Great Clump” of qi).
 - Openness to transformation of self.

2. Life as dream; dream as life

- You can dream you drink wine and wake up weeping; or dream weeping and wake up joyful.
- “While dreaming, you don’t know it’s a dream.”
- Zhuangzi:
 - Asks if a “great awakening” would make our whole present life look like a dream.
 - Claims that Confucius and the questioner are dreaming; even his own statement is within the dream.
- Lesson:
 - Our current certainties about what is real, important, or tragic may later look as mistaken as dream-fears.
 - This undercuts obsessive clinging to particular states of life.

3. Butterfly dream

- Zhuang Zhou dreams he is a butterfly, carefree.
- Wakes as Zhuang Zhou again.
- He doesn’t know:
 - Whether he was Zhuang Zhou dreaming a butterfly,
 - or a butterfly now dreaming he is Zhuang Zhou.
- Calls this the “transformation of one thing into another.”
- Lesson:
 - Identity is fluid; the boundary between “me” and “not me” is not as strict as we think.
 - We should not cling to one fixed self as ultimately real.

4. Lady Li

- Lady Li wept when taken from her old life to Qin.
- When she later enjoyed palace luxury, she regretted her earlier tears.
- Zhuangzi:

- Asks whether the dead may similarly regret how tightly they clung to life.
- Lesson:
 - Our present judgments about what is good/bad (life/death, place/status) are unstable and may be overturned by later transformations.

How to embrace transformation

- “Harmonize with them by means of their Heavenly Transitions”:
 - Recognize that every “so” is also “not-so,” every “right” also “not-right,” in some context.
 - Don’t try to force all things into one permanent pattern.
 - “Forget what year it is, forget what should or should not be”:
 - Drop obsessive calendar- and duty-fixation.
 - Live in the present flow, rather than in abstract schemes.
 - Sage’s posture:
 - “Standing shoulder to shoulder with the sun and moon, scooping up time and space.”
 - Participates in many different “harvests”, yet tastes the same underlying “maturation” in all.
 - Even death/life cannot fundamentally disturb him.
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Sincerity, Authenticity, Genuine Pretending – and Zhuangzi’s Recommendation

This section is about how to understand the self and its roles.

1. Definitions

Sincerity

(Think roughly: inner consistency and earnestness about accepted norms or roles.)

- You:
 - Deeply internalize certain values/roles (e.g., “dutiful son,” “loyal minister”, “moral person”).
 - Strive to align your thoughts, feelings, and actions with those norms.
 - Avoid hypocrisy: you want your inner and outer to match.
- Ideal in many Confucian texts:
 - One should truly embody one’s role, not just go through the motions.

Authenticity

(Think roughly: being true to an inner, unique, “real self” that is prior to roles.)

- You:
 - Believe you have a deep, stable core self with its own desires, values, identity.
 - Try to express this inner self outwardly, even if it conflicts with social expectations.
 - Often involves suspicion of social roles as “masks” that distort your real essence.
- Ideal in much modern Western thought:
 - “Be yourself,” “find your true self,” “don’t just conform.”

Genuine Pretending

(Concept used by some interpreters to capture Zhuangzi's view.)

- You:
 - Fully and skillfully play your social roles (child, student, friend, worker, etc.).
 - Do so with wholehearted engagement, but with an important awareness:
 - * You know that no role or self-description is ultimately, absolutely “you”.
 - * Roles are tools or costumes that you can change as circumstances change.
 - “Pretending”:
 - Because roles are not your fixed essence.
 - “Genuine”:
 - Because you are not deceptive or half-hearted; you throw yourself into the role for now, while knowing it's not ultimate.
 - Fits Zhuangzi's idea of:
 - “Walking two roads” (both engaging and stepping back).
 - Letting each “this” be right in its context, without freezing it as absolute.
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2. Zhuangzi's critique of sincerity and authenticity

Problems with rigid sincerity

- When sincerity is tied to one fixed set of norms or one dao:
 - You cling to one moral scheme as the truth (e.g., only one way of being filial, loyal, just).
 - You become rigid and unable to adapt to different situations or people.
- Zhuangzi's targets:
 - Confucians and Mohists who insist on their own “right” and denounce others' as “wrong.”
 - People who “follow whatever has so far taken shape in their minds, making that their teacher.”
- Consequences:
 - “Continue along the same ruts,” exhausted and bewildered.
 - Constant disputes over right/wrong with no final resolution.
- From a Daoist standpoint:
 - Such sincerity is a vice because it opposes openness and adaptability.
 - It ties your identity tightly to one pattern, making change and uncertainty terrifying.

Problems with authenticity (in the Western sense)

- Authenticity assumes:
 - There is a stable, deep “true self” you should discover and express.
 - Social roles are often false impositions that hide this true self.
- Zhuangzi's view of self clashes with this:
 - The self is fluid and interdependent, not a fixed core:
 - * Ziqi “loses me”.
 - * Butterfly dream blurs boundary between “Zhuang Zhou” and “butterfly”.
 - * Body and mind are just configurations of qi that transform.
 - Our identities and preferences themselves are products of changing circumstances:
 - * Lady Li's reversal of feelings about her life situation.

- Thus, a project of “finding and expressing the one, final true self”:
 - Misunderstands what a self is.
 - Risks making you cling to yet another rigid story about who you “really” are.
 - Conflict with Daoist embrace of constant transformation.
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3. Why Genuine Pretending fits Zhuangzi

How it works

- You accept that:
 - Roles and identities are necessary: we can’t live without them.
 - But they are also contingent and changing: none is ultimately “who you are” forever.
- So you:
 - Take on roles as they arise (student, friend, child, worker).
 - Perform them skilfully and wholeheartedly (like the wheelwright’s practiced knack).
 - Stay internally light and flexible:
 - * You don’t absolutize any role.
 - * You let roles transform as situations change.
- This matches:
 - The sage “harmonizing with others” through varying rights/wrongs while remaining at rest in the middle.
 - “Harmonizing with Heavenly Transitions” and “being jostled and shaken by the boundlessness, yet lodged securely in it.”
 - Going by “the rightness of the present ‘this’” instead of defending one constant identity.

Connection to the virtues

- Openness:
 - Genuine pretending recognizes many legitimate ways of being; you can seriously inhabit different roles without claiming any as the only true one.
- Adaptability:
 - You can step into and out of roles as the context changes (like the monkey-trainer’s chestnut counts).
- Spontaneity:
 - Once you have practiced roles and skills, you can perform them effortlessly, without overthinking.
- Attentiveness:
 - You watch for what this situation calls for, rather than mechanically replaying a role-script.

Why Zhuangzi recommends genuine pretending

- It:
 - Respects the inescapable reality of roles (you still act, talk, form relationships).
 - Avoids the rigidity of sincerity (no single fixed dao or identity is treated as absolute).
 - Avoids the illusion of a fixed authentic core (self is recognized as transformable).
 - Allows you to live happily and skillfully within uncertainty and change.

- In short:
 - Zhuangzi's ideal is not "be absolutely sincere" or "express a true inner self,"
 - But to play your changing roles genuinely, while knowing they are only roles—this is genuine pretending.