

10 Zhuangzi

1. Daoist Virtues and Vices in the Zhuangzi

Core Idea: Living in Harmony with the Dao

- The **Dao** is the ever-changing, spontaneous, underlying course of the world.
 - Living well = developing a **practical knack** (like the Wheelwright) for moving with the Dao.
 - This knack cannot be fully captured in rules or words; it requires practice and attunement.
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Virtues Zhuangzi Emphasizes

These are traits that help us **flow with the Dao**:

1. Openness

- Willingness to let go of fixed views, identities, and plans.
- Recognizing that different beings have different perspectives on what's "right," enjoyable, or beautiful (e.g., eels, monkeys, humans each "know" different things).
- Connection: the "Radiance of Drift and Doubt" – holding views lightly and being open to many standpoints.

2. Adaptability

- Ability to shift with changing circumstances rather than resisting them.
- Example pattern: "Walking Two Roads" – using different norms or descriptions with different people (like the monkey trainer's "three in the morning, four at night" vs "four in the morning, three at night"), without clinging to one rigid description.
- The sage moves flexibly among many "rights" and "wrongs", without being trapped by any single one.

3. Spontaneity

- Acting fluidly, without overthinking, once one is attuned to the Dao.
- Like a skilled musician or craftsman for whom action flows effortlessly.
- Zhuangzi's ideal person **does not obsessively plan or control**, but responds naturally to each new situation.

4. Attentiveness

- Careful, non-judgmental awareness of the present "this."
 - Seeing what is actually going on, rather than forcing reality into preconceived categories.
 - The sage "goes by the rightness of the present 'this'," noticing what works for each thing in its own context (its "everyday function").
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Vices Zhuangzi Criticizes

These block harmony with the Dao:

1. Rigidity

- Clinging to one fixed standard of right/wrong, one identity, or one way of life.
- Example: trying to decide once and for all what is “truly” right, or what one “really” is, instead of seeing that “this” and “that,” right and wrong, shift with perspective.
- Leads to conflict, dogmatism, and inability to cope with change.

2. Being Stuck or Blocked

- Being “bound” to one path, worn away “in the same ruts.”
- Getting trapped in projects, debates, and distinctions, exhausting oneself and never finding rest.
- Zhuangzi portrays many thinkers as stuck trying to make their special skill or theory the ultimate truth.

3. Inattentiveness

- Being so caught in fears, desires, and disputes that you don’t actually see what’s happening.
 - Example: people arguing endlessly about who is right, but missing the deeper point that their perspectives are partial and relative.
 - Inattentiveness makes you miss the subtle movements of the Dao.
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2. Embracing Uncertainty, Change, and Transformation

A. Uncertainty

Key claim: Deep uncertainty is built into human life; Zhuangzi thinks we should embrace it, not fight it.

1. Uncertainty about Right and Wrong

- Different beings and cultures “affirm” different things as right.
- No independent, perspective-free standpoint from which to settle all disputes.
- The sage:
 - Does **not** try to fix once and for all what is right or wrong.
 - Uses multiple standards “to harmonize with others” but **rests in the center**, not captured by any one.

2. Uncertainty about Knowledge

- We can’t even be sure we *know* when we know (e.g., “How do I know that what I call ‘knowing’ is not really ‘not-knowing’?”).
- The dream arguments:
 - The butterfly dream: can’t be sure whether Zhuang Zhou dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly now dreams it is Zhou.
 - Suggests that our sense of being awake and certain may itself be part of a bigger “dream.”
- Ideal: letting the “understanding consciousness come to rest in what it does not know” – peace in not-knowing.

3. Uncertainty about Benefit and Harm

- We believe we know what’s good (life, success) and bad (death, failure), but:

- The dead might “regret” how much they clung to life.
- What looks bad now might be good later (like Lady Li regretting she ever cried about being captured).
- The “Consummate Person” is beyond fixation on benefit and harm; even life and death cannot shake him.

Happiness implication: Trying to force certainty about values, identity, or the future makes us anxious and rigid. Relaxing into uncertainty allows ease and playfulness.

B. Change and Transformation

Core idea: Everything is constantly transforming. Resisting this causes suffering; flowing with it is wisdom.

1. Metaphysical Transformation

- The world is like the wind sounding through different hollows: same wind, many shifting tones.
- Things are “formed” and “destroyed,” but these processes blend into each other; formation already contains destruction and vice versa.
- “All things and I are one” – not a fixed metaphysical doctrine, but a perspective: seeing yourself as continuous with the ever-shifting world.

2. Personal Transformation: Self, Life, and Death

- “I have lost me”: Zhuangzi’s characters describe a state where the old sense of a fixed “me” falls away.
- Life and death are just different phases of the same ongoing process.
- The butterfly dream and other stories push us to see identity as **fluid**, not fixed.

3. Emotional and Evaluative Transformation

- Our feelings about things (like Lady Li’s tears and later delight) change radically with context.
- What we see as disasters or blessings is often a matter of perspective and timing.

Recommended attitude:

- **Embrace:**
 - Aging, illness, death, role changes, shifting feelings.
 - **Avoid:**
 - Clinging to a past self or fixed life plan.
 - **Practice:**
 - Seeing each situation as a new “this,” and responding afresh.
 - Letting yourself be “jostled and shaken by the boundlessness” while being “secure in the boundlessness.”
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3. Self and Role: Sincerity, Authenticity, Genuine Pretending

Zhuangzi challenges common ideas about the self and how we should relate to social roles.

A. Sincerity

Rough idea (as used in this course):

- Being **internally committed** to a role or value:
 - Your outer behavior matches a deeply held inner attitude.
 - You *really mean* it: e.g., sincerely believing in your social or moral role and fully endorsing it from the inside.
- Emphasis on:
 - Having a stable, genuine inner core that aligns with your public words and actions.

Zhuangzi's problem with (strong) sincerity:

- If sincerity means **locking in** to one set of roles or values as absolutely right, it becomes:
 - Rigid
 - Closed to other perspectives
 - Unable to adapt as circumstances and understandings change
 - This clashes with Daoist virtues of openness and adaptability.
 - It can lead to:
 - Arguing and struggling to defend “your” way as the one true way.
 - Grinding yourself down upholding a fixed identity.
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B. Authenticity

Western-influenced idea:

- Being “true to yourself”:
 - Discover your one “real” inner self and express it.
 - Critically distance yourself from social conventions if they conflict with your “true” identity.
- Focus on:
 - Inner psychological depth
 - Owning your desires and values as uniquely yours.

Zhuangzi's problem with (strong) authenticity:

- Assumes there *is* a single, stable “true self” to be uncovered beneath roles.
 - But in Zhuangzi:
 - The self is **fluid** and **transforming** (e.g., losing “me,” butterfly dream).
 - What counts as “me” shifts with time, context, and perspective.
 - Clinging to a “true self” can become another kind of rigidity:
 - “I am this kind of person; therefore I must act like this,” even when the situation calls for something else.
 - This again conflicts with openness and adaptability.
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C. Genuine Pretending

Zhuangzi's recommended alternative

Basic idea:

- You **play your roles fully and skillfully**, like a good actor, while recognizing they are:
 - Context-dependent
 - Not absolute
 - Not your ultimate, unchanging essence
- “Pretending”:
 - You know roles (parent, teacher, citizen, friend) are, in some sense, constructed and provisional.
 - You don’t mistake any single role for your deepest, final identity.
- “Genuine”:
 - You are **wholehearted** and **caring** in the role while you’re playing it.
 - You are not cynical, manipulative, or fake.
 - You really respond to people’s needs and to the situation.

How genuine pretending works:

- **Flexible Identity**
 - You can be a devoted parent at home, a professional at work, a playful friend elsewhere—without needing one of these to be “the real you.”
 - You “walk two roads”: fit into various norms and perspectives while remaining centered in the Dao.
 - **Alignment with Daoist Virtues**
 - **Openness**: you’re open to many ways of being, not locked into just one.
 - **Adaptability**: you shift roles and responses as circumstances change.
 - **Spontaneity**: you can respond freshly and creatively, not robotically following a rigid self-concept.
 - **Attentiveness**: you notice what this person and this situation call for, instead of imposing a pre-decided “authentic” script.
 - **Not Hypocrisy**
 - Hypocrisy: pretending to have values or feelings you don’t have, to deceive others.
 - Genuine pretending: you know roles are partly “as if,” but you inhabit them with real care and responsiveness.
 - You are honest at a deeper level: honest about the contingency and fluidity of all social roles and selves.
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D. Which Is Recommended in Zhuangzi?

- **Not:**
 - Narrow **sincerity** that absolutizes one role or value set.
 - Strong **authenticity** that assumes a fixed, inner “true self” that must always be expressed.
- **Yes:**
 - **Genuine pretending** is most in line with the Zhuangzian ideal.

Why Zhuangzi favors genuine pretending:

1. **Matches the reality of change and uncertainty**
 - Since identities, roles, and values transform, it is wiser to treat them as flexible and provisional.

- Genuine pretending lets you participate fully in life without being shattered when roles change.

2. **Avoids rigidity**

- You don't chain yourself to one moral code, role, or self-image.
- You can harmonize with different people's "rights" and "wrongs" while resting in the center.

3. **Supports happiness**

- Less anxiety about "who you really are" or whether you are perfectly consistent.
- More room for play, humor, and peaceful acceptance of transformation.
- You live more like the Zhuangzian sage: attuned, adaptable, and unthreatened by change—even by death.

Summary for Exam Use

- **Virtues:** openness, adaptability, spontaneity, attentiveness – all help you flow with the Dao.
- **Vices:** rigidity, stuckness, inattentiveness – all block harmony with the Dao.
- **Uncertainty:** about right/wrong, knowledge, and benefit/harm is pervasive; the sage rests in not-knowing and goes by the present "this."
- **Change/Transformation:** world, self, and values constantly transform; resisting this causes suffering; embracing it leads to freedom.
- **Sincerity:** deep inner commitment to roles/values; risks rigidity.
- **Authenticity:** being true to a supposed inner "real self"; risks clinging to a fixed identity.
- **Genuine pretending:** wholeheartedly playing roles while knowing they're contingent and transformable; this is the Zhuangzian ideal.