

10 Zhuangzi

Zhuangzi: Virtues and Vices in Daoism

1. Practice and “Knack”: The Wheelwright

- Wheelwright story (summary idea):
 - An old wheelwright tells a bookish noble that written words are just the “leftovers” of the sages.
 - Real skill (like making a good wheel) cannot be fully taught by words or rules.
 - You must practice until you develop a knack — an embodied, intuitive responsiveness.

Implication for Daoist virtue:

- Living in harmony with the Dao is like wheel-making:
 - Not rule-following, but skilled responsiveness to changing situations.
 - Virtues are practical abilities cultivated through life, not abstract principles memorized from texts.
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2. Core Virtues in Zhuangzi

All these support moving with the Dao in a changing, uncertain world.

a. Openness

- What it is:
 - Willingness to see from multiple perspectives.
 - Not clinging to one fixed view of what is right, good, or real.
- Textual basis (ideas):
 - Different beings “know” different things as right (eels, people, birds, deer each find different foods, homes, mates “right”).
 - “Each thing is right in its own way”; the sage lets many perspectives be valid.
- Role in happiness:
 - Reduces dogmatism and conflict.
 - Makes it easier to accept others and oneself in changing roles and circumstances.

b. Adaptability

- What it is:
 - Ability to shift easily as situations change.
 - Willingness to let judgments, plans, and even self-conceptions adjust.

- Textual basis (ideas):
 - “Courses are formed by someone walking them”: paths and norms are made by use, not fixed in advance.
 - The sage “walks two roads”: can switch between different “rights and wrongs” to harmonize with others while remaining inwardly at ease.
- Role in happiness:
 - Helps one cope with unpredictable events (loss, failure, illness).
 - Prevents getting “stuck” in outdated roles or expectations.

c. Spontaneity

- What it is:
 - Unforced, natural, flexible responsiveness — like a skilled musician improvising.
 - Acting without overthinking, once the knack is internalized.
- Textual basis (ideas):
 - The wind blowing through many hollows creates many different tones automatically.
 - The sage “lets things be so of themselves” rather than forcing rigid plans.
- Role in happiness:
 - Less anxiety and over-calculation.
 - Actions feel effortless and fitting, like “going with the flow.”

d. Attentiveness

- What it is:
 - Careful, present-moment noticing of subtle details: context, timing, other people's needs.
 - Awareness of how things are actually changing rather than how we wish they were.
 - Textual basis (ideas):
 - The sage “goes by the rightness of the present ‘this’”: decides based on the concrete situation before them.
 - The “Illumination of the Obvious” means clearly seeing how every “this” is also a “that” from another viewpoint.
 - Role in happiness:
 - Prevents clumsy, inappropriate actions.
 - Makes it possible to be spontaneous and wise, because the spontaneity is well-informed.
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3. Central Vices in Zhuangzi

These are obstacles to harmonizing with the Dao.

a. Rigidity

- What it is:
 - Clinging to one set of beliefs, rules, or identities as absolutely right.
 - Insisting there is one correct way things must be.
- Textual basis (ideas):

- Zhuangzi mocks those who “shoot forth like an arrow” to judge right and wrong, and “hold fast as if to sworn oaths.”
 - Confucians and Mohists each insist their doctrine is the correct one, endlessly debating.
 - Why it’s bad:
 - The world is too complex and changing for one rigid standard.
 - Leads to conflict, self-torment, and inability to adapt when circumstances shift.
- b. Being Stuck or Blocked
- What it is:
 - Being trapped in one role, agenda, or emotional state.
 - Continuing along the same “ruts” even when they no longer work.
 - Textual basis (ideas):
 - People “drown in their own activities, unable to turn back.”
 - Zhao Wen’s son spends his life trying to master his father’s zither technique, never moving beyond.
 - Why it’s bad:
 - Wastes life chasing narrow projects or reputations.
 - Prevents growth and transformation.

c. Inattentiveness

- What it is:
 - Not really seeing what’s happening now; being lost in fixed concepts or worries.
 - Textual basis (ideas):
 - Endless debates leave “something unseen”; people argue theories instead of seeing the present situation.
 - To “labor your spirit” trying to unify all things is called “Three in the Morning”: you miss that 3+4 and 4+3 are the same.
 - Why it’s bad:
 - Leads to foolish emotional reactions (like the monkeys angry at 3/4 but happy at 4/3).
 - Stops you from acting well in the actual moment you are living.
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Zhuangzi: Embracing Uncertainty, Change, and Transformation

1. Uncertainty as Fundamental

a. Pervasive Uncertainty

- Humans are naturally unsure about:
 - What is truly right or wrong.
 - What will happen to them and the world.
 - Even what the “self” is.
- Zhuangzi stresses:
 - Our judgments of right/wrong depend on perspective (“this” vs. “that”).
 - What counts as beautiful, useful, or good varies by species, culture, and situation.

Key idea: There is no single, final, context-free standpoint from which to judge everything.

b. The Sage's Attitude: "Radiance of Drift and Doubt"

- The sage:
 - Does not decisively fix what is right once and for all.
 - Instead uses the "Radiance of Drift and Doubt" — a clear, relaxed awareness that things are always shifting.
 - Does not "define what is right," but trusts the "everyday function" of each being (what actually works for it).
- This is not lazy relativism; it is:
 - Careful attention to concrete cases.
 - Refusal to absolutize any single perspective.

c. "Illumination of the Obvious" and "Present This"

- "Illumination of the Obvious":
 - Seeing how every viewpoint is both right and limited.
 - Understanding that "this" only makes sense against some "that," and vice versa.
- "Going by the rightness of the present 'this'":
 - Instead of chasing final certainty, respond wisely to this specific situation now.
 - Deep uncertainty at the grand level, but clear responsiveness in the immediate.

Result: Peaceful epistemic humility — calmness in not knowing everything, combined with practical skill in action.

2. Embracing Change and Transformation

a. Self as Process, Not Fixed Thing

- Imagery of the wind:
 - A great breath blows through many hollows; each produces different sounds.
 - Similarly, the Dao flows through beings, producing many forms and personalities.
- Ziqi says he has "lost me":
 - The rigid, separate "I" dissolves into a more open awareness.
 - We are shifting patterns in a larger process, not solid, isolated selves.

b. Life and Death as Transformations

- Stories and images:
 - Lady Li cries when captured, but later rejoices in the king's palace and regrets her earlier distress — perspective changes completely.
 - Dream images: dreaming of drinking wine vs. weeping, then waking; a "great awakening" might show our current life as just a dream.
 - Butterfly dream: Zhuang Zhou dreams he is a butterfly; on waking, he cannot tell if he was Zhou dreaming he was a butterfly, or a butterfly now dreaming it is Zhou.
- Core thought:
 - Boundaries between states (life/death, waking/dream, human/animal) are not absolute.
 - Our strong attachments to one state ("life," "being human," this particular identity) are partly based on narrow perspective.

c. Recommended Attitude

- Do not:
 - Cling desperately to any particular identity, role, or condition.
 - Treat death as an absolute catastrophe or life as an absolute possession.
 - Do:
 - Treat transformations as natural transitions in the Dao.
 - Remain flexible and curious: “How do I know that loving life is not a delusion? How do I know the dead do not regret having clung to life?”
 - For happiness:
 - Reduces fear of future change (aging, illness, death).
 - Encourages savoring of the present configuration while being ready to flow into the next.
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Self and Role: Sincerity, Authenticity, and Genuine Pretending in the Zhuangzi

Zhuangzi is very interested in how we inhabit roles (parent, student, official, friend) in a changing world. Three contrasting models:

1. Sincerity

(Think: Confucian ideal.)

a. What Sincerity Is

- You:
 - Wholeheartedly identify with your social/moral roles (child, ruler, friend, etc.).
 - Try to make your inner feelings perfectly match the moral norms of the role.
 - Want to really be a filial child, loyal minister, benevolent ruler, etc.
- “Genuineness” here:
 - Being inwardly exactly what your role demands.
 - Little or no gap between inner self and outer performance.

b. Problems from Zhuangzi's Perspective

- Encourages rigidity:
 - You lock onto a specific, role-defined identity and moral code.
 - Hard to accept other perspectives or roles that conflict with your chosen one.
- Makes you vulnerable to change:
 - If you lose the role (fired, exiled, retired), your sense of self collapses.
- Strengthens harsh judgments:
 - Sincere defenders of their roles often insist that their way of living is simply right, other ways are wrong.
 - This leads to endless debates, conflicts, and moralistic anxiety.

Conclusion: Zhuangzi is suspicious of sincerity as an absolute ideal. It tends toward the vices of rigidity and stuckness.

2. Authenticity

(Think: modern Western ideal.)

a. What Authenticity Is

- You:
 - Seek to discover your “true inner self” — your unique, deep identity.
 - Aim to live in a way that expresses this inner essence, even against social expectations.
 - Often view social roles as masks or constraints that must not distort your true self.
- “Genuineness” here:
 - Being faithful to your inner essence, not letting society define you.

b. Problems from Zhuangzi's Perspective

- Still assumes a fixed core self:
 - A stable inner essence you must discover and protect.
 - This clashes with Zhuangzi’s vision of self as fluid and transforming.
- Can become a new kind of rigidity:
 - “I am this kind of person, therefore I must always act this way.”
 - Anxiety about “Am I really being my true self?” creates inner conflict.
- Can damage harmony with others:
 - Overemphasis on self-expression may make it hard to adapt kindly to family, workplace, or community needs.

Conclusion: Authenticity is less focused on fixed roles and moral codes than sincerity, but still too focused on a fixed self. It doesn’t fit well with Zhuangzi’s emphasis on transformation and perspective-shifting.

3. Genuine Pretending (Zhuangzi’s Recommended Ideal)

“Genuine pretending” is a helpful modern term for Zhuangzi’s preferred way of being in roles.

a. What Genuine Pretending Is

- Pretending:
 - You fully play your social roles (parent, teacher, friend, official) — like an excellent actor.
 - You take them seriously enough to do them well and responsibly.
 - But you remain aware that they are roles, not absolute identities.
- Genuine:
 - You are not lying or faking in a deceptive way.
 - Your responses in the role are sincerely caring and appropriate to the situation.
 - Your genuineness lies in attunement to the moment, not in expressing a fixed inner essence.

Key point: You neither cling to roles as your true self (sincerity), nor cling to a hidden inner essence behind roles (authenticity). You skillfully inhabit roles, knowing they are temporary configurations of the Dao.

b. Features of Genuine Pretending

Connects directly to Daoist virtues:

- Openness:
 - You are open to many possible identities and perspectives.
 - You see that each role is one way the Dao flows through you for a while.
- Adaptability:
 - You can move flexibly among different roles as life changes (child → parent, student → worker, etc.).
 - You adjust behavior to the needs of each relationship without inner crisis.
- Spontaneity:
 - Like a good improviser, you respond creatively to each new situation within the role.
 - Not rigidly following a script, but letting the role express itself appropriately in changing conditions.
- Attentiveness:
 - You carefully read the “rightness of the present this”:
 - * What does this child, this colleague, this stranger need now?
 - You are sensitive to context rather than trapped in abstract rules.

c. How Zhuangzi’s Text Supports Genuine Pretending

- The sage “uses various rights and wrongs to harmonize with others” while resting in the center (Heaven’s Potter’s Wheel).
 - Outwardly: can speak and act in many different moral languages and roles.
 - Inwardly: not bound by any single fixed identity.
- The sage treats “each thing as right” and “enfolds them all within himself.”
 - Can affirm many forms of life, many roles and perspectives.
- Advice to “forget what year it is, forget what should or should not be; let yourself be jostled and shaken by the boundlessness.”
 - Let go of fixed stories about who you must be.
 - Allow roles and identities to shift with circumstances.

d. Why Genuine Pretending is Recommended over Sincerity and Authenticity

1. Handles Uncertainty Better
 - No need for final certainty about who you “really” are or which moral code is absolutely right.
 - You navigate uncertainty by skilled, context-sensitive responding.
2. Handles Change and Transformation Better
 - Roles and identities can come and go without destroying your sense of self.
 - You see yourself more like Zhuang Zhou/the butterfly: multiple forms over time.
3. Avoids Main Vices
 - Less prone to rigidity:
 - You don’t absolutize roles (sincerity) or inner essence (authenticity).

- Less likely to get stuck:
 - If a role no longer fits, you can gracefully move to another.
 - Increases attentiveness:
 - Focus shifts from “Am I being true to myself?” to “What is right for this situation?”
4. Promotes Harmony and Happiness
- Easier to get along with diverse people and norms: you can “walk two roads.”
 - Anxiety about self-justification and moral purity decreases.
 - You live more lightly and playfully, yet still responsibly.
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4. Quick Comparison Table

Model	What is “real” self?	Attitude to roles	Zhuangzi’s verdict
Sincerity	My role-defined moral identity	Be truly and fully my role	Too rigid, role-bound
Authenticity	Inner essence behind roles	Roles may be masks	Still too essentialist
Genuine pretending	No fixed essence; shifting patterns in Dao	Fully play roles, knowing they’re provisional	Recommended ideal

For the exam:

- Be able to:
 - Define the four virtues and three vices and explain how they relate to living with the Dao.
 - Explain how Zhuangzi embraces uncertainty and change (perspectivism, dreams, transformation).
 - Distinguish sincerity, authenticity, and genuine pretending, and give reasons why genuine pretending best fits Zhuangzi’s philosophy.