

## A Daoist Critique of Morality

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### 1. Introduction

What is the Way (*dào* 道) by which to guide social and personal life? In classical Chinese philosophy – the thought of the Warring States period (481–221 B.C.) – a prominent answer, endorsed by the Ruists (“Confucians”) and Mohists, was that the Way is the path of benevolence (*rén* 仁) and righteousness (*yì* 義). Broadly, ‘benevolence’ here refers to conduct demonstrating kindness or goodwill toward others and to the character trait of being reliably disposed to engage in such conduct. ‘Righteousness’ refers to what is morally right or appropriate. Early Chinese texts often pair these two cardinal values as a compound, ‘benevolence-and-righteousness’ (*rén yì*). Jointly, they overlap extensively with what we call ‘morality’. Just as commonsense moral discourse today encourages us to be a good person, do the right thing, and avoid immoral conduct, for many classical Chinese audiences it would have seemed common sense that one should seek to embody benevolence and to do what is righteous.

In this context, consider the following exchange from the classical Daoist anthology *Zhuangzi* (莊子). Yi’erzi was a pupil of Yao, an ancient sage-king exalted in both the Ruist and Mohist traditions. Xu You was a Daoist worthy – Yao’s teacher, according to one passage – who rejected Yao’s offer to rule the empire on the

grounds that the empire was in good order already and accepting merely for the title would be foolish.

Yi'erzi said, 'Yao told me, "You must devote yourself to benevolence and righteousness while clearly stating what is right and wrong"'. Xu You said, 'Why come to see me? Yao having already tattooed you with benevolence and righteousness and cut off your nose with right and wrong, how will you wander the aimless and wild, unbound and uninhibited, turning and shifting path? ...The blind lack the means to appreciate the attractiveness of eyes and facial expressions, the sightless lack the means to appreciate the look of richly coloured embroidery'.<sup>1</sup> (6/83–86)

Xu You likens devoting oneself to benevolence and righteousness and seeking to clearly articulate right from wrong to suffering the ancient Chinese corporal punishments of tattooing the convict's face and amputating the nose. Commonsense morality is not merely a mistake, the passage implies. It mutilates us, leaving us blind to the features by which to navigate the Way. For the Way is no straight and narrow path, something we can commit to in advance and articulate as a definite scheme of distinctions. It has no fixed destination or boundaries but is instead constantly turning and shifting. It is a path we 'wander' rather than march along purposefully. To wander it adeptly, we rely not on clear statements of right and wrong, but on capacities more like those by which we appreciate beauty.

This astonishing rejection not just of a particular understanding of morality but of the very idea of morality as a guide to action is representative of an intriguing thread of discourse that winds through the two major classical Daoist anthologies, the *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi*, along with Daoist-inspired passages in the rulership manual *The Annals of Lü Buwei* and the Han dynasty compendium *Huainanzi*. This discourse is not associated with a particular author – its strands appear in different ancient compilations and through various strata of the *Zhuangzi* associated with

distinct, anonymous authorial voices. Moreover, it includes passages presenting a range of slightly different doctrinal stances – some, but not all, for instance, make normative appeals to a conception of people’s inherent ‘nature’ or ‘disposition’ (*xìng* 性). Still, the various passages are tied together by a central, unifying motif: a rejection of the core moral values of benevolence and righteousness as a conception or elucidation of the Way – not just a rejection of particular substantive theories of benevolence and righteousness, but of the whole idea that the Way is justifiably interpreted in terms of such values. To the contrary, according to this discourse, benevolence and righteousness actually obscure the Way and impair our ability to follow it. To justify this stance, the texts raise several themes – some implicit in the passage above – that together constitute a fascinating critique of morality.

This chapter aims to elucidate key features of this critique, explain their significance in the context of early Chinese ethics, and relate them to ethical discourse today. Because the relevant texts are brief, of unknown authorship, and scattered across different bodies of writing, I will not attempt to reconstruct the position of any particular text or thinker. Instead, I will interpret selected individual passages and collate their shared themes into a composite stance that could have been held by a hypothetical classical Daoist thinker but may not represent the views of any actual historical figure. The resulting stance is thus not purely an interpretation of the sources but a development of them that could plausibly have been endorsed by their authors – or so I argue. For brevity, I will not attempt an exhaustive survey of relevant passages in early Chinese texts but will attempt only to identify several recurring themes.

Before beginning, let me distinguish my subject from a related but separate line of thought in Daoist texts. Prominent parts of the *Zhuangzi*, such as 'Discourse on Evening Things Out' (book 2) and 'Autumn Waters' (book 17), present a sophisticated sceptical discussion of the claim that any value or guide to action could be justified universally or absolutely, rather than at most only provisionally and contextually (see Fraser 2009). This discussion can be marshalled to formulate a critique of benevolence and righteousness that complements and reinforces the discourse treated here. However, this broader critique of value falls outside the scope of this chapter. Here I will focus specifically on passages that explicitly address the paired norms of benevolence and righteousness, typically by mentioning them as a compound (*'ren yi'*). This is one reason for the indefinite article in my title. The chapter seeks to articulate just one of several potential Daoist critiques of morality.

The next section gives an overview of this Daoist critique of benevolence and righteousness by discussing two rich dialogues from the *Zhuangzi* that present several of its key themes. Section 3 then draws on a variety of texts to develop four of these themes, the claims that attending to benevolence and righteousness is a sign of pathology, that these values interfere with people's spontaneous capacities, that they are redundant, and that they are an obstacle to genuinely adroit action. In Section 4, I draw on these four points to construct and elucidate a composite account of the critique of benevolence and righteousness. I explain how, given early Daoists' understanding of the structure of action and of the factors that guide it, their critique may be surprisingly plausible. In Section 5, I argue that the texts' criticisms of the values of benevolence and righteousness can be interpreted as criticisms of morality

in general, both as a decision procedure and as a source of justification. Along the way, I attempt briefly to situate the Daoist critique in relation to well-known ‘morality critics’ in the West, including contemporary writers such as Nagel (1979), Wolf (1982), and Williams (1985) and nineteenth-century figures such as Nietzsche and James. Section 6 concludes the chapter by considering a series of potential objections to the Daoist position and tentatively suggesting how a Daoist proponent might respond.

## 2. ‘Apply Your Virtuosity and Follow the Way’

Some of the richest expressions of the Daoist critique of benevolence and righteousness occur in a series of fictional dialogues between Kongzi (Confucius) and Lao Dan (Laozi) scattered across several books of the *Zhuangzi*. Kongzi presents and Lao Dan critiques the view that benevolence and righteousness are the Way. In one dialogue, Kongzi launches into a long-winded exposition of the classics in an attempt to win Lao Dan’s assistance in placing books in the Zhou palace archive. Lao Dan interrupts and asks to hear just the crux of it.

Kongzi said, ‘The crux lies in benevolence and righteousness’.

Lao Dan said, ‘May I ask, benevolence and righteousness, are these people’s nature (*xing*)?’

Kongzi said, ‘They are. If the gentleman is not benevolent, he is not complete; if not righteous, he does not live. Benevolence and righteousness are genuinely people’s nature. What more is there to do?’

Lao Dan said, ‘May I ask, what do you call benevolence and righteousness?’

Kongzi said, ‘The heart within feeling harmony and joy, caring inclusively for all impartially – this is what benevolence and righteousness really are’.

Lao Dan said, ‘Eeek! There’s a danger in that last statement. All-inclusive care – isn’t that impractical? Impartiality to all is just partiality. Do you wish to keep all under heaven from losing what nurtures them? If so, then heaven

and earth inherently have regularity, the sun and moon inherently have illumination, the stars and planets inherently have ranks, the birds and beasts inherently have flocks, and the trees inherently grow upright. Just proceed by applying your virtuosity, move by following the Way, and you've got it! Why all this hustle and bustle to promote benevolence and righteousness, as though beating a drum in search of a lost child? Eeek! You disorder people's nature'. (13/47-53)

Lao Dan presents three criticisms of benevolence and righteousness and proposes a constructive alternative. First, the ideals of benevolence and righteousness are vague and impractical and perhaps conceptually self-defeating. Caring all-inclusively about everyone is an obscure, unworkable ideal. (What exactly is it? How could we act on it in practice? What would distinguish it from, for instance, just seeking to get along with others harmoniously?) Insofar as a commitment to impartiality reflects one's personal ethical convictions, it is itself 'partial' or 'biased', according to the text. Second, pursuing benevolence and righteousness is wasteful and ineffective – it results in misdirected effort and needless commotion, as if we were to march around banging a drum to attract a lost child who is in fact only playing quietly in the garden. Third, through this misguided effort, devotion to benevolence and righteousness disrupts people's inherent nature (*xing*). This is a further, practical respect in which benevolence and righteousness may be self-defeating. Presumably they are proposed to help 'nurture' people or see to their needs. Instead, according to the text, they disorder people's nature – their inherent dispositions and patterns of activity – and thus actually impede their 'nurture'.

Lao Dan's alternative approach also turns on an appeal to natural, spontaneous patterns and tendencies. In early Chinese thought, human conduct is conceptualized as a direction and manner of 'proceeding' (*xing* 行, also 'walking')

along some 'course' or 'way' (*dao*). Lao Dan observes that the natural world spontaneously manifests inherent courses or ways: the days, months, and seasons follow regular cycles, the stars and constellations track repeated paths across the sky, animals flock together as typical for each species, trees grow toward the light. The implication is that if we wish to preserve what 'nurtures' us, such naturally occurring patterns present an appropriate Way for us too to follow, one requiring no superfluous 'hustle and bustle'. By our inherent nature or dispositions, we are able to act on patterns appropriate for us. Instead of fixing benevolence and righteousness as guidelines, we need only apply our inherent 'virtuosity' (*dé* 德), through which we can find a spontaneously occurring Way in any situation. 'Virtuosity' refers to the nature-given potency, power, capacity, or proficiency by which we follow the Way. We can think of it as a distinctively Daoist conception of our capacity for agency, understood specifically as an inherent competence in navigating paths presented by our circumstances.

In another episode – perhaps a variant of the same story – Kongzi calls on Lao Dan and expounds on benevolence and righteousness. Lao Dan replies with this critique:

When chaff from winnowing blinds the eyes, heaven and earth and the four directions change places; when mosquitoes or horseflies sting the skin, the whole night you can't get to sleep. When benevolence and righteousness confusedly torment our hearts, no disorder is greater. To keep the world from losing its simplicity, just move as the wind pushes you and take your stand in the culmination of your virtuosity. Why all this hullabaloo, like one who shoulders and bangs a drum to search for a lost child? The snow goose stays white without a daily bath; the crow stays black without a daily inking. The simplicity of black and white isn't enough to debate over; the spectacle of fame and praise isn't enough to count as great. When the spring dries up, the fish dwell together with each other on land, spitting moisture on each other and dampening each other with the froth, but it would be far better for them to forget each other in rivers and lakes. (14/56–60)

Again, Lao Dan presents a negative critique and a positive alternative.

Benevolence and righteousness disorder the normal functioning of our heart, the organ that guides action. They disorient us, as does a blinding cloud of dust, and interfere with what normally comes spontaneously, as a painful insect bite prevents us from falling asleep. They amount to much unnecessary, ineffectual effort and fuss. Again, the constructive recommendation is that we employ our inherent virtuosity to find paths to take in particular situations, adapting to our context much as a sailboat's path is determined by the direction of the wind. Following the Way should be simple and easy, as the goose's feathers stay white without bathing. The passage presents a pivotal cluster of metaphors for the role of benevolence and righteousness and the character of a flourishing social life – metaphors also prominent elsewhere in the *Zhuangzi* (6/22–24, 6/72–73). A community devoted to benevolence and righteousness is like a stranded school of fish struggling to survive by spewing froth on each other. By analogy, benevolence and righteousness are a desperate, futile response to pathological circumstances. Urgently tending to each other's survival might seem a fitting course of action for the grounded fish. But ideally they could find their way back to a water source – a spring that hasn't run dry – and simply swim along together spontaneously, without deliberately attending to each other.

### 3. Core Themes



The two selections above raise many of the major themes running through Daoist writings critical of benevolence and righteousness. This section will expand on several of these themes, which are deeply intertwined with one another.

As the metaphors of the beached fish and the mutilating punishments imply, reliance on benevolence and righteousness is typically depicted as a sign of personal and social pathology (Moeller 2009: 43, Ci 2011: 236). A concern with benevolence and righteousness signals loss of or alienation from the Way and disruption or crippling of our virtuosity, or powers of agency. Such moral values arise only when people have failed to apply their virtuosity to follow the Way and interact with each other adeptly. The *Daodejing*, for instance, claims that ‘When the great Way is discarded, there are benevolence and righteousness....When the six relations are not harmonious, there are filial devotion and parental kindness’ (Lau 1963: 22). One of the *Zhuangzi* ‘Primitivist’ writings – so dubbed by Graham (1981) because they advocate a simple, primitive agricultural lifestyle – asks, ‘If the Way and virtuosity are not discarded, why choose benevolence and righteousness?’ (9/11). The

*Huainanzi* states:

Proceeding by following our nature (*xing*) is called the ‘Way’. Fulfilling one’s inborn nature is called ‘virtuosity’. Only when our nature is lost is benevolence valued; only when the Way is lost is righteousness valued. Thus when benevolence and righteousness are established, the Way and virtuosity are displaced. (Major et al. 2010: 397)

Benevolence and righteousness arise through attempts to remedy deficiencies in social interaction that would not occur, or would be resolved spontaneously, were we applying our virtuosity and following the Way competently. They are not the Way, but crutches or aids introduced when it is lost. Precisely because they are

crutches, as long as we rely on them, we thereby prevent ourselves from following the Way adeptly (Ci 2011: 237). Interpreting the Way through these values amounts to handicapping ourselves, as if we were to require that people with healthy legs walk with a cane. The relation between these values and the Way explains apparently paradoxical passages in Daoist texts urging that other ethical ideals can be realized only by renouncing benevolence and righteousness. As the *Daodejing* says, 'Cut off benevolence and cast off righteousness and the people will return to filial devotion and parental kindness' (Lau 1963: 23). A prerequisite for following the Way is that we transcend benevolence and righteousness.

A related theme is that benevolence and righteousness interfere with our inherent nature (*xing*) or our spontaneous functioning. The Yi'erzi passage implies that benevolence and righteousness damage our innate faculties. Another passage depicts Zhuangzi claiming that, in striving to exemplify benevolence and righteousness, people only suppress their inherent virtuosity (14/12). Lao Dan states that benevolence and righteousness disorder our nature. A Primitivist essay claims that benevolence and righteousness 'disrupt all the world' and those who pursue them 'trade away their nature for benevolence and righteousness' (8/19). In some Primitivist writings, people's nature is associated with a specific normative conception of a simple, agricultural lifestyle (9/7), analogous to how the 'genuine nature' of horses fixes a way of life for them, running about the plains and eating grass (9/1). Other passages – such as the *Huainanzi* excerpt above – do not tie people's nature to a particular lifestyle but imply only that we should pursue a Way that fulfills our nature, presumably in the sense of nurturing our health and exercising our innate functioning. Another *Huainanzi* passage relates our nature to

our virtuosity, a link affirmed in many passages: ‘the Way is what guides things; virtuosity is what maintains our nature...When virtuosity declines, benevolence and righteousness arise’ (Major et al. 2010: 351). The implication seems to be that the healthy exercise of virtuosity supports the flourishing of our nature. One *Zhuangzi* passage states that virtuosity is that by which things live, while nature refers to norms associated with having a particular living body (12/38–39), suggesting a conception of ‘nature’ as normal, healthy physiological functioning.

With the exception of some radical Primitivist passages, I suggest that these appeals to people’s nature do not imply the implausible stance that our inborn, biological nature inherently programs us with a specific Way to follow, which benevolence and righteousness disrupt. More likely, the point is that our nature furnishes us with capacities by which certain patterns of action come to us easily and spontaneously, without intensive study or effort, and that such patterns are characteristic of good health and the flourishing use of our capacities. By analogy, we might say it is people’s nature to walk upright or to speak a language, or it is the nature of fish to live in water. The allegation then is that benevolence and righteousness interfere with the spontaneous, healthy functioning of our capacities.

A further, complementary theme is that the guidance available from more basic sources renders benevolence and righteousness redundant (cf. Moeller 2009: 43–52). Such sources include our nature, virtuosity, and the openings for action – the Way – presented by concrete contexts. Lao Dan urges that we simply rely on our inherent virtuosity and move according to the Way. The Yi’erzi story depicts the activity of Xu You’s ‘teacher’ – perhaps the Way itself – as harmonizing the myriad things ‘without deeming this righteousness’ and benefiting a myriad generations

‘without deeming this benevolent’ (6/88–89). An implication is that action that issues directly from virtuosity in response to the Way fulfils the ends of benevolence and righteousness without the agent intending to do so. A passage in the *The Annals of Lü Buwei* makes this point explicit with respect to our nature: if we master the genuine features of our nature and fate, the text claims, ‘the art of benevolence and righteousness proceeds of itself’ (Knoblock and Riegel 2000: sect. 25/3.4). The *Huainanzi* explains that ‘benevolence and righteousness cannot be greater than the Way and virtuosity; benevolence and righteousness lie within the embrace of the Way and virtuosity’ (Major et al. 2010: 641). Guiding action by the Way and virtuosity is also supposedly simpler and more direct than appealing to benevolence and righteousness, requiring no hullabaloo and offering no grounds for debate. For among the problems in acting on benevolence and righteousness is that different agents and circumstances are so diverse and complex that ‘the bases of benevolence and righteousness and the paths of right and wrong are a tangled-up, confused jumble’ (*Zhuangzi* 2/70) – so much so that distinguishing general or absolute values to guide action is impracticable.

A final recurring theme is that benevolence and righteousness are antithetical to ‘forgetting’, a signal feature of adroit action in Zhuangist thought. In many *Zhuangzi* passages, exemplary action is characterized by the absence of conscious attention that ensues when things fit well, as when we ‘forget’ a perfectly fitting belt or shoes (see Fraser 2014). A well-known passage about personal improvement depicts ‘forgetting benevolence and righteousness’ as the first stage in becoming a Zhuangist adept (6/90). Benevolence and righteousness force us to attend to our interactions with others, when ideally we would aim to ‘forget the entire world’

while making 'the entire world forget us' (14/10–11). The metaphor of the stranded fish implies that the finest mode of social interaction would be one in which we 'forget each other', our relations with others proceeding so smoothly that both sides cease to consciously attend to how they interact. The richest treatment of the metaphor presents it as a couplet: 'Fish forget each other in rivers and lakes, people forget each other in arts of the Way' (6/73). The ideal is not mutual neglect but for our joint, skillful performance of the Way to fit both sides so well that we seemingly act as extensions of each other, as the well-fitting shoes become an extension of our body or a pair of figure skaters spontaneously coordinate their movements.

Suppose, for the sake of discussion, that naturally occurring patterns can indeed guide action and that we possess an inherent virtuosity by which to navigate an adroit path through them. Why then have benevolence and righteousness become the prevailing conception of appropriate conduct? As Lao Dan explains in yet another *Zhuangzi* dialogue with Kongzi, benevolence and righteousness were never intended to be absolute or universal norms, but only temporary expedients. They were never more than makeshift 'grass huts' in which one camps for a night. For 'the perfected people of old', benevolence was 'a makeshift way' and righteousness 'a temporary lodging' from which they went on 'to wander in the meandering emptiness', aiming at no particular destination (14/50–52). Taking benevolence and righteousness as fixed norms is a misguided extrapolation of guidance offered for particular circumstances that no longer obtain. The more fitting approach is to 'connect with the Way, unite with our virtuosity, and put aside benevolence and righteousness' (13/64). The aim is to find what fits the situation, in response to the needs of those involved, without relying on predetermined standards. As another

passage puts it, what is actually *yi* ('righteous') – in this case, right or appropriate – is 'set by what fits' in a particular context (18/39). The norms of benevolence and righteousness are like the Six Classics, which are merely 'the worn tracks of the former kings', not the shoes that made the tracks (14/77). Neither the classics nor benevolence and righteousness offer reliable guidance, because the Way is a process of ongoing transformation – one must 'conduct oneself as a person in relation to the process of transformation' (14/81).

#### **4. Rejecting Benevolence and Righteousness**

Drawing these themes together, we can summarize the Daoist critique of benevolence and righteousness roughly as follows. Benevolence and righteousness are not the Way nor an adequate, practicable guide to it. Committing to them generates misplaced, fruitless effort, which directs us away from simpler, more effective paths that better suit our nature and our situation. Adopting benevolence and righteousness as guides to or norms of conduct interferes with applying our inherent capacities to find and follow the most fitting course of action. Instead, we can employ our inherent virtuosity – our ability to respond adeptly to the shape of our circumstances – to find a Way to proceed in concrete contexts. Our circumstances as we find them – including our own abilities and dispositions – always present us with various paths of more or less adaptive, harmonious, and efficacious action.

This critical stance is rooted in and rendered plausible by a particular understanding of the structure of action and of the Way. Daoist thinkers conceive of

action through the model of skills. Normatively commendable action for them is an adroit response to particular concrete circumstances akin to the competent performance of an art or a skill, such as riding a bicycle or just walking down the street. To them, it is plausible, even obvious, that competent conduct rests primarily on an implicit, uncodifiable feel for and responsiveness to one's situation. For it is a truism that skilled performances issue from such a feel and responsiveness. This view of action dovetails with the Daoists' conception of the Way. For many early Chinese thinkers, the Way can be thought of as a set of norms covering our course and manner of conduct – what we do and how we do it. Mohist and Ruist thinkers sought to identify the Way with norms that are 'constant' or 'regular' (*chang* 常) – that is, settled and consistent. By contrast, Daoist texts typically depict the Way as continually shifting and transforming, following no fixed or predetermined boundaries.<sup>2</sup> There is no 'constant' Way – in particular, benevolence and righteousness do not constitute, demarcate, or guide toward such a Way. For Daoist critics, the Way simply is not the sort of thing that can be articulated through fixed norms or values such as benevolence and righteousness. The question 'What is the Way?' has no determinate general answer, let alone one as specific as 'The Way is what is benevolent and righteous'.<sup>3</sup> All we can offer are vague, loose generalizations such as 'proceed according to the facts of the situation' (4/43) or 'rely on natural patterns, slice through the main gaps, and be guided by the major seams, responding to what's inherently so' (3/6-7).

If these Daoist thinkers' exemplars of competent action are so-called 'open' skills such as walking or bicycle riding, their view of the Way is easy to understand. Open skills contrast with 'closed' skills, in which the performance of the skill is the

same every time (Vigani and Heaton 2010: 8). An example of a closed skill might be drawing a circle on a fresh sheet of paper with a sharp pencil. The task and the conditions are always identical. By contrast, the Way by which we perform open skills is indeterminate and subject to constant change. When we walk or ride down the street, we must adjust to different gradients and surfaces and steer our way through traffic. Adept performance of open skills depends on a tacit feel for and ability to adjust to changing conditions. The same point holds for many of the skills explored in *Zhuangzi* passages – carving up an ox, crafting a wheel, whitewater swimming, and piloting a ferry are just a few examples.

The crux of the Daoist critique can be helpfully illuminated by applying the notion of an open skill to think through the characterization of benevolence and righteousness as ‘a makeshift way’ and ‘a temporary lodging’ – tactics employed by ancient sages in a one-off, concrete situation. Let’s say I have fallen into a bad habit that impairs my performance in a skill. Suppose, for instance, that when skiing I sit back too much, making it difficult to change edges and turn smoothly (cf. Vigani and Heaton 2010: 21–29). A ski instructor might tell me to move my hips forward over my feet, keep my hands more forward, or press down on the balls of my feet. Any of these tips could help nudge me out of my bad habit, but none of them is the Way. The Way in this case is to maintain dynamic fore-aft balance while gliding down slopes of different shapes and gradients in different snow conditions. There is no determinate or fixed technique for such balancing, and the exact movements involved change continually. Moreover, being in balance is not a specific posture. It is a relation between the parts of my body and the environment, indicated by how my body feels and what I am able to do next. Any tips that prompt me to balance



better are at best only temporary aids, to be set aside once the problem is solved. Taking them as 'constant' guides would indeed cripple my ability to follow the Way. After all, the point is to stay in balance, not keep my hands forward, move my hips over my feet, or anything else. Focusing too much on hand, hip, or foot position will not teach me proper balance and indeed might disrupt my balance in other respects.

Benevolence and righteousness, then, are analogous to the coaching tips a sports, music, or dance instructor might offer a particular pupil committing a particular fault in a particular context. In their original setting, they may have been effective hints for finding the Way. But they must not be mistaken for the Way itself, and treating them as anything more than a provisional expedient interferes with our mastering the Way.

## 5. Rejecting Morality

The Daoist critique is directed at benevolence and righteousness (*ren yi*), but I suggest it extrapolates to a critique of morality more generally. While the Chinese concept of '*ren yi*' may not be equivalent to our concept of morality, the two share enough features that we can defensibly read Daoist texts as offering a critique of morality – or at least something similar enough to be worth discussing alongside the views of Western critics of morality, such as Nietzsche. Of course, even in contemporary academic philosophy, 'morality' is not a monolithic concept. A Kantian conception of morality may diverge from a consequentialist conception, for instance. Still, we can identify key features typically associated with philosophical, normative conceptions of morality. Morality supposedly applies universally: moral

norms transcend those of particular cultures or communities and apply to all persons with the capacity to follow them. It overrides other values, norms, and practices: conduct that is morally prohibited must be avoided, even if it complies with self-interest, law, or local custom. It incorporates some conception of impartiality or impartial justification. It supposedly takes up a central, fundamental place in life, partly because of how it overrides other values.

Ruist and Mohist statements about benevolence and righteousness associate them with similar features. In the Confucian *Analects*, benevolence and righteousness are central to the life of the gentleman, the text's ethical ideal. The gentleman places righteousness above all other considerations (17:23, 7:16).<sup>4</sup> He 'dwells' in benevolence, never violating it 'even for the space of a meal' and adhering to it even in moments of urgency (4:1, 4:5). He would not relinquish it even to save his life (15:9). Benevolence and righteousness are both tied to conceptions of impartiality. The benevolent person models his treatment of others on how he prefers to be treated (6:30). The gentleman is inherently neither for nor against anything, but only 'sides with what he deems righteous' (4:10). The Mohists too depict righteousness as the most valuable thing in the world – more valuable even than one's person, since people will fight to the death over it (47/1-2).<sup>5</sup> They seem to endorse organizing one's life entirely around benevolence and righteousness (47/20). They propose their divinity, Heaven, as a model of righteousness (27/73) partly on the grounds that it is impartial to all (4/9-10). The norms of benevolence and righteousness apply to everyone, since we are all Heaven's subjects. The *Mozi* explicitly contrasts 'the Way of benevolence and righteousness' with mere 'practices' and 'customs' and indicates that benevolence and righteousness override such

parochial norms (25/74–81). Both Mohist and Ruist writings thus imply that benevolence and righteousness take priority over other values or norms, reflect some rough conception of impartiality, and play a central, fundamental role in the life of the admirable person. I suggest, then, that the classical Chinese concepts of benevolence and righteousness overlap enough with morality that we can reasonably consider the Daoist critique of benevolence and righteousness a critique of morality.

What then is the significance of the Daoist critique? Unlike some contemporary critiques of mainstream moral theories, such as Stocker (1976), it is not a criticism of any particular substantive moral theory. Its point is not that prevailing normative theories are inadequate and a more satisfactory moral theory must be sought. Nor is it the view, pioneered by James (1896), that morality can never be formulated into a final theory, since it is constantly evolving in response to new, emerging demands. Contemporary critics of prevailing moral theories, such as Nagel (1979), Williams (1985), and Larmore (1987), have argued that morality cannot be codified or is not the proper subject of a systematic theory, because value cannot be reduced to a single source, for instance, or because moral questions cannot be satisfactorily resolved through an explicit decision procedure. Critics such as Williams (1981, 1985) and Wolf (1982) have contended that morality is but one kind of value among others and does not necessarily subsume or override other values. Although Daoist thinkers might agree with some of these claims, the gist of their critique diverges from them. As Leiter notes (1997: 252), these recent criticisms of morality are all directed at particular theories of morality, not at morality itself. The Daoist critique is distinct from all of them in two ways. First, it focuses not on moral

theory but on morality as a practice and the associated attitude or ideology that morality is the Way. Second, it does not advocate a different understanding of, role for, or approach to morality. Rather, it advocates that morality be jettisoned entirely, on the grounds that its practice and the associated ideology are detrimental to the exercise of our virtuosity and our following the Way – and thus to ‘nurturing life’, or living as well as we can. The point is not that one or another theory of morality is problematic but that the practice of guiding and evaluating human conduct by any conception of morality is crippling. The Daoist critique thus aligns with Nietzsche in rejecting morality as a cultural practice on the grounds of its pernicious effects on human flourishing (Leiter 1997: 274). It departs from Nietzsche in holding that morality detrimentally affects everyone, not only an exceptional handful of creative geniuses. It urges that we would all benefit, as individuals and communities, by forgetting about morality.

As their texts make clear, in rejecting morality, the Daoists are not rejecting typical practical ends of morality such as personal well-being and consideration for others. (If anything, they advocate greater responsiveness to others than most moral theories do.) They are rejecting appeals to morality as a source of action guidance – and thus as a decision procedure – and as a criterion of appropriate action – and thus as a basis for justification. In rejecting morality as a decision procedure, they advocate that we not guide action by deliberately attempting to follow moral norms. Instead, we are to seek the most responsive, fitting, effective, or harmonious way forward, given our concrete circumstances. Ideally, we need not even ask what that way is but can directly act appropriately. In more recalcitrant situations, the decision procedure envisioned seems to be simply to puzzle out the most fitting, sustainable

course of action, given our values, needs, and abilities and the circumstances we face, including the demands and needs of others. We are able to work our way through such situations because of our inherent virtuosity, which amounts to an inborn aptitude for 'arts of the Way' – roughly, for responding to action-guiding structures and patterns by acquiring and extending skills. Even when we apply moral norms to guide action, it is by virtue of this underlying aptitude or virtuosity that we are able to do so. The Daoist stance is that we can most effectively guide action directly through this aptitude, rather than through the intermediary of moral norms.

Rejecting morality as a decision procedure does not amount to rejecting morality entirely. One can consistently renounce moral values or principles as a decision procedure while nevertheless endorsing morality as a criterion by which to evaluate or justify conduct. For what is truly distinctive of morality is its claim to a special normative status grounded in universal or impartial standards. However, I suggest that Daoist critics probably also reject appeals to morality as an evaluation or a justification. When Yao urges Yi'erzi to devote himself to benevolence and righteousness and to clearly articulate right from wrong, the implication is that these are universal norms by which the sage-king governs the world – and thus, I suggest, the highest criteria by which to assess or justify conduct. When Kongzi contends that benevolence and righteousness are people's genuine nature, such that without them a gentleman cannot really live or be complete, again the implication is probably that they are a universal or fundamental standard by which to evaluate or justify conduct. In rejecting the view that benevolence and righteousness are the Way, then,

the Daoists are likely also implicitly rejecting the idea that justification or evaluation by appeal to these moral values is privileged or authoritative.

My hypothesis is that the Daoists regard such justificatory or evaluative claims as empty, redundant, or irrelevant. They see conduct as appropriate or justified insofar as it responds to features of the agent's context in a successful, competent way that allows all involved to proceed onward smoothly. There may be a plurality of ways to do this, typically none of which will be definitive. Daoist critics probably reject the idea of any stronger, more authoritative justification or evaluation beyond what tentatively seems most fitting. To them, the claim that some course of conduct is morally justified is empty: it adds nothing to the status of simply being justified, in the sense of provisionally yielding the best balance between relevant factors in some situation. Nor for them would the claim that some factor represents a moral reason give it priority in determining what that balance might be. Most likely, they would suggest there is no way to identify any feature—including the general feature of being a moral reason—that determines what considerations will take priority in every case. If we look at the examples of adroit action given in the *Zhuangzi*—expertly butchering oxen, swimming through a stretch of rapids, compromising with one's wards over food servings, nurturing a rare bird by providing a suitable diet and home—what makes such actions appropriate is that they are practically successful, according to ends set by the context. (In examples involving interpersonal relations, this success seems to be marked by both sides' accepting and flourishing under the arrangement.) To Daoist writers, it is pointless to claim any stronger justification for such courses of action beyond the fact that they work, provisionally. Moral criticism might have a point, if it calls attention to

overlooked factors likely to reduce the success of some path. If we ride roughshod over others' interests, for instance, we neglect important features of our context and undertake a course likely to generate obstacles later. The Daoist proposal is simply to become as responsive to such features as we can and forgo empty, potentially self-righteous claims to authoritative justification.

## 6. Critical Reflections

Like Nietzsche's 'genealogy' of morality, the Daoist critique reminds us that evaluation and guidance of human conduct in distinctively moral terms is a cultural practice, adopted under certain circumstances for certain purposes. Like the custom of offering libations to the Olympian gods, this practice may be neither necessary nor inevitable. Hence the Daoist stance deserves careful critical evaluation. A first step toward such an evaluation is to acknowledge that a fuller account is needed of the Daoist alternative to morality than I have been able to provide in this brief chapter. In particular, Daoist thinkers owe us a more detailed explanation of the Way and of normative notions such as 'good fit' (*shì* 適) or 'competence' (*tōng* 通). For the purposes of this chapter, however, let me set these demands aside and consider several more immediate potential problems facing the Daoist critique.

One potential difficulty is that in their rhetoric about people's nature, spontaneously occurring natural patterns, and our inborn virtuosity, Daoist critics of morality may be conflating normative with descriptive issues, in effect contending that whatever exists naturally is thereby appropriate or right. Primitivist passages that link people's nature to specific patterns of activity – typically a plain, rustic

life – may indeed make this mistake. But most of the passages discussed here do not seem committed to this view. A more charitable interpretation of the appeals to people’s nature and virtuosity and to natural patterns is that our inherent dispositions and abilities are such that we always find ourselves following some Way – holding certain *prima facie* defensible values and norms and employing our ability to find a course of action from them in our particular situation. Daoists need not hold that these values and norms are automatically appropriate, let alone that they are appropriate because they are natural. Indeed, the most likely Daoist stance is probably that such values and norms can be expected to require extension and revision as circumstances change. I suggest that the focus on such spontaneous features pertains less to the content of the Way and more to the process by which we find and follow it. That is, the most fitting Way is generally a simple, straightforward extension or revision of our present Way discoverable by applying our spontaneous, inherent virtuosity.

As their texts clearly indicate, in critiquing morality the Daoists are not advocating immorality, nor ‘anything goes’. Rather, they are urging more adept performance in applying our capacity for skilled, responsive agency to follow the Way. This constructive position suggests another critical question. Might the Daoist stance actually amount to a refined conception of morality, rather than a rejection of it? After all, they seem to advocate an unselfish, perceptive responsiveness to others, arguably a quintessentially moral attitude. Still, I suggest the Daoist approach cannot defensibly be interpreted as an alternative conception of morality, since it rejects explicit moral concepts as guides to action and makes no claim to a distinctively moral conception of justification. The values a Daoist adept acts on may



sometimes overlap with values affirmed by various conceptions of morality. Some relevant texts explicitly claim as much, as we saw. But the unifying ideal is not moral; it is simply to find, for each particular situation, a fitting path by which to proceed, applying standards of good fit that may themselves change with circumstances. Any number of different paths might count as fitting in different situations, and there is no reason to expect that what fits will regularly correlate with morality.

A further potential worry for the Daoist position is whether it can support social criticism and reform. One function of morality is to provide a purportedly universal, transcultural standard by which to underwrite criticism and amelioration of repugnant practices such as slavery or foot-binding. If the Daoists dispense with morality, do they retain any grounds from which to justify social reform? They themselves seem to think so, since they contend that heeding their concerns will improve social conditions. Of course, their criticisms of problematic conduct or practices will not be expressed in moral terms. But Daoist writings employ a rich vocabulary for expressing disapproval of inept or unsuitable conduct, which they denigrate as 'confused', 'clumsy', or 'blind', for instance. Rather than improvement by moral standards, they urge greater responsiveness to our circumstances, including others' needs and preferences, and increased awareness of different, novel courses of action open to us. Indeed, by eliminating appeals to a privileged status of moral righteousness, the Daoist approach might present more room for improvement in our treatment of others than morality itself does. Morality can be employed as a licence for cruelty, through mistreatment of those deemed unworthy or neglect of those we are not morally required to help. The Daoist approach

prompts us to consider how to find a path that aligns with others' skillfully, such that both sides can sustain their course harmoniously.

Probably the most important challenge for the Daoist critical stance is to ask just what norms, values, or guidance it proposes as a replacement for morality. If morality is not the Way, then just what is? Daoist texts often present skilled performances as models for appropriate conduct. But the analogy is inexact. Skills come with built-in ends that determine what counts as appropriate performance. The butcher's skill is measured by whether he slices cleanly through the meat, the whitewater swimmer's by whether he survives the rapids unscathed. Conduct in general does not have such fixed ends, so perhaps the skill analogies are misleading. The core question that morality purports to answer is not the first-order issue of how to perform skills well but the second-order one of what sorts of skills we are justified in performing. Becoming a highly skilled perpetrator of genocide is surely not the Way, for instance.

The Daoist view acknowledges these points, I suggest, but responds differently to the claim that conduct in general has no fixed ends. If human conduct has no built-in aim or direction, then there can be no fixed or predetermined Way, and so morality too cannot be the Way. We must relinquish the idea that any particular moral value, model, principle, formula, or justification procedure can authoritatively determine appropriate conduct. Demanding an explicit recipe for the Way is like demanding a recipe for maintaining your balance while climbing a rocky hill. The only possible 'recipe' is something as blandly general – indeed nearly tautological – as 'keep your centre of mass over one of your feet'.

So how do we find the Way? I suggest the Daoist approach is to start by provisionally accepting the values we find ourselves with and going on from there. We stand ready, in light of conditions we encounter, to modify how we apply these values, to find tradeoffs between them, or to revise or replace them. The skill examples provide concrete illustrations of how we might carry out this process by developing greater sensitivity to our circumstances and cultivating the psychological calm and fluidity needed to find effective courses to pursue (see Fraser 2014). Like chopping up an ox or swimming through dangerous rapids, finding and following the Way is a practical task that mixes competent performance of the familiar with puzzle-solving in the face of change and novelty. The Daoist stance is that morality is but one particular approach to this task – a relatively ineffectual and frustrating one.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Citations to the *Zhuangzi* give chapter and line numbers in Zhuangzi (1956).

All translations from Chinese texts are my own. English-language editions are cited for reference only.

<sup>2</sup> An exception is Primitivist writings which contend that people have a 'constant nature' and without interference would spontaneously form small, simple agrarian communities.

<sup>3</sup> The Daoist critique may parallel Geuss's grounds for claiming that the question 'What ought I to do?' as framed in mainstream philosophical ethics is a mistake. Once we grasp 'the nature of human action and its place in the world', according to Geuss, we see that 'there is no such appropriate answer that combines authority with determinateness' (2005: 59).

<sup>4</sup> Citations give section numbers in Lau (1979).

<sup>5</sup> Citations give chapter and line numbers in Mozi (1986).