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Virtue in Daoism

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Virtue in Daoism

When we mention virtue ethics in Chinese philosophy, it is Confucianism that usually comes to mind. The relevance of Daoism to virtue ethics has not received the attention it deserves.[1] Yet what is translated as "virtue" is the term *de*. Of the two most important sources for early Daoist thought, the *Daodejing* literally means "Classic of Way [*dao*] and Virtue [*de*],"[2] and the *Zhuangzi* also has *de* as one central concept.

In ancient Chinese philosophy, the *dao* (way) and *de* (virtue) are always correlated and constitute a common conceptual framework. Confucius's goal is to seek the way, but he also emphasizes that the cultivation of virtue is his major concern (*Analects* 7:3). "I set my heart on the way, and base myself on virtue."[3] In Laozi, the relationship between the way and virtue is described as follows: "The way gives them [the ten thousand things] life; virtue rears them."[4] "In his every movement a man of great virtue follows the way and the way only."[5] The *Zhuangzi* also says: "When things obtain it [One] and come into existence, that is called virtue (which gives them their individual character)."[6] The idea is consistent with the chapter *Xin Shu* of the *Guanzi*: "Virtue is the dwelling of the way. When things acquire it they come to life."[7] Virtue

[1] There are surely a number of good discussions, including P. J. Ivahoe, "The Concept of de ('Virtue') in the Laozi," in *Religious and Philosophical Aspects of the Laozi*, eds. Csikzentmihaly and Ivanhoe (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 239-257; Kathleen M. Higgins, "Negative Virtue: Zhuangzi's Wuwei," in S. M. Gardiner, ed. *Virtue Ethics Old and New* ((Ithaca: Cornel university Press, 2005), 125-141, etc.

[2] The term *de* appears 43 times in the book. It is interesting to note that while Arthur Waley translates *de* the *Analects* as "moral force," he renders *de* in the *Daodejing* as "Power," taking it in its original meaning. In ancient oracle bone inscriptions and pre-Confucian texts, the term virtue *de* refers to the psychic power that an individual possesses , especially to the beneficent power that a ruler holds that enables him to command his people without appealing to physical force. For helpful discussions about the origin and development of the notion of virtue (de), see Donald J. Munro, *The Concept of Man in Early China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969), 185-97; Nivison, *The Ways of Confucianism* (La Salle, Il: Open Court, 1996), 17-43; Philip J. Ivanhoe, introduction to *Confucian Moral Self Cultivation*, 2nd ed (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2000).?

[3] *Analects* 7:6; cf, also 19.2))

[4] *Laozi*, ch.51.

[5] *Daodejing*, chap. 21.

[6] *Zhuangzi*, 12:5. The translation is from Chan, 1963, 202.

[7] *Guanzi* 36; Technique of hearts, All the quotation is from Zhang Dainian, 1989, 342.

(*de*) is the homophonous cognate of the verb "to attain." Hence the *Guanzi* continues: "Virtue is obtaining, obtaining that by which things are what they are."[8] What it obtains is from the way.

The picture emerged from these remarks is as follows: the way is more fundamental and is the ground of virtue; virtue is the manifestation of the way in the individual, and becomes that thing's way. In the lexicon *Shuo-wen*, virtue is defined as an event "arising" or "presenting itself." This seems to suggest that virtue is what the way presents itself in the particular. Graham refers to ancient philosophers as "the disputers of Dao;" yet they are also disputers of *de* (virtue). They should be called, more precisely, the disputers of "*dao-de*."

Although *dao* (the way)-*de* (virtue) is a common framework in classical Chinese ethics, different schools have different views about what is the way and what is virtue. Daoism is not an organized school in the classical period and the term "Daoism" was coined later. Nevertheless, it is not accidental that they are grouped together. The *Daoejing* and the *Zhunagzi* share the same approaches to the way and virtue, and this paper is an effort to elucidate the core ideas of virtue that are common in them.[9] The paper begins by exploring the tension between the virtue of weakness and the virtue of *wu-wei* to determine what is the central conception of virtue in Daoism, and proceeds to examine the claim that "I have lost me." (*Zhuangzi*, II.2) What is the "me" that is to be lost? What is the "I" that is left when "me" is lost? It is through answering these questions that the salient features of Daoist conception of virtue are revealed.

1. The Daoist virtue: weakness or wu-wei (non-action)?

In Laozi's *Daodejing*, there appears to have a tension in its conception of virtue. On the one hand, virtue requires softness, deference, humility, or weakness. That is, Laozi reverses the preference ordering of the conventional value dichotomy and advocates a negative or passive way (*dao*). Whereas the conventional value systems promote the strong, the wise, the dominant, and the large, Laozi teaches us to value the weak, the ignorant, the submissive, and the small.

On the other hand, virtue is not to take the side of being weak. Rather, it is *wu-wei* ("non-action," "non-assertive action," or "effortless action"), an action with a state of mind that is free

[8] Ibid.

[9] It is known that the *Zhuangz*i is more like an anthology that contains various strata of ideas. I will concentrate on the inner chapters, but will use the relevant texts from the outer and miscellaneous chapters to illuminate the related themes.

of the dichotomies. Accordingly, the *Daodejing* does not accept at all the dichotomy of strong and weak or any other dichotomies. The conventional favor of A over B in value scheme should be reversed; yet the goal of the reversal is not to establish B over A, but the abolishing of the dichotomy itself.

Which one of these two is the central Daoist conception of virtue? We have strong textual support to either of these two views. The virtue of weakness is supported by *Daodejing* ch. 8 (water "is close to the way because it settles where none would like to be;" *Daodejing* ch.28 ("Know the male, but keep to the role of the female….then the constant virtue will not desert you"), ch. 40 ("Weakness is the means the way employs"), etc.[10] Few readers will miss the metaphors of "mother," "the female," "valley," etc. Even in the ancient, Xunzi understands that Laozi promotes the value of the bent, not that of the straight.[11] This reading is also popular in contemporary scholarship. Indeed it has been a general impression that the main feature of Daoism is the reversal of the existing values and it teaches a *techne* for the weak to survive.

On the other hand, *Daodejing* ch.77 says: "Is not the way of heaven like the stretching of a bow? The high it presses down; the low it lifts up. The excessive it takes from; the deficient it gives to."[12] The way of heaven is to keep the balance by reducing where there is excess, and by augmenting where this is not enough. The chapter apparently points to a virtue of *wu-wei*, or being free of dichotomies. Moreover, opposites entail and turn to each other (ch.22) , and are interdependent (ch. 67). The way models on *ziran* ("self-so," ch. 25). From these remarks it does not make sense for one to stick to the weak side. Reading in this way, one would concur with Xiaogan Liu that "A reverence for 'naturalness' is the most distinguishing characteristic of the Daoist scheme of values."[13]

Not everyone seems to be aware of or acknowledge of the tension here. For instance, Schwartz claims that a major theme of Laozi is "its exaltation of the feminine as the symbol of the principles of *wu-wei* and 'spontaneity,' . . . . The female is the epitome of *wu-wei*." [14] He

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[10] Cf. also chs. 46, 52, 88.
[11] *Xunzi*, ch.17
[12] Cf. also 2, 3, 10, 38, 43, 48, 57, 63, 64
[13] Xiaogan Liu, "An Inquiry into the Core Value of Laozi's Philosophy," in *Religious and Philosophical Aspects of the Laozi*, eds. Csikzentmihaly and Ivanhoe (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 211-12
[14] B. Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge, MS: Belknap Press), 1985, 200.

takes it that the female represents what *wu-wei* means, i.e., nonassertive, the uncalculating, and the non-deliberative. Yet the female is in contrast to the masculine. It is the weak side in the conventional value systems, rather than embodying the *wu-wei* principle. Sometimes the *Daodejing* seems to advocate weakness as opposed to strength. Having an attitude of consciously favoring weakness, however, is different from the ideal of *wu- wei,* which is acting in an effortless manner, which requires not consciously favoring either side of a dichotomy.

Zhuangzi ch.33 ("All under Heaven"), which presents a short history of ancient Chinese philosophy, describes the position of Laozi (and Guan Yin) as follows: "Externally, they had the appearance of pliant weakness and self-deprecating humanity. Internally, it was an empty void and leaves all things unharmed which was their firmest reality." The author seems to realize that there is a tension, and proposes a solution in terms of the internal/external distinction.

I believe that these are two different notions of virtue, but are philosophically related and can be reconciled. Their difference is not due to the textual situation (the text is an edited accumulation of fragments and bits drawn from various resources, rather than by a single author). Of them, it is *wu-wei*, not being weak, that is the central notion of virtue in Daoism. First, if Laozi advocates the virtue of being weak, he is presenting his own speakeable and prescriptive way, and his philosophy becomes an alternative normative ethics to Confucianism or Mohism. That would subject himself to the criticism he levels against all distinction-drawn normative ethics. Indeed, Schwartz concedes that, because Laozi is in favor of the unfavored sides of these dyads, he "had not entirely freed himself from value judgment." [15]

Second, the virtue of being weak is philosophically related to the virtue of *wu-wei* as follows. Since the world values A over B, it is essential to abolish the superiority of A before the dichotomy itself could be abolished. The reversal enlightens people that the opposites are not fixed and hence should not be taken for granted.[16] In this reading, the reversal is an intermediate step leading to the abolishment. Being weak is not the goal, but being free of the opposites of

[15] Ibid, 204.

[16] This is also the reading of Chad Hansen: "We should not take the negative dao as a constant dao either. Its point can only be a series of examples of how we can reverse whatever guidance we get in language. Each item merely helps us realize that we can never take any fixed discourse as a guide in all circumstances." *A Daoist theory of Chinese Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) 223.

strong and weak is. Indeed, if the virtue of being weak were regarded as the central virtue, it would be difficult to interpret these passages that support the virtue of *wu-wei*.

Since we are exploring the common ideas of virtue in Daoism, we need to bring together the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* . Doing so indeed further justifies this view that the reversal, and the value of the low side, is only the immediate step to the final goal of abolishing the opposites. In *Zhuangzi* ch. 5, entitled "Markers of Full Virtuosity," various defective bodies are portrayed, in contrast to the fullness of the virtue that these bodies harbor. The Ugly man named "Horsehead Humpback" is neither political powerful nor wealthy, and is ugly enough to astonish all the world; but he turns out to be the most attractive person because of his virtue. Women would rather be his concubine than another man's wife, and the Duke Ai of Lu, who, after talking to him, offers him to manage the entire kingdom (5.13). At first glance, the chapter appears to echo *Daodejing* ch. 8 that water "is close to the way because it settles where none would like to be." It shows that the fullest virtue matches the ugliest shape and hence appears to be in favor of the lower side in the conventional value schemes.

Yet this can hardly be convincing. Even in *Zhuangzi* 5, bodily defects are said to be beyond the control, rather than a state that one seeks to be in. [17] Zhuangzi's point seems to be that it is a matter of fate to have an ugly body and one should not let these calamities disrupt the inner harmony. "Virtue takes no definite external form." (5.18) It is a person's virtue, not his body, that is most important.

The text of *Zhuangzi* overwhelmingly shows that its central theme is that all sorts of right-wrong (*shi-fei*) distinctions are not fixed, so that we should develop a state of mind (virtue, *de*) that is free of all these artificial guiding principles. The theme of chapter 2 of the *Zhuangzi*, entitled "Equalizing Theories on Things," is that all discourses are equal and none has an inherent priority. The chapter ends with the most known story of butterfly that drives home the point that everything in the world transforms into another. The virtuous person is said to use his heart as a mirror, neither welcoming nor escorting, responding but not storing (7:31). The famous story about the death of Zhuangzi's wife shows that even the distinction between death and life can be abolished (ch 16). Since one should accept the flux of the world, there is certainly no point to stick to the weak side, or to bind oneself to any one thing. "From the point of view of

[17] Elsewhere he even says that knowing them to be something else you can do nothing about is the utmost virtue (*Zhuangz*i, 4.13).

the Course [dao], the reciprocal overflowing of things are such that nothing can be definitively called worthy or unworthy." [18] The way makes no evaluative judgment at all.

The remainder of the paper is dedicated to expositing the virtue of *wu-wei* or being free of all dichotomies as the central conception of virtue that is common to the D*aodejing* and the *Zhuangzi.*

II. Losing "me" or conventional social virtue

At the beginning of *Zhuangzi* 2, a character named Ziqi shows a state in which the body is "made like dried wood, and the mind like dead ashes." He himself characterizes this state as "I have lost me" (*wu sang wo*, 2.2). Here we have a distinction between "I" (*wu*) and "me" (*wo*). "Me" is something to be lost, something not good to have; and "I" is better off without "me." "I" is the subject self, which is natural and has "me" as an object self that can be possessed or lost.

The "me" that is to be lost or eliminated is "the formed mind" (*chengxin*, 成心), which is developed out of social training and language learning. It is calculating and purposively, equipped with all sorts of distinctions, values and tastes that one is internalized in the process of growing up. "The mind comes to be what it is by taking possession of whatever it selects out of the processes of alternation."(2:12) When such a "me" fills up the subject self "I," one tends to deliberate and plan, to judge and rank, and to follow one pattern of desires and approvals. With such a "me," "we give, we receive, we act, and we construct: all day long we apply our minds to struggles against one thing or another." (2.6) It is the root for us to be nervous, anxious, and worrying. Clearly, the mind is the moral character and practical thinking that is established and shaped in the process of socialization and employed in daily intentional activities.

For Daoism, the "me" is harmful to the subject self "I." To eliminate such a "me" or "formed mind" is the process of nourishing virtue (*de*), the ideal state one should be in. Zhuangzi describes the process as the "fasting of the mind" (*xin zhai*), that is, the surrender of the contents of "me" acquired in social conditioning. In a conversation designed between Zhuangzi's characters Yan Hui and Confucius in the beginning of *Zhuangzi* ch.4, the former asks Confucius's permission to travel to the state of Wei in order to reform the unprincipled tyrant and save the chaotic state. To accomplishing this political mission, Yan Hui has confidence in his learned knowledge of right and wrong. However, having analyzed the situation and listened

[18] *Zhuangzi*, 17; Ziporyn, ibid. p. 72

to several strategies Yan Hui proposed, Confucius concludes that none of them works, for in all of them "you are still taking the mind as your instructor [*shi*]." (4.8) As long as the "me" is guiding actions, Yan Hui not only cannot succeed, but will most likely lose his own life. Confucius prescribes that what Yan Hui should do is to fast the mind, first doing away with sense-perception, and then purging the distinction-drawing mind and its accumulated conceptions of right and wrong, and finally reaching the stage of living with the vital energy (4:8). [19]

Zhuangzi also depicts the cultivation of virtue as a mental process that leads to the state of "sitting and forgetting." (6.53) This process is shown to have three levels of progress: (a) forgetting specific moral values or virtues such as *ren* (humanness) and *yi* (righteousness), and (b) forgetting ritual and music, and finally (c) reaching the state of "sitting and forgetting," in which perception, consciousness of the physical form, understanding are all eliminated. "Me" is expulsed or destroyed, and what is left is an "I" which is free of all preferences.

As we move on, we will constantly return to the metaphors of "the fasting of the mind" and "sitting and forgetting" and gradually unfold their implications. Here I like to mention that the process of "losing me" in Zhuangzi is consistent with Laozi. For Laozi, social conditioning is a process of falling from the spontaneous way or the highest virtue (*Daodejing* ch. 18), since it influences people to internalize distorting and deforming ideas. It is in this spirit that Laozi says: "In the pursuit of learning one knows more every day; in pursuit of the way, one does less every day." (ch.48) Learning gradually increases degrees of self-conscious activity, but it leads to hypocrisy of Confucianism and other theories, and obscures one's spontaneous tendencies and natural desires. The more one pursues the distinction-making based knowledge, the farther he is from the way. Cultivation of virtue is to undo the damage of socialization.[20] "Exterminate the sage, discard the wise, and the people will benefit a hundredfold." (ch. 19) The process of "exterminating" (绝) and "discarding" (弃) uproots all sorts of artificiality, and the final result is to "exhibit the unadorned [*su*] and embrace the uncarved block [*pu*]," that is, the original vitality,.

[19] Zhuangzi here seems to reverse the advice that Mengzi gives in 2A2. Mengzi tells us to follow our mind, rather than follow our qi, and to cultivate our mind, whereas Zhuangzi tell us to fast our mind, and follow the qi rather than our mind. I am grateful to Bryan Van Norden for pointing out this contrast to me. See also his *Menzi, with Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Hackett, 2008), 38.

[20] 18, 3, 59, 12, 68, 80

The language here is sharply opposed to that of Confucius who claims that cultivating virtue is subject to ritualization and is like carving a piece of jade (*Analects* 1.15).

Zhuangzi is well aware that the formed mind, which determines what "me" is, inevitably emerges from the process of social training. He calls this "me" *qing*, i.e. the characteristic human inclinations. "Affirming some things as right and negating others as wrong are what I call the characteristic inclinations (*qing*, 5.22)." Clearly, the characteristic inclination is precisely the rational self that guides actions. Since Zhuangzi seeks to eliminate the formed mind, he also insists that we should live without the characteristic human inclinations.

It is certainly an astounding claim to abandon the rational self. The term *qing* reminds us of Mencius who employs the same term to refer to the characteristic feature that makes a person a person. "As far as what is genuinely in him [*qing*] is concerned, a man is capable of becoming good, that is what I mean by good." (*Mencius*, 6a/6) Graham, in commenting on Mencius's view, argues that the term *qing* in pre-Han literature does not usually mean "passion," but means, as a noun, "fact," and, as an adjective, "genuine." "The *qing* of X is what makes it a genuine X, what every X has and without which would not be an X; in this usage *qing* is surprisingly close to the Aristotelian 'essence.'"[21] Graham's view makes good sense in interpreting *Mencius* 6a/6 and *Zhuangzi* 5.22. Both Mencius and Zhuangzi use this term in an objective sense to express what a human being essentially is. Yet these two philosophers have the opposite attitudes toward its value. For Mencius, we must develop our *qing* in order to become a true and good human being, and the task of ethics is to help it grow. On the contrary, in Zhuangzi, *qing* should be forgotten and fasted since it harms the "I," the original nature.

What distinguishes Daoism from Confucianism can be further illuminated if we broaden our comparison to include Aristotle, the most influential virtue ethicist. For Aristotle, "We are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit" (*Nicomachean Ethics* [NE], 1103a23-24). Ethical virtue (*ēthekē aretē*) is grounded in *ethos* (habit, social customs), and comes about as a result of the repeated practice of corresponding actions (1103a34-b1). In the process of habituation, values implied in *ethos* gradually take root in a learner. Furthermore, the development of moral virtue and that of practical wisdom are one and the same process. The agent progressed from accepting the values to understanding the reasons behind them, and

[21] Graham, 1990, 60. The recent recovered Guaodian texts, however, have shown that *qing* defined as emotions play a central role in the earliest Confucian texts.

eventually turns herself into an agent of practical wisdom. The virtuous disposition, the result of ethical education, is the fusion or integration of ethical virtue and practical wisdom (1144b31-32). Once something becomes habitual, it "grows into a part" (*sumphuēnai*, 1147a22). Virtue, then, becomes the second nature. Aristotle frequently identifies the self with virtuous character. He calls a virtuous friend "another self" (1166a32) or a "second self" (*MM*, 1213a20-26). A friend is a second self because he or she is fundamentally the same in character.

It is not difficult to see that the moral virtue, resulted from Aristotle's habituation, is precisely the "me" or the formed mind. It is precisely what Daoism seeks to purge in obtaining the Daoist virtue.

The Daoist ethics of virtue, hence, appears to be the reversal or negation of the mainstream Confucian and Aristotelian virtue ethics. What we have learned from Confucian and Aristotelian theories of how to become a good person are all rejected in Daoism. In the Daoist conception of virtue we encounter something that we are not quite familiar with. For convenience, I call the mainstream Confucian and Aristotelian types of virtue ethics "positive virtue ethics" in the sense that it emphasizes on the positive exercise of human mind and on active pursuit of some value-loaded goals. In contrast, the Daoist ethics is "negative virtue ethics" in the sense that it surrenders oneself and separates virtue from active pursuit and exercise. Roughly put, they have the following key differences.

First, while they all appeal to human nature and all agree that virtue is natural, they have different views of what is the virtue-related true human nature. For the positive ethics, there is one part of nature that serves as the basis of virtue and that is to be developed through social training. According to Mencius, it is the goodness of human nature which consists of four sprouts, and virtue is the maturation of the good sprouts. According to Aristotle, it is the human *ergon* ("function") of rational activity, and virtue is the excellent exercise of rational function. In contrast, in Daoism, what is related to virtue is our vitality (*qì*) and spirit (*shen*). They are the original nature that social education distorts. The cultivation of virtue is to return to and preserve this part of nature. Zhuangzi pointedly rejects the special position of rationality that is the foundation of many positive ethics, by claiming that the mind that is associated with the rational "me" does not occupy any privileged position within the human organism (2:9). The true ruler of the organism is the way.

Second, they have opposed views regarding the relationship between virtue and social value. For the positive virtue ethics, virtue is acquired through habituation or ritualization. This is considered to be a process of cultivating the normal sense of virtue in many virtue theories. In Daoism, however, socialization is a declining process, leading one to artificiality and hypocrisy and thus alienating one from the original nature. A socially conditioned person is one that should be "cured." The goal of cultivation or training is to forget, lose or empty the conventional sense of virtue that the positive virtue ethics seeks to acquire.

Third, they have opposed views on the relationship between virtue and authenticity. In the positive virtue ethics, virtue makes one a true human being. For Aristotle, virtue is the state "which makes a man good and which makes him to do his own work well." (*NE,* 1106a22-23) Mencius and the author(s) of the *Doctrines of the Mean* share a similar idea: Humanness (*ren*) is what makes a person a person. In contrast, Daoism does not encourage people to develop what is conventionally taken to be the essence of human beings. The prescriptive right/wrong (*shi/fei*) distinctions that constitute the true humanity in the positive ethics is considered to have marred our true nature in Daoism. The possession of the Daoist virtue does not make you an excellent member of human species; rather it makes you live without characteristic human inclinations, and live with nature.

Daoism thus points to a different direction of virtue ethics. Contemporary situational ethics has challenged the positive virtue ethics by questioning whether we have an entrenched and global character.[22] It has excited contemporary virtue ethics. Daoism also poses challenges to the positive ethics, but from a different standpoint. It acknowledges that we have an entrenched character, but to be virtuous is to get rid of it, to lack it. I hope this challenge can also be deeply exploited.

III: Restoring "I": Virtue of Emptiness

Here raises a problem. If the rational "me" is lost, what is the "I" that is left? What kind of agency is it? What kind of virtuous state does "I" have? Without guidance from the rational mind, how does one exercise agency?

[22] John Dorris, " Persons, Situations, and Virtue Ethics," *Nous* 32 (1998), 504-30.

At first glance, the "I" that is left not only is not a rational agency, but does not even look like a recognizable human agency at all. It is said to be a person who does not have "characteristic human inclinations" (5.22) and his body likes "the limb of a withered tree and heart like dead ashes." (2.1) The "I" is in a state of "sitting and forget" in which limbs, body, perception and understanding are all eliminated (6.53). One would naturally wonder what kind of subject it is. The same impression may also be generated from the *Daodejing* which claims that "One who possesses virtue in abundance is comparable to a new born babe." [23] A new born babe has little self-conscious, knowledge, desire and motivation.

Yet, this initial impression is not tenable. The "I" which has lost "me" still possesses a kind of wisdom. The *Daodejing* repeatedly emphasizes that after all dichotomies are dissolved, there is a kind of enlightenment or acuity called *ming*,[24] and that is about the wisdom of Dao. *Zhuangzi* distinguishes two kinds of wisdom. "You have learned the wisdom of being wise [有知之知], but not yet the wisdom of being free of wisdom [无知之知]." (4.9) The former knows through intellectual learning and distinction-making reasoning, and is the subject of the mental fasting, while the latter is the true knowing about the way when the rational or calculating knowledge is purged. It is the "Illumination of the Obvious" (2.15, 2.18), "the axis of the way" (2.16) and "genuine Knowledge." (6.5) Moreover, having fasted the heart/mind, or ceasing to "take the heart as master," Yan Hui not only can still proceed with the difficult project to reform the King of Wei, but is said that his mental state "will get you close to success" to his political mission (4:9). Furthermore, Confucius apparently believes that the state of "sitting and forgetting" is marvelous. That is why when he heard that Yan Hui has reached such a state, he says: "You truly are a worthy man! I beg to be accepted as your disciple." (6: 52ff)

Since "I" has a kind of wisdom and agency, we have to take the baby metaphor with caution. While the metaphor is effective in symbolizing the embodiment of harmony and equilibrium, a baby has not yet entered social training and hence has not yet had a "formed mind." In contrast, the Daoist virtue is obtained after the formed mind is forgotten, and thus it is a result of mental training or cultivation, although not in the normal way we understand. It is true that the Daoist virtue is to return to and preserve the original and spontaneous state, but it is a return at a

[23] *Daodejing* 55, cf. chs. 10, 20, 28.
[24] *Daodejing*, 16, 22, 52, 33

higher level. It is a return with a new vision and wisdom, after knowing and purging the distorting influences of guiding systems.

Therefore, we should draw a distinction between the pre-reflective state and the post-reflective one. The baby's mentality is pre-reflective, whereas the Daoist virtue state, the "I" that has lost "me," is post-reflective. It is neither 'irrational' nor 'non-rational," but "post-rational." What, then, is this post-rational virtue state?

Let us turn again to the "fasting of the mind." Having fasted sense-perception and mind, Yan Hui enters the stage of living with the vital energy (*qi*). Vital energy is described as "an emptiness [*xu*], a waiting for the presence of beings. The Course [*dao*] alone is what gathers in this emptiness. And it is this emptiness that is the fasting of the mind." (4.8) In this passage, the "fasting of the mind" is identified with "emptiness."[25] In Chinese language, what is opposite to "emptiness" is "full" (*man*) or "solid" (*shi*). Yan Hui says that before he fasted his mind, "it is myself that is full and real." (4.9), meaning that his "I" possesses a full and real "me." Yet in emptiness, that full "me" is gone. Emptiness can be a cosmological or metaphysical state (close to "void" or "not-being") as well as psychological state. Here we focus on the latter, which I take to be the state of Daoist virtue. "In emptiness, nothingness, calm, and indifference, he merges with the Virtue of Heaven" (ch. 15) Being unified with the Virtue of heaven is surely the highest virtue.

In *Zhuangzi* ch7 the psychological emptiness is presented as follows:

> [1] Not doing, not being a corpse presiding over your good name; not doing, not being a repository of plans and schemes; not doing, not being the one in charge of what has to happen; not doing, not being ruled by your own understanding. [2] In this way, wholeheartedly embody the endlessness and roam where there is no sign, fully realize whatever is received from Heaven, but without thinking anything has been gained thereby. [3] It is just being empty (*xū*), nothing more. [4] The Consummate person uses his mind like a mirror, rejecting nothing, welcoming nothing, responding but not storing. [5] Thus he can handle all things without harm. (7:11-7:14, my numbering)

[25] This is consistent with *Daodejing* ch.16 "I do my utmost to attain emptiness; I hold firmly to stillness (*jin*)."

In this text, [5] shows one consequence of being empty, a topic we will return to later. [3] is what [1] and [2] are supposed to explain, and [4] is a further illumination to [3]. Hence let us focus on [1], [2] and [4]. [1] can be seen as the negative aspect of emptiness. It is to forget or empty ourselves of all sorts of things that have filled us up in social conditioning, such as values, plans, undertakings and goals. [4] adds one positive aspect to emptiness by linking emptiness with the mirror metaphor. A mirror is empty of any fixed content of its own, but merely responds spontaneously to situations as they arise. [26] Because it is empty, it is open and adaptable, and it reflects what appears in front of it without bias or distortion. More importantly, it responds without storing or accumulating anything afterwards (and thus without giving rise to emotions or thoughts).

[2] provides a cosmological and metaphysical connection. Emptiness is said to "embody the endlessness" and fully realize whatever is received from Heaven." What is received from Heaven is "I," and so in this state the subject self is unified with Heaven. When Yan Hui reaches the state of "sitting and forgetting," he said he is "the same as the Transforming Openness." (6.53) In emptiness, one accords with nature and merges with nature. Emptiness is identified with the fasting of the mind, and one thing that has to be fasted is "characteristic human inclinations." (*qing*, 5.23) When a person shows *qing*, he "treats spirit like a stranger and labors one's vitality." The passage implies that when a human being empties *qing*, it is the spirit and vitality that is restored. In the state of emptiness, it is spirit and vitality that is operating.

The relation among emptiness, spirit, and heaven becomes even clearer in the famous story of Cook Ding. His masterful performance in carving up an ox embodies the state of emptiness. He describes that in that state, he "encounters it [ox] with the spirit," and his understanding consciousness "comes to a halt, and thus the promotings of the spirit begin to flow." (3.4) In other words, he is guided not by sense perception or cognition, but by spirit. Cook Ding also indicates clearly that the operation of spirit follows the proper patterns in the natural world. "I depend on Heaven's unwrought perforations [*tianli*, literally, the patterns of heaven]." Spirit can interact and even identifies with the pattern of heaven, because spirit is endowed in us by heaven. The spirit's agency thus has an affinity with heaven, which enables it to be sensitive to the inherent patterns in things around it and "transform with things."

[26] *Daodejing* 10 also describes: "can you polish your mysterious mirror and leave no blemish?"

Emptiness is thus not an absolute void. It is empty but not blank, signifying rather a privation or absence of the "me" that is loaded with all sorts of right/wrong (*shi-fei*) distinctions. There is a kind of acuity and wisdom that can interact with pattern of the world which is in transformation. A person who let such an original nature shine achieves the Daoist virtue and is unified with the virtue of heaven.

The Daoist state, characterized by emptiness and its related concepts such as "mirror," "spirit," "vitality," surely sounds mysterious and evocative. Even *Zhuangzi* ch. 33 describes the ideas of Zhuangzi "vague! Ambiguous! We have not got to the end of them yet." [27]While some commentators reject it,[28] numerous charitable Daoist commentators have been trying to make sense of it and try to find a place for it in Western philosophy. Angus Graham takes great pain to show that it is the spontaneity that sets the limits to rationality.[29] In refuting a popular line of interpretation that Zhuangzi is advocating a "no-self" doctrine, Edward Slingerland argues that the metaphors of emptiness and forgetting does not lead to "annihilation" of the self, but as "producing a kind of clearing or openness "that either allows the normative order itself to enter into the agent or…releases normatively positive instantiation of the self that has previously been repressed."[30]

Slingerland's view is criticized in turn by Chris Fraser who argues that there are three views of psychological emptiness in the *Zhuangzi*: the instrumental view which "values *xu* primarily as a means of efficacious action;" the moderate view which "assigns it intrinsic value as an element of one Zhuangist vision of the good life," and the radical view which advocates the form of life in which "the Daoist sage transcends mundane human concerns to merge with nature or the Dao" Fraser claims that the position of Slingerland holds good only with the first two views, but not with the third. These three views form a tension. While the first two views articulate a relatively commonsensical position, in the radical view the agent ceases to exercise human agency. The radical view of emptiness does not link emptiness up with characteristic

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[27] Ziporyn, p. 124.
[28] Even in the ancient period, Xunzi accuses Zhuangzi of being "prejudiced in favor of nature and does not know man." (*Xunzi*, 21)
[29]Angus Graham, "Taoist Spontaneity and the Dichotomy of 'Is' and 'Ought'," in *Experimental Essays on the Chuang-Tzu*, ed. Victor Mair, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983), 2-13..
[30] Edward Slingerland, *Effortless Action* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 198

human concerns, and is not a theory about what is morally right. Hence, it is of not much use in contemporary ethics, and should be detached from the other two views and rejected. [31]

Emptiness as the highest Daoist virtue is complex and has several aspects; but it is not clear that these different aspects are in tension, even though Zhuangzi frequently gives emptiness a figurative depiction. Fraser's comments, however, remind me of how Aristotle's theory of contemplation has been received in Aristotelian scholarship. Aristotle claims in NE x1178a6-10 that contemplation is primary happiness, while the life of moral virtue is secondary. This ranking has been criticized in many ways by commentators and has given rise to the long-standing inclusivism-intellectualism debate. At NE, 1177b24-28Aristotle says, "such a [contemplative] life would be too high for man; for it is not insofar as he is a man that he will live so, but in so far as something divine is present in him." Commentators thereby affirm that his ethics starts with the goal of grasping human good, but ends with a life that humans cannot live. In this reading, the contemplative life is impractical, it is not a genuine human goal, and it has no significance for human welfare.[32] Commentators not only wonder how the contemplative life could be accepted in contemporary ethics, but also believe that Aristotle's view entails immoral consequences.[33] The contemporary revival of virtue ethics, although embracing Aristotle's theory of moral virtue and practical wisdom, does not have much interest in the theory of contemplation either. Alasdair MacIntyre, for instance, claims that the *telos*-providing metaphysical contemplation does not deserve a serious treatment.[34] All this sounds similar to Fraser's criticism of Zhuangzi.

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[31] Chris Fraser, "Psychological Emptiness in the *Zhunagzi*," *Asian Philosophy*, 18:2 (2008), 123-147. The idea can be traced to *Shi Ji* (or *Records of the Historian*) which says that his work "useless to rulers of men."

[32] For instance, Kathlen Wilkes, "The Good Man and the Good for Man in Aristotle's Ethics," in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (Berkeley: University of California, 1980), ed. A. Rorty, 347); Thomas Nagel, "Aristotle on *Eudaimonia*," ibid., 12)

[33] For it leads one to believe that contemplative activity could be pursued at the expense of morality.

[34] "It is nothing other than thought timelessly thinking itself and conscious of nothing but itself." *After Virtue,* 1984, 158;

To bring together Aristotle's theory of contemplation (in the way that I read it)[35] and Zhuangzi's emptiness provides us with a new approach to understand the elusive Daoist ideas on emptiness.

Aristotle draws two divisions of rationality: practical rationality, the virtue of which is practical wisdom, and theoretical rationality (pure intellect), the virtue of which is theoretical wisdom. Contemplation is the "the activity of wisdom" (1177a24). At first glance, contemplation and emptiness are rather different in contents, and indeed the difference could not be more striking. Contemplation is the exercise of pure intellect, and it brings to mind truths of the universe through a systematic investigation. In contrast, emptiness has nothing to do with rationality. What is operating in emptiness is spirit, which responds to the world unselfconsciously and spontaneously. Nevertheless, when we examine the role of contemplation and emptiness in each ethics, some structural and illuminating similarities emerge.

First, consider the distinction of practical self and theoretical self and the distinction of "me" and "I." The "I" differs from the contemplative mind, but both differ from moral character. Following the function argument, Aristotle repeatedly identifies reason with selfhood. Reason "is the man himself, or is so more than anything else."[36] Following the division of two kinds of rationality, the rational self should also have two kinds: the theoretical rational self and the practical rational self. At NE, 1168b25-6, he identifies the self with one's character and practical reason. At NE x,7, he identifies the self with theoretical intellect: "Intellect [*nous*] more than anything else is man." (1178a1-7)

The theoretical self and practical self are different. Practical wisdom is interwoven with moral virtue, and achieves its end from moral virtue cultivated out of habituation. "Virtue makes the goals correct."[37] In contrast, theoretical wisdom is not concerned with human affairs, and intellect is even said to be separable from the non-rational part of the soul at *NE*, 1178a23. One main reason for the life of practical wisdom to be secondary happiness is because it involves bodily passion and is related to social morality.

Although the "I" differs from theoretical self in contents, the "me" corresponds well to the practical self, for both refer to the moral character developed in social training. In Aristotle, what

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[35] For detailed exposition, please see J.Yu, *Ethics of Confucius and Aristotle*: *Mirrors of Virtue* (Routledge, 2007), esp. chs. 6-7.

[36] *NE*, 1169a1-2; cf. 1168b35; cf. 1166a14-18.

[37] *NE*, 1144a8-9; cf. 1144a20, a30-31, 1145a5-6.

is in contrast to moral virtue and practical wisdom is contemplation, and in Daoism, what is in contrast to a socially recognized virtuous self is "I."

Second, consider the relationship among the "I," contemplation, and morality. As noted above, Fraser claims that the radical view of emptiness is not about what is morally right. He is certainly not wrong. Yet that is indeed the point that Zhuangzi hopes to convey. His goal is to purge or empty all social values and return to "I." He is neither for nor against any moral systems (they are all the "pipes of heaven" for him), but is amoral. It was also mentioned above that Aristotle faces a similar accusation that his contemplation lacks moral significance. It is true that while practical wisdom concerns "what sort of things conduce to the good life in general" (*NE*, 1140a27-28), theoretical wisdom has nothing to do with practical human affairs. "For wisdom will contemplate none of the things that will make a man happy (for it is not concerned with any coming into being)." (*NE*, 1143b19-20) God, the paradigm of contemplation, does not possess any moral virtue or vice (*NE*, 1178b16-7). Indeed for Aristotle, for contemplative activity, moral virtue is a kind of hindrances for contemplative activity (1178b2-7).

However, there is a major difference. Daoism is amoral, and it claims that "I" emerges only when "me" (representing moral character) is emptied. In contrast, Aristotle recognizes the significance of social morality and only thinks that moral life and contemplative are two models of human flourishing that cannot be fulfilled within a single career. He ranks the theoretical self higher than the practical self. In other words, for Aristotle, moral life is secondary, and for Daoism, moral life should be purged.

Third, consider the relationship among the "I," contemplation, and nature. In Aristotle, theoretical intellect, not practical reason, is "the best thing in us" (NE, 1177a21). It is concerned with "the kind of things whose principles cannot be otherwise" (1139a7), which are "the highest objects in nature" (1141a20, b4). Unchanging things such as the constituent parts of the universe have a far more divine nature (*polu theiotera tēn phusin*) than do human affairs (1141a20-21, b1-4, 1177a21-22). He claims that one should do one's best to live in accordance with theoretical intellect (*NE*, 1177b31-34), Contemplation is the actualization of pure intellect. He also characterizes God in terms of contemplative activity (1178b17-23). In contemplation, we are in the same state as God, although God is always in that state, and human beings can be there only for a limited time (Meta. 1072b24).

Such a depiction is similar to how Zhuangzi describes emptiness, in structure if not in contents. The spirit which is operating in emptiness is also the best thing in us, the heavenly endowed and original nature. It is described as "heavenly reservoir" (2.36) or "Numinous Reservoir" (5.15), "Heavenly mechanism" (*tianji*). Emptiness is said to "embody the endlessness" and "fully realizes whatever is received from Heaven" (7.14) Emptiness is a state that harmonizes with the way or nature, and perfectly integrates one with the order of nature. Yan Hui says in "sitting and forgetting" he harmonizes with "the Great Thoroughfare." Cook Ding says that he is with the pattern of heaven in carving up an ox.

Fourth, the contemplative life is the happiest, and so is the life of emptiness. In Aristotle, the contemplative life is primary happiness, and is also the pleasantest (Meta. 1072b23-27; NE, 1177a19-28). In *Zhuangzi* 7.11-14 emptiness protects the agent from harm, clearly because it "releases" the "I" from psychological disturbances and distress, and enables it to maintain affective equanimity and adapt to circumstances through immediate responsiveness. Yet emptiness goes far beyond this instrumental value. It is about the way of living. The king who conversed with Cook Ding concludes that "I have learned how to nourish life." (3.5) Such a life enables the subject to be "free and easy wandering" (*xiao-yao-yu*), [38] and enjoys the state of "self-so" (*ziran*), i.e. following along with the process of nature and living with an unobstructed mind.

In short, both think that life should be related to nature and the world, although for Aristotle, we should contemplate the rational structure (logos) of the world , whereas for the Daoist we must act spontaneously in accordance with the "heavenly pattern" of the world. Both think that the life is the fulfillment of nature; although Aristotle's contemplation fulfills the rational nature, whereas the Daoist emptiness fulfills the heavenly endowed vitality and spirit. Both think they are demonstrating the most pleasant life, although the contemplative pleasure is intellectual, and the Daoist pleasure lies in spiritual freedom.

The most important similarity is that both Aristotle and Daoism are searching for a life that goes beyond moral life, although for Aristotle, moral life is secondary, and for Daoism, moral life should be purged. For Aristotle, the life that goes beyond moral life is rational research. What lies behind the hierarchy of happiness is Aristotle's deep-seated enthusiasm for the pursuit

[38] This is the title of *Zhuangzi* ch.1. Graham translates it as "Going Rambling without a Destination," and Ziporyn renders it as "Wandering Far and Unfetted."

of eternal and universal knowledge. He maintains that it is in the pursuit of contemplation that human beings most fully manifest our rational essence. It goes beyond moral concern; yet as Kraut points out, "Aristotle's defense of the contemplative life is in part a defense of the intrinsic value of science, a good which is now widely appreciated."[39] Daoism lacks the enthusiasm for pure theoretical inquiry. Yet it is also seeking a life that is not locked up by social morality. The end it aspires to is a natural way of living, a virtuous aptitude, which enables one to be sensitive to the limit of cognitive ability, to open up to other possible perspectives, to interact with each thing by letting it work and flourish in its own natural and spontaneous way. [40]

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[39] Richard Kraut, *Aristotle on the Human Good* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989),78,

[40] I wish to thank Bryan W. Van Norden for his detailed and constructive comments.