Daoist Role Ethics and Moral Fictionalism

1. Moral Agency and Social Roles, East and West

According to Chris Fraser, there is a way of distinguishing the traditional Western view of action and agency from the classical Chinese view. He claims that the Western and Eastern views can be classified in terms of two basic models: a Western 'argument' model and an Eastern 'performance' or 'discrimination-and-response' model.[1] Fraser's distinction applies to both general agency and moral agency. I would claim the Western 'argument' model is exemplified quite nicely by Alasdair MacIntyre.[2] This is because his approach is rooted in Aristotelianism and Thomism. For MacIntyre, a moral agent is someone other than and more than the social roles they can perform. An agent has roles, but an agent is not the roles they have. A moral agent is a rational free agent. It is a commonly held doctrine, according to MacIntyre, that "human beings have by their specific nature a capacity for recognizing that they have good reason to acknowledge the authority of evaluative and normative standards that are independent of those embodied in their particular social and cultural order, and so share equally in a capacity to be able to transcend in thought the limitations of those established standards."[3] What follows from this widely held doctrine is that,

> I have to understand myself as and to present myself to others as someone with an
> identity other than the identities of role and office that I assume in each of the roles that I
> occupy. I have to understand myself as someone who brings to each role qualities of
> mind and character that belong to her or him qua individual and not qua role-player.[4]

Hume, Kant, and Davidson, along with Aristotle and St. Thomas, all serve as appropriate representatives of the 'argument' model, for it is based as much on Greek rationalism as it is on Enlightenment conceptualism. It places rationality, deliberation, and decision-making at the core of agency. Action is understood in relation to the structure of reasoning utilized in deliberating about and justifying discrete acts. Fraser sees Western practical reasoning as being based on theoretical reasoning, with its formal use of the syllogism and *modus ponens*. Actions are the results of beliefs and desires in the same way conclusions are the results of premises. One acts by combining a cognitive premise with a conative one. Actions result from beliefs that guide and trigger them and desires that motivate them. According to the 'argument model,' acting is akin to providing reasons. While for the Aristotelian tradition the decision (*prohairesis*) to act in a beneficial way after rational deliberation constitutes a kind of intellectual integrity or wisdom (*phronesis*), the Kantian tradition sees acting on the basis of sound reasons as an expression of one's ultimate freedom and dignity. Either way, it is a fairly common view in the West that acting is like arguing and being an agent amounts to being an atomic individual.

Fraser thinks the 'argument model' ignores both certain Eastern approaches to action and agency and the way in which we act in our everyday lives. He does not want to deny that we occasionally deliberate, and quite rationally, about which acts to perform. His main point is that we do not act on the basis of the 'argument model' as much as we might think. Rather, most of what we do we do immediately, automatically, and unreflectively. Fraser writes, "Most of what we do every day, we do without deliberation or conscious decision."[5] Our actions are more often based on certain learned skills, habits, and routines. We usually respond to our environments without much awareness of our alternatives. The problem with the 'argument model' is that while it may describe how we come to make certain big, one-off decisions, it cannot explain how

we actually perform our everyday skills, habits, and routines. For this explanation, Fraser thinks we should look more to the Eastern 'performance model' of action and agency.

In classical China, actions were described and understood more in terms of pattern recognition and analogy than logical consequence and formal validity.[6] Of course, this does not mean there was no reasoning in ancient China. Fraser argues that if the West took pre-existing forms of reasoning as the model for explaining action, the East, in particular ancient China, can be seen as basing their model of reasoning on their understanding of action, which was thought of as an intuitive and spontaneous practice of discrimination and response. What we would call 'reasoning' corresponds in ancient Chinese thought to *bian* , 'dialectics,' 'disputation,' or perhaps best, 'discrimination.' *Bian* is the way in which something can be determined as this (*shi*) or that (*fei*) with respect to some kind (*lei*) or model (*fa*). Interestingly, *shi* and *fei* can also mean right and wrong. A kind or model is a paradigm composed of preceding analogical inferences regarding this or that. To speak or act is to respond to and discriminate between things in terms of what other things they are like and how one has been habituated to react to them. Clearly, this is more an issue of ethics and semantics than logic, but what is key is that what matters most in speaking, and thus acting, is the responsive speed with which one can appropriately classify a word, object, behaviour, or situation in terms of its proper model and so behave in accordance with that classification. There was such a rage for this process that it motivated "the distinctively Chinese concern with 'rectifying names' (*zheng ming*), or training the populace to discriminate the extensions of 'names'—a category that for pre-Qin thinkers includes all words—in a unified, consistent way."[7]

From this point about the rectification of names it can be seen that there is a normative element to just about everything, quite literally, in the classical Chinese 'performance' model of action and agency. If things are names (named 'thises' or 'thats') and names need to be rectified in accordance with their appropriate models, then all things have a job to do in society, a role to perform. In a sense, one could say the entirety of classical Chinese thinking amounts to a full-scale role ethics. Fraser writes,

> Words function like job titles associated with roles and protocols. Moreover, action-guided norms are associated not only with names for social roles, or 'jobs,' but with names and descriptions of objects.[8]

Starting from childhood we are enmeshed in a network of social roles, both for us to perform and for everyone and everything else to embody and express. Indeed, we ourselves are nothing but a particular constellation of roles that continually respond to other constellations of roles. This is especially the case for Confucianism, which sees all of reality as thoroughly norm-governed. One's life is to be a continuous process of learning to render one's roles intuitively performable. There is a strong emphasis on the learned internalization of a variety of patterns of activity that become unconscious role performances. Ideally, by adulthood we are so trained that we simply become a series of globally robust and reliable dispositions to act in accordance with our norm-governed roles, and if society and nature (*tian* .) are in proper order, so will everything be doing its job, performing its role, and following the path set for it, manifesting the harmony (*he* .) of the universe itself (the *dao* .). Fraser here borrows the notion of an RDRD from Robert Brandom: a 'reliable differential responsive disposition.'[9] He writes, "Once we have developed the relevant RDRDs, we can generally perform our roles almost automatically."[10]

Recently, Henry Rosemont Jr. and Roger T. Ames have developed the classical Chinese 'performance model' of action and agency into a contemporary Confucian role ethic.[11] Ames in

particular makes a big deal of the lack of atomic individualism in the Chinese tradition. He also reads the cosmology grounding much classical Chinese thinking as being a kind of process philosophy. For Ames, not only is there no self in classical China, there are no things in the sense of concrete particular substances that serve as the bearers of properties. Ames's point is clearly inferable from Fraser's distinction: if the 'argument model' requires a truly distinct agent behind discrete actions (or in MacIntyre's terms, an integral moral agent distinct from the roles it performs), then the 'performance model' requires instead that agents be indistinct from their actions and the roles they perform. In other words, in the 'performance model,' it is not even that people have roles, but rather roles that 'have' people. There are no doers behind the deeds. There are only the deeds continually done. All there is, is the ceaseless interaction of RDRDs. In classical China, agency is in a sense reduced to actions, while in the West actions are in a sense reduced to agency. While very bizarre to Western minds, the Chinese idea seems to be that the masterful performance of a habituated skill or the dexterous unfolding and actualizing of a disposition demands no clearly isolable subject or agent. On this model, practical reasoning collapses into perception and intuition. Whoever might be behind a role performed collapses into the role's seemingly self-generated performance.

It is important to emphasize that in ancient China roles or names were norms rooted in social customs like rituals and family relations. According to Confucianism, the traditionally established and received structures of ritual performance and family relations are the most important models that are to guide the inculcation of RDRDs. Fraser labels a particularly effective and reliable constellation of RDRDs a *virtuoso*, an ideal performer of ritual and family roles. In Confucian terms, the virtuoso is a sage, a moral exemplar whose goodness consists in the near perfection of his performance of his roles. The virtuoso is the one who has been trained well. He has mastered and embodied the *daos*, rituals, family and political obligations, and models he has learned to perform. He is a moral virtuoso because he is nothing but a collection of good performances, which are good precisely because they are reliable. Fraser writes, "A morally good character will be one that incorporates genuinely reliable, robust moral responsive dispositions."[12]

In the Confucian *Analects*, we discover what makes the virtuoso performer so good. Perhaps the most important Confucian virtue is *ren*. The term is cognate with the word that simply means human being (*ren*). Before the *Analects*, *ren* often referred to a strong and beautiful aristocratic man, a truly free and manly man, especially in the *Book of Odes*, but with Confucius *ren* became a moral term meaning 'goodness.' In the Confucian tradition, it came to designate a kind of empathy or benevolence shown towards human beings. The Confucian moral virtuoso is a man of *ren* in the sense of unbridled goodness exhibited towards others. The Confucian *shengren*, wise man or sage, is a perfect human being who performs only those actions that are truly appropriate for human beings. He never descends to the level of animals or mere beasts. He is never brutal, but human to the point of being humane. Confucian goodness amounts to a kind of perfectly humane unselfishness and caring for others. *Ren* is *the* Good of Confucianism. It the best a human can do. The one who embodies *ren* becomes an authority on all things human. This is why Ames and Rosemont translate *ren* with both 'authoritative conduct' and 'authoritative person.' They chose to emphasize the authoritativeness involved in *ren* because terms like 'goodness,' 'humanity,' and 'benevolence,' while roughly correct as translations, are too static and psychological to truly convey the fullness of *ren*. For them,

ren is one's entire person: one's cultivated cognitive, aesthetic, moral, and religious

sensibilities as they are expressed in one's ritualized roles and relationships. It is one's 'field of selves,' the sum of significant relationships, that constitute one as a resolutely social person. *Ren* is not only mental, but physical as well: one's posture and comportment, gestures and bodily communication.[13]

Coming to embody and express *ren* is the way one truly becomes the full and complete human one is, which is the entire network of social roles one performs. Performing all these roles with a benevolent humanity makes one truly good. *Ren* is how one's humanity becomes truly humane through permanent role performance.

The Confucian sage is the authority on being human, but what this means is that he is an authority on performing rituals. Ritual propriety, *li*, is another chief virtue of Confucianism. *Li* also refers to the rites, customs, and rules everyone must follow in society. *Li* can be understood to mean social etiquette. It is a matter not only of religious activities like sacrifices made to spirits, but everyday activities like deciding what to wear, how to eat one's food, and the way one is to relate to a minister. The proper performance of rituals and rites, and the upholding of traditions and customs, is the most important activity one is engaged in, in everyday life. The sage performs his rituals with the greatest dexterity and ease. Thus, he is ritually proper, and lets his complete humanity flourish through his ritual propriety. Through his performance of rituals and upholding of customs, his humaneness and benevolence shine forth. By completely submitting to and internalizing all the rituals, rules, and roles that determines his every social interaction, he, his social virtuosity, becomes sagacious.

The moral virtuoso is not only the best at performing rituals. He actually really desires to perform them. He enjoys performing them as well, which is another aspect of his immensely attractive virtuosity. He feels the customs in his heart. He is one with his performances. His benevolence and propriety permeates his every gesture. He gladly performs his every duty, making him both right and righteous, *yi*. *Yi*, another important Confucian virtue, is the emboldening of one's cultivated awareness of what is truly humane and ritually proper in each particular instance by a sense of duty to constantly actualize this awareness in practice. *Yi* is sometimes translated as 'morality' itself and other times as 'appropriateness.' It is the fitting way one reacts to their social environment of customs and rituals with a virtuoso performance of all of one's roles.

The Confucian sage never performs roles alone. He could not, quite simply, because he is not an individual. Rather, he is a particular role or nexus of roles in a context of roles. The sage always performs well for others. Often the most important role he is performing is a family role. Filial piety, *xiao*, is another major Confucian virtue. *Xiao* is piety expressed not only towards one's immediate family, but also towards one's entire extended family and ancestral lineage. The spirits of dead family members are still in play and need to be related to with as much proper affection and reverence as immediate and extended family members. Respect and dutifulness shown between family members, dead and alive, is what constitutes *xiao*. According to the *Analects*, filial piety was so important for Confucius that it could be regarded as the root of goodness: "Might we not say that filial piety and respect for elders constitute the root of Goodness?"[14] The family is at the centre of Confucian role ethics. The five key relationships emphasized in Confucianism reflect the primary role of the family: the relationship between father and son, older brother and younger brother, husband and wife, the elderly and the young, and a ruler and his subjects. The family is the network of relations and roles that serves as the foundational paradigm for the actualization of the 'performance model' of social action.

2. Daoist Role Ethics I: The *Laozi* and Moral Abolitionism

In contemporary metaethical terms, it could be argued that Confucianism, and perhaps classical Chinese thinking in general, is about as morally realist as could be. Moral realism is the position which holds that moral claims ('stealing is wrong,' 'keeping promises is obligatory') purport to report facts about the world and that at least some of these claims are true.[15] Moral realists believe one can have beliefs and express true propositions about mind-independent moral facts. Moral properties—like goodness and badness, right and wrong—are believed to be really out there, inhering within things or instantiated by events. For moral realism to be applicable to classical Chinese thinking, especially the Chinese understanding of action and agency, there will have to be a slight metaphysical adjustment. It will not be that moral properties inhere in things, but that things in a sense are moral or normative realities in themselves. For Confucianism, moral reality *is* reality. All things (people and objects) are so many role-specific functions fated to perform in some manner in accordance with the basic relational models of family, state, and cosmos.

To be a moral anti-realist today, one would usually have to hold certain semantic or epistemic positions. Moral non-cognitivism says that moral claims in fact do not report any facts or express any propositions, and so could neither be true nor false, because moral claims are more like the expression of emotions and prescriptions than anything else. On this account, moral properties are not real because moral semantics is not even in the business of trying to report the truth. There are no moral facts, so there could be no moral beliefs about, and no propositions that could correspond to, them. Moral error-theory, on the other hand, holds that there are indeed moral propositions which express moral beliefs, but it is just that they are all false. Morality is a systematic error. Moral error-theorists deny there could possibly be objective prescriptions or moral properties mostly because their existence would make the world a very strange place. Thus, all attempts to express moral truth are destined to fail. I would claim that Confucianism constitutes a kind of moral realism not merely because of the feasibility of reading the tradition as holding a kind of moral cognitivism or moral success theory, but, prior to these semantic and epistemic theories, because it simply requires that everything, metaphysically speaking, *be normative*, that all things exist and function as morally significant social roles.

Classical Chinese Daoism came to be regarded as the foil to Confucianism. Daoism has two main ways of dealing with Confucianism, which are found in its classic texts: the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* .[16] Neither the *Laozi* nor the *Zhuangzi* utterly reject the classical Chinese view of things as being role performances. What they do instead is empty roles of their normative contents. I would say there is certainly a kind of moral anti-realism in Daoism,[17] but what the two texts suggest we should do about a Confucian world, or at least a world shot through with Confucian rhetoric, differs. I will argue that the suggestion of the *Laozi* roughly corresponds, in contemporary terms, to a moral scepticism that reduces to a moral abolitionism, while the suggestion offered by the *Zhuangzi* roughly corresponds to a moral trivialism that reduces to a kind of moral fictionalism. Moral abolitionism advises that we drop moral speech altogether, that we abolish our desire and tendency to use morality as a way of describing and trying to change the world.[18] Moral fictionalism says we should pretend morality is correct for instrumental and prudential reasons.

With respect to roles, the moral abolitionist would request that we either stop imbuing

our roles with moral significance or simply quit performing them. The moral fictionalist would suggest that we perform our roles, and sustain their moral significance, while knowing, either all the while or in our more reflective moments, that our roles actually carry no moral weight whatsoever, that we only pretend-perform our social roles while remaining quite internally detached from and dismissive of their purported value. The moral fictionalist quite literally plays his roles. The moral abolitionist has quit playing. Neither believes our roles instantiate anything morally real or non-negotiably obligatory. Roles, especially non-familial social and political roles, are viewed as degradations by Daoism, and advise that we should aim to avoid performing as many roles as possible (the *Laozi*) or never internally identify with the roles we are fated to perform (the *Zhuangzi*).

The *Laozi* is a collection of eighty-one terse and enigmatic wise-sayings that were meant to serve as a guide for a potential ruler. Oddly, the text approaches ruling from a very paradoxical, cosmological, and, to us, very un-political perspective. The strategy found throughout the *Laozi* is one of subtraction, reversal, reduction, and emptying. One is advised to lose one's desires, emotions, plans, and basically one's humanity. The focus of one's life, the object of both one's concentration and emulation, should be the Dao, the entire universe viewed as a constant, permanent, and indifferent process of physically omnipotent self-creation and self-destruction. Today, we would probably regard the social and political goal of the *Laozi* as a kind of utopian anarcho-primitivism in which we return to a simple and small contented prehistoric agrarian community indistinguishable from nature itself. The way to return to this condition is to have a king, a sage-ruler, who has no political ambitions or desires to dominate whatsoever, but instead stands as the empty, neutral centre of society that all citizens aim to imitate insofar as the sage-ruler himself either perfectly imitates the Dao or simply becomes the Dao itself. The sage-ruler is to function as the Dao's explicit expression in finite, human form, at least when perceived from without. The effect of having the Dao permeate society is to subdue and simplify everyone to the point of sturdy stupidity.

The *Laozi* emphasizes that the Dao serves as the ground or condition of possibility for all names or role performances by neither having a specific name (the Dao does not count) nor performing a particular role itself. *The* Dao is in one sense the ultimate identity of all particular *daos* (ways of doing things, performing roles), because it is the permanent way all things are done and all roles are performed. In another sense, it is radically distinct from all impermanent *daos*. In chapter one, we read,

> As to a Dao—if it can be specified as a Dao, it is not a permanent Dao. As to a name—if it can be specified as a name, it is not a permanent name.[19]

Recall that a *dao* is a path or paradigm of role-performance and a name is a job title. What this chapter is claiming is that the Dao's role is to be permanently role-less. Its job is to be impartial, neutral, and useless, forever unemployed. Thus, it can serve as the condition for all roles, all specifically impermanent names or *daos*. The Dao is the way everything really is. It is the essence of all things. The more the sage-ruler can be like the Dao, and the more the people can be like the sage-ruler, the less everyone will name names and perform roles, the less everyone will even form the desire to be humane, righteous, proper, pious, and reverential, and thus the less there will result the social complexity that generates the moral conflicts of irreconcilable role performances. If excessive and complex role performance can be abolished so too will the need to imbue roles with moral significance. In fact, that roles are thought to be morally significant at all is already a sign of decay and failure and must be reversed.

The *Laozi* takes dead-aim at Confucianism, which it regards mostly as an unhelpful set of moral complaints that only enhance the immorality it tries to remedy. Chapter eighteen reads,

> Thus, when the great Dao is dispensed with, then there is humanity and righteousness. When knowledge and smartness come out, then there is great falsity. When the six family relations are not harmonious, then there is filial piety and compassion. When the state and families are in confusion, then there are upright ministers.[20]

The Confucian solution to the apparent immorality of failed role performances found throughout society is to scold and reform everyone with clever policies, harsh injunctions, and punitive measures. The Daoist response is quite the opposite, for it sees the emergence of Confucianism and its fierce tendency to regard role performances as morally significant as the very source of name malfunction and poor role performance in the first place. For the *Laozi*, the effect of employing morality as a solution is to amplify the very problem it itself causes. Confucianism is just such an amplification. In the next chapter, the *Laozi* offers its solution:

> Abandon sagacity and discard knowledge, and the people will benefit a hundredfold. Abandon humanity and discard righteousness, and the people will return to filial piety and care. Abandon skill and discard profit, and there will be no thieves or robbers.[21]

We are then given even more direct advice: "Manifest plainness, embrace simplicity, reduce selfishness, have less desires, abandon learning, have no worries."[22]

By emptying roles of their ascribed moral significance, there would likely come two results: one, many of the roles would just vanish, and two, the ones left would become much easier to perform and generate fewer conflicts. The solution of the *Laozi* to the problem of what to do if one finds moral distinctions to be either mere emotional ejaculations or fundamentally false is to abolish morality, that is, to abolish the moralization of our natural role performances. One abolishes moralized roles either by abolishing the roles themselves or by depriving them of their moral veneer by ceasing to use a moral semantics regarding them. If we were to practice the moral abolitionism of the *Laozi*, the thinking is that we would only perform those social roles that are basic and fundamental. We would then live in a society truly harmonious with itself and nature.

3. Daoist Role Ethics II: The *Zhuangzi* and Moral Fictionalism

If the response of the *Laozi* to a world of social roles is to empty them of their normative contents by abolishing the desires, emotions, and reactions that lead to the emergence of a complex, morally significant society in the first place, then the response of the *Zhuangzi* will appear much less harsh and perhaps a little more realistic. More than likely, however, many will find the text too cynical. The *Zhuangzi* responds to the world with a glib shrug and cheeky wink. The text fundamentally agrees with the *Laozi*, but instead of advising us (or a potential ruler) to explicitly do something about the way Confucians, and certainly many others, obsessively moralize social role performances, the *Zhuangzi* advises that we simply play along and give people what they want, even though we would be wise to avoid any attachment to the roles we perform. When it comes to our own internal lives we should be moral abolitionists, but when it comes to how we appear and how we relate to others, we should practice a kind of moral fictionalism, that is, we should behave *as if* roles were normatively significant and instantiated moral properties. But, to be more precise, the *Zhuangzi* never recommends that we initiate a normative role performance. Rather, we should engage in the pretense of morality only as a

response. The *Zhuangzi* writes,

> The Consummate Person uses his mind like a mirror, rejecting nothing, welcoming nothing: responding but not storing. Thus he can handle all things without harm.[23]

Playing along with the way people behave and what they value is a prudent means of dealing with humanity's pathological tendency towards moral outrage and glorification over what is, internally speaking, utterly and objectively indifferent. It is best to appear to go along with whatever performances humanity is requiring of you at any moment while remaining all the while internally detached. The *Zhuangzi* calls this 'Walking Two Roads' and 'Three in the Morning:'

> What is this Three in the Morning? A monkey trainer was distributing chestnuts. He said, 'I'll give you three in the morning and four in the evening.' The monkeys were furious. 'Well then,' he said, 'I'll give you four in the morning and three in the evening.' The monkeys were delighted. This change of description and arrangement caused no loss, but in one case it brought anger and in another delight. He just went by the rightness of their present 'this.' Thus, the sage uses various rights and wrongs to harmonize with others and yet remains at rest in the middle of Nature's Potter's Wheel. This is called 'Walking Two Roads.'[24]

The rightness of the present 'this' (*shi*) is whichever social role one is being called on to perform at that moment. Of course, we still need to develop the ability to actualize, and so habituate ourselves, to the RDRDs contributing to and constituting our roles. However, we can also learn that every 'this' is a 'that' (*fei*) for another 'this,' that every right is wrong according to another right. The *Zhuangzi* thus employs a particularly extreme kind of sceptical relativism when it comes to the actual metaphysical status of roles and values. The text even pushes its sceptical relativism to the point of asserting that everything is, objectively speaking, simultaneously equally right *and* wrong, that all roles performances equally engender good *and* bad relations. Every good role performance is bad from the perspective of some other role and so on. The *Zhuangzi* swings back and forth between a relativistic scepticism and an absolute scepticism that becomes in the end, I would claim, an affirmative trivialism: things/roles/values (whatever) are both absolutely right *and* wrong, totally this *and* that, depending on which perspective is taken, with that perspective itself also being absolutely right *and* wrong. If all things are roles, then all roles are always performed equally well and poorly. It is just that we normal, everyday humans do not have the ability to take *this*, absolute perspective, a view from everywhere and nowhere at once, and remain human. Instead, we, *qua* humans, should do whatever is presently regarded as the right role performance.

Only the sage is supposed to be able take both perspectives at once, that is, to be able to perform whatever is the presently correct role *and* also know and thus *be* the absolute fact that all roles (again: things/values/whatever) are equally empty of any value, selfhood, or existence *and* are all value, selfhood, and existence. The sage does this by identifying himself simultaneously with both all and none of the perspectives, all the roles that are performed and the role-less condition of possibility of all role performance: the Dao itself. In a sense, the sage becomes not only the particular role he performs, but every role he does not perform *and* the role-less stage itself, the Dao, upon which all roles are performed and which is ultimately essentially identical to all roles in their ceaseless transformation and self-performance. This is how the sage can perform any role with detached ease. One of many stories found in the *Zhuangzi* that captures this ability of the sage is that of Mengsun Cai. It is important to note that the role of the proper

mourner, someone who *really* feels and expresses pain over his loss, is one of the most important roles one is supposed to play in a well-run Confucian society. It is a sign of true humaneness, righteousness, ritual propriety, and filial piety. Mr Mengsun seems to be quite good at mourning, but something is strange about him.

> Yan Hui went to question Confucius. 'When his mother died, Mengsun Cai wailed but shed no tears, unsaddened in the depths of his heart, observing the mourning but without real sorrow. Lacking tears, inner sadness, and real grief, he nonetheless gained a reputation throughout Lu as an exemplary mourner. Is it really possible to have a reputation that is utterly at odds with reality? I have always found it very strange.'

> Confucius said, 'Mengsun Cai has gone to the very end of this matter, beyond merely understanding it. For when you try to simplify things for yourself but find it impossible to do so, things have already been simplified for you. This Mr Mengsun understands nothing about why he lives or why he dies. His ignorance applies equally to what went before and what is yet to come. Having already transformed into some particular being, he takes it as no more than a waiting for the next transformation into the unknown, nothing more. …[H]is physical form may meet with shocks but this does not harm his mind. His life is to him but a morning's lodging, so he does no real dying. This Mr Mengsun alone has awakened. Others cry, so he cries too. And that is the only reason he does so.[25]

Mr Mengsun is a fictionalist about the value of the role of a proper mourner. He does not have the characteristic feelings of a mourner, but he mourns well anyway. The only one who seems to notice he is pretending is a Confucian in training, that is, someone concerned with criticizing others for improperly being humane, filial, or pious. The Confucian is chiefly concerned with finding, criticizing, and reforming others who are not right. He is someone on the look-out for moral frauds and fools, those role performers who lack the genuine conative and emotional elements which are supposed to motivate the proper performance of roles. The Zhuangzian role fictionalist, on the other hand, is not concerned with anyone's supposed lack of sincerity. Instead he just lets people's natural dispositions unfold. If Mr Mengsun can discharge the role-specific responsibilities of a proper mourner without identifying in the least with either the feelings or value others ascribe to the role, then what difference does it make? If the people believe Mr Mengsun performed his role well, they should be allowed to hold that believe. Perhaps Yan Hui should keep quiet and stop causing problems. Besides, accusations of insincerity often betray one's own insecurity.

Mr Mengsun can mourn with the best of them because he considers all roles as being equally empty of objective value. He regards them as only whatever must be performed if the circumstance calls for it. For Mr Mengsun, the problem with the Confucian, the moral scold, is that he

> still harbours Humanity in his breast, with which he tries to constrain other human beings. He may be able to win people over that way, but in doing so he never gets beyond *criticizing* people, considering them wrong.[26]

The Zhuangzian Daoist is done with criticizing people. He is merely trying to endure them with as much agility, celerity, and levity as possible. Another famous story that finds a role fictionalist championed by the people as someone special is that of Carpenter Shi's friend, the Pretending Tree. What is interesting about this tree is that it seems to try quite hard to be worthless and role-less. Still, though, the people find a way to appreciate it even if they all know, at least implicitly,

that in fact it is quite a worthless tree and wants nothing more than to be left alone so to drift into oblivion. The way the *Zhuangzi* presents the story one gets the impression that it is best to evaluate people (or trees) not on the basis of the roles they perform, but on the basis of both the roles they get away with not performing and their performance of the roles they are circumstantially required to perform but do not allow to latch onto their innermost non-being:

> Carpenter Shi was traveling in Qi when he came upon the tree of the shrine at the Qu Yuan bend. It was over a hundred arm spans around, so large that thousands of oxen could shade themselves beneath it. It overstretched the surrounding hills, its lowest branches hundreds of feet from the ground, at least a dozen of which could have been hollowed out to make into ships. It was surrounded by marvelling sightseers, but the carpenter walked past it without a second look.

> When his apprentice finally got tired of admiring it, he caught up with Carpenter Shi and said, 'Since taking up my axe to follow you, Master, I have never seen a tree of such fine material [worth, talent] as this! And yet, you don't even deign to look twice at it or pause beneath it. Why?'

> Carpenter Shi said, 'Stop! Say no more! This is worthless lumber! As a ship it would soon sink, as a coffin it would soon rot, as a tool it would soon break, as a door it would leak sap, as a pillar it would bring infestation. This is a talentless, worthless tree. It is precisely because it is so useless that it has lived so long.'

> Back home, Carpenter Shi saw the tree in a dream. It said to him, 'What do you want to compare to me, one of those *cultivated* trees? The hawthorn, the pear, the orange, the rest of those fructiferous trees and shrubs—when their fruit is ripe they get plucked, and that is an insult. Their large branches are bent; their small branches are pruned. Thus do their abilities embitter their lives. That is why they die young, failing to fully live out their natural life spans. They batter themselves with the vulgar conventions of the world—and all the other creatures do the same. As for me, I've been working on being useless for a long time. It almost killed me, but I've finally managed it—and it's of great use to me! If I were useful, do you think I could have grown to be so great?

> Moreover, you and I are both [members of the same class, namely] *beings*—is either of us in a position to classify and evaluate the other? How could a worthless man with one foot in the grave know what is or isn't a worthless tree?'

> Carpenter Shi awoke and told his dream to his apprentice. The apprentice said, 'If it's trying to be useless, what's it doing with a shrine around it?'

> Carpenter Shi said, 'Hush, don't talk like that! Those people came to it for refuge of their own accord. In fact, the tree considers it a great disgrace to be surrounded by this uncomprehending crowd. If they hadn't made it a shrine, they could easily have gone the other way and started carving away at it. What it values is not what they value. Is it not absurd to judge it by whether it does what is or is not called for by its position, by what role it happens to play?'[27]

The lesson of the Pretending Tree, and the *Zhuangzi* as a whole, is that since most do not want to become moral abolitionists, anyone who does should keep it to themselves, practice it internally, and engage in a moral fictionalist performance of the roles that are unavoidable. This may be the only path to survival and wisdom. Again, the advice is, "Don't let the external compromise get inside you, and don't let your inner harmony show itself externally."[28]

But what of kind of moral fictionalism is this? The contemporary options are hermeneutic

or revolutionary. Revolutionary fictionalism can also be assertive or non-assertive. Hermeneutic moral fictionalism takes us back to the non-cognitivist kind of moral anti-realism. It says that since it is already impossible for there to be a cognitive element to moral speech, when one does speak morally one is only pretending. Moral semantics is inherently fictitious and to use it is at all is to engage in a pretence from the start. Now, it does not seem that Daoism wants to claim that Confucians are only pretending or that they do not really think and believe that being humane, ritually proper, and so on is morally good or the right way to behave.[29] If that is correct, then we can move on to consider revolutionary moral fictionalism as being the more appropriate label for what the *Zhuangzi* offers. Revolutionary moral fictionalism says that—insofar as we accept the moral error theory that we can have moral beliefs and assert moral propositions, but they are all false—we have prudential and instrumental reasons to pretend that moral beliefs and propositions are true. Morality is simply too useful, or omnipresent, to be abolished, at least not yet. We should speak and behave as if morality were true.

We already do this with many other fictions. Think of how we talk about Santa Claus or the Tooth Fairy to kids. We want kids to behave, so we use these fictions. We also want adults to behave, so we use morality. As Simon Kirchen writes,

Moral talk can help to coordinate desires and interests more readily than other methods.
But, to think there literally are objective prescriptions, say, is silly.[30]

Revolutionary moral fictionalism comes in two main forms: assertive and non-assertive. Assertive revolutionary moral fictionalism holds that we can assert that things are right or wrong while not believing what we assert and that later, in our more reflective moments, we admit we did not and never really did believe such things. The position seems to imply that we could somehow simultaneously assert that something is the case while not believing that assertion. One complaint against this position could be that it is impossible, for how could one *really* assert something without believing it? It may simply be too difficult of a thing for humans to do, with their limited mental capacities. It depends on one's view of the force of assertions. If one thinks such a mental stance would introduce too much mental strain to continue on behaving in any way resembling a functional adult, then one will deny one could get away with being an assertive revolutionary moral fictionalist. Another possible problem is one could say the lack of sincerity of such a fictionalist's moral assertions would be just too obvious. A response to this objection, a response I think is implicit in the *Zhuangzi*, would be that one could become more convincing in the way one asserts things one does not believe. It is merely a matter of discipline and practice.

Another way of dealing with the problems of assertive fictionalism is to hold a non-assertive kind. Non-assertive revolutionary moral fictionalism says that we can accept the moral error theory and utter moral claims without asserting them. Instead of really asserting moral propositions, we can pretend to do so. This way we do not have to deal with the apparent incoherence of asserting things we do not believe. To pretend to assert a moral claim is to speak and behave in the way we do to children when we talk about Santa or the Tooth Fairy. Richard Joyce gives the example of pretending to be a bear.[31] Joyce says that when he is on the floor playing with his children, crawling around and saying in a gruff voice, 'I'm a bear,' he is not really asserting he is bear. He is pretending to assert he is a bear. If it seemed Joyce was really asserting he was a bear—say, by standing upright and saying in a calm, clear, and deadly serious voice, 'I'm a bear'—then we would probably think he was going crazy. His kids would probably start to find their father rather boring or run away scared. What is interesting about this example is that Joyce's kids have to play along for the pretence to work. The same goes for morality. Just

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as with the assertive kind, non-assertive revolutionary fictionalism seems to imply that one has to offer a believable rendition of a person who sincerely believes in and asserts moral propositions. In the end, however, I find it hard to discern that strong of a difference between assertive and non-assertive revolutionary fictionalism because the non-assertive kind seems to be only a poorer, perhaps less convincing, performance of someone who really believes in moral reality.

How does the moral fictionalism of the *Zhuangzi* fit into this taxonomy? As noted above, it does not seem that the *Zhuangzi* employs a revolutionary fictionalism because it does not deny the empirically obvious fact that many people, especially Confucians, genuine believe in and assert the reality of moral properties. As a hermeneutic fictionalism then, is the *Zhuangzi* more in line with the assertive or non-assertive kind? It is hard to call because the revolutionary moral fictionalism of the *Zhuangzi* is purely responsive. In other words, the Zhuangzian never initiates the performance of morally-laden social roles, but instead avoids them as best he can. However, if a context requires the performance of a social role loaded with moral significance he will submit to his fate of being caught in such a relationship and so carry about the responsibilities demanded of him. Will he assert moral propositions he does not believe? Yes, but he will if and only if the situation demands it and he is confident he has developed the requisite RDRDs to properly perform the role and thus appear genuine. In other words, the *Zhuangzi* advises assertive fictionalism only if one has achieved the mastery of the role performance required and there is no way to get along without performing it. The advice is: assert moral propositions and perform moral roles only if you are capable of being believed by at least most your audience and no other options are available which would allow you avoid the situation altogether. This would entail having the ability to convincingly assert moral propositions, or permit moral propositions to be ascribed to you, that you do not believe.

Think of the pretending tree enduring its role as a shrine: it will be play along and 'assert' its status as a very worthy and useful tree *qua* shrine because anything less would involve its being chopped up into a plethora of putatively useful objects. The tree would prefer to assert nothing at all, but since fate demands that it at least perform some role in order to get by in a world of nothing but supposedly morally significant role performances, it might as well get busy really asserting itself as a shrine. This is an existential issue for Daoism, which is to say it is a matter of not only longevity, but survival. We must be adaptive and affirm our fate no matter how much we know morality is neither true nor real, at least not in the terms it is usually used, that is, again, in the terms of objective and non-negotiable prescriptions. The *Zhuangzi* would advise that we be non-assertive fictionalists only if we have not yet developed the RDRDs necessary to be successful assertive fictionalists. However, we would be wise not to rest on not getting caught in our pretence of not really asserting the moral claims we do not really believe. Our life depends on it. Yes, we should avoid as many role performances as we can and so abolish morality from our hearts, but we must also recognize that we are fated to be constrained to perform at least some morally laden social roles.[32] Nature has burdened us with a human form after all. We might as well learn to play these roles well if we wish to obtain that wisdom which is our identification with the Dao, that is, nature's omnipotent and absolutely infinite and eternal indifferent creation and destruction of itself as all things. This is a wisdom utterly devoid of cleverness. Instead, it is the exercising of an ability to dispassionately perform our roles well given to us by nature itself:

> Making your real home in the oneness, let yourself be temporarily lodged in whatever
> cannot be avoided. This will get you close to success. It is easy to wipe away your

footprints, but difficult to walk without touching the ground. It is easy to use deception when you are sent into your activities at the behest of other humans, but difficult to use deception when sent into activity by nature. You have learned how to fly with wings, but not yet how to fly without wings. You have learned the wisdom of being wise, but not yet the wisdom of being free of wisdom. Concentrate on the hollows of what is before you, and the empty chamber within you will generate its own brightness.[33]

I would like to conclude by claiming that, while it is difficult to encourage others to reciprocate one's moral abolitionism and so give up either performing or endowing roles with moral significance, as the *Laozi* would like, I can see no reason why one could not be, if one were so inclined, a Zhuangzian revolutionary responsive assertive moral fictionalist about social role performances today. This is not to say it would be easy, but it may be the best strategy available if one were convinced of moral anti-realism and the moral unreality of our social roles. In fact, it may make us *better* at performing our roles and thus fulfilling the moral responsibilities called upon us by our relations to others. It may be that we would achieve the levels of cooperation, coordination, and general security we use morality as a tool to help us achieve if we were not so conatively and emotionally invested in the roles we perform. Could it be that we would become better family members, friends, citizens, employees and so on if we calmed down and minimized our tendency to embolden these roles with moral significance? Would we get what we want out of our social relationships if instead we viewed them as merely so many tasks and performances to endure and discharge? Finally, would it not be ironically fitting if a moral abolitionist or fictionalist Daoist role ethic could achieve with greater ease and efficacy those stated goals of Confucianism than its own moral realist brand of role ethics?

Notes

[1] Fraser, Chris (2009) Action and Agency in Early Chinese Thought. *Journal of Chinese Philosophy and Culture* 5, 217.

[2] MacIntyre, Alasdair (2006) Social Structures and Their Threat to Moral Agency. In his Ethics and Politics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 186-204.

[3] MacIntyre, 189.

[4] MacIntyre, 190.

[5] Fraser, 221.

[6] Fraser, 222.

[7] Fraser, 225.

[8] Fraser, 225.

[9] Fraser, 226.

[10] Fraser, 226.

[11] Ames, Roger T. and Henry Rosemont Jr. (1999) The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation. New York: Ballantine Books. Ames, Roger T. (2011) Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

[12] Fraser, 234.

[13] Ames and Rosemont, 1999, 140.

[14] Ames and Rosemont, 1999, 141.

[15] Sayre-McCord, Geoff (2009) Moral Realism, Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (Fall 2009 Edition), Edward N. Zalta, (ed.), URL= http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-realism/.

[16] These texts as referred to as 'the' Laozi and 'the' Zhuangzi because we do not actually know who wrote them. 'Zi' means 'master.' So, it is common to refer to the texts as 'the master Lao' or 'the master Zhuang,' literally. The Laozi also has the title of Daodejing ..., which means 'the text of the Way and its Power (or Efficacy).'

[17] It is hard to pinpoint what exactly makes the Daoists moral anti-realists. They would certainly deny that anything has objective moral value or that there are any non-negotiable objective prescriptions one must follow. They would also emphasize that the prevalence of moral speech is the result of the pathological desire that the world be otherwise than it is. With classical Chinese thinking in general, it is very hard to tell if they would regard the utterance of a moral claim or the enactment of a moral requirement as evincing a cognitivist or noncognitivist source. The strong distinction between beliefs, reasons, desires, and emotions common to the West did not exist in ancient China. This is probably rooted not only in the predominantly aesthetic and performative aspect of Chinese thinking and living in general, but in the fact that the very word for the 'mind,' *xin* ., also means 'heart,' and is often translated as 'heart-mind.' Aside from the cognitivist/non-cognitivist issue, the Daoists definitely seem more like error than success theorists with respect to not only moral claims, but to any claims at all beyond that of claiming the only 'truth' is the one that expresses everything and nothing simultaneously, the claim that asserts a perfect correspondence between itself and everything and so says nothing at all, with this everything/nothing being the Dao itself, the whole thing that is every true/false (this/that, right/wrong) distinction. This will, hopefully, make more sense as we move along.

[18] The only major proponent of moral abolitionism in contemporary metaethics is Richard Garner. See his Beyond Morality (1993). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

[19] Moeller, Hans-Georg (2007) Daodejing (Laozi): A Complete Translation and Commentary. Chicago: Open Court Press, 3.

[20] Moeller, 47.

[21] Moeller, 49.

[22] Moeller, 49.

[23] Ziporyn, Brook (2009) Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 54.

[24] Ziporyn, 14.

[25] Ziporyn, 47-48.

[26] Ziporyn, 50.

[27] Ziporyn, 30-31.

[28] Ziporyn, 29. We should keep in mind that while the *Zhuangzi* does have this practical outlook, it is just as vehement about its internal moral abolitionism as the *Laozi*. For example, we read: "The sage has his way of wandering. For him, understanding is merely a bastard son, obligations and agreements merely glue, Virtuosity a mere continuation of something received, skill merely salesmanship. The sage makes no plans, so what use would he have for understanding? He is unsplit, so what use would he have for glue? He loses nothing, so what use would he have for the attainments of Virtuosity? He is not for sale as a commodity, so what use would he have for salesmanship? These four are his nourishment from nature, nature's sustenance. Since he receives his sustenance from nature, what use would he have for the human? He has the physical form of a human being, but not the characteristic inclinations of a human being. Since he shares the human form, he lives among men. Since he is free of their characteristic inclinations, right and wrong cannot get at him. Minute and insignificant, he is just another man amongst the others. Vast and unmatched, he is alone in perfecting nature in himself" (translation modified) (Ziporyn, 38).

[29] Again, this entire matter is contingent upon deciding whether classical Chinese thought was cognitivist, and considering that that is contingent upon deciding the exact metaphysical status of the heart-mind (*xin*), we will have to postpone dealing with this matter for another time.

[30] Kirchin, Simon (2012) Metaethics. Great Britain: Palgrave Macmillan, 93.

[31] Joyce, Richard (2001) The Myth of Morality. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[32] This can be viewed as the Daoist response to the voluntarist criticism that we should not have responsibilities and special obligations placed upon us by certain relationships into which we are forced. The Daoist feels the voluntarist's pain on this issue, but he equally thinks it is delusional to suppose one could have much control over the relationships into which we are often simply born. The concern should not be with trying to have control over which relationships we enter into, for there is nothing we can do about many of those, but instead with discovering the means by which we may be able to either avoid certain relationships altogether or fulfil our function in those relationships with a certain detached equanimity. Since the Daoist position is fairly

fatalistic and cynical, one may have to already be sympathetic to a deterministic and necessitarian view of things to find it appealing. For the most part, the Daoists are as anti-realist about moral properties as they are about free will. The point is to affirm our fate while realizing that all things human are devoid of the kind of reality ascribed to them by humans.
[33] Ziporyn, 27.