

Zhuangzi on Disability: A Confucian Response

In an insightful and penetrating essay, John Altman and Bryan Van Norden argue the ancient Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi anticipates what has become known as the “social model” of disability.¹ This suggestion has been taken further in a blogpost by Helen de Cruz, who argues Zhuangzi provides a needed corrective to the ableism that is endemic to western philosophy.² As de Cruz puts it: “[Zhuangzi’s] work celebrates disability as a valuable difference, as something that can be good for a disabled person, as a difference we should definitely not seek to erase.”

There is a lot to said about in this reading of Zhuangzi, and ultimately I think it can be sustained. But we need to be careful about reading this philosopher too literally when he tells stories with disabled characters. Zhuangzi is not, in the first instance, trying to tell us something about their lives, any more than he is commenting on botany when singing the praises of gnarled trees, or embracing social norms that allow women to be sold to wealthy men as brides when arguing such arrangements might work out. Nor is he offering sound gardening advice in detailing the many uses of overgrown gourds, or encouraging criminal behavior in praising the moral insight of convicts. He is using these stories to remind us of how much is lost when we lazily fall back on unimaginative and conventional accounts of what is good and bad. Being mindful of this takes us, I think, to a more substantive engagement with philosophical ableism.

Crippled Virtue

De Cruz focuses on a passage about “Splay Limbed Shu”, in which Zhuangzi claims that “[w]ith a crippled body, [Shu is] still able to look after himself and finish out the years Heaven gave him.”³ In fact, as Zhuangzi tells it, Shu is doing quite well for himself. Despite his various maladies Shu makes a comfortable living as a tailor while avoiding being drafted into the military and having to do his share of manual labor in the village. Moreover, he is the regular recipient of generous rations—he eats well and lives comfortably. Zhuangzi’s point seems, then, to be straightforward—Shu’s apparent misfortune is really anything but. As De Cruz sees it, Zhuangzi is telling us that there is nothing wrong with Shu, and that only a distorting prejudice against the disabled would suggest the lives of those without his maladies are in any sense better or preferable to his.

¹ John Altman and Bryan W. Van Norden, “Was This Ancient Taoist the First Philosopher of Disability?”, *New York Times*, 2020/07/08, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/08/opinion/disability-philosophy-zhuangzi.html>.

² Helen De Cruz, “Zhuangzi on disability: the radicalness of challenging ableism”, <https://helensreflectionsblog.wordpress.com/2021/03/09/zhuangzi-on-disability-the-radicalness-of-challenging-ableism/>.

³ Quoted by De Cruz.

The passage ends, however, on a different note, one that doesn't seem to support such a straightforward reading. After detailing these evident advantages to Shu's uncommon conditions Zhuangzi adds "How much better, then, if he had crippled virtue!" I think this final line tells us that Zhuangzi is up to more than highlighting the foolishness of common prejudice against the disabled. We need to ask: What would it mean to have crippled *virtue*? And what would be *its* advantages?

The Confucian Dao

Zhuangzi is almost certainly targeting Confucianism here, and it is possible that his use of a 'crippled' person as an example is meant to evoke Mencius, who also draws a connection between physical well being and virtue. One of the most celebrated passages in pre-Han Confucianism is Mencius' example of the child and the well in Book 2A, where Mencius makes a strong claim about human being's natural capacity to feel compassion for others, and their tendency to be alarmed at their suffering. Mencius uses the occasion to introduce his four 'sprouts' of virtue that point to the goodness of human nature, which he then compares to our four limbs. The rhetorical strategy here is clear—no one can deny that by nature, humans have four limbs, and that to be missing one or more is to be damaged. In the same way, Mencius continues, those who deny or damage their sprouts "cripple" or "steal from" themselves.

What then is Zhuangzi up to in trying to turn the tables here?

The Challenge of Radical Perspectivism

Throughout the text attributed to him, Zhuangzi makes the case for a pervasive perspectivism, a view that holds that any explicit understanding of the world is partial and can be countered by competing interpretations. While Zhuangzi frequently makes this point by arguing that what we take to be bad or a misfortune or useless can be understood and experienced in quite different ways, his broader point is epistemic, linguistic, and ultimately moral. Human knowledge, he argues, is partial and fallible, and language can only capture bits and pieces of a reality that always eludes a final reckoning. As we'll see, there's a question about just how far Zhuangzi wants to take this perspectivism, but it is clear that when it comes to questions as to how we should live, he thinks skepticism of the pronouncements of supposed moral experts—the kind of presumptuous but hapless moralizer he makes Confucius out to be—is always warranted.

Zhuangzi's perspectivism is the sort of thing that frustrates more sober philosophers—it veers in the direction of ethical relativism, and it is hard to shake the sense that surely some perspectives or interpretations of reality are *better* than others, or at least closer to right if not absolutely or completely true. Chinese philosophers were not immune to this preference for firmer epistemic ground, and here too it is no surprise that Confucians were a frequent target of Zhuangzi's teasing—Confucian philosophers are indeed the sober foil to his Daoist free spirited reluctance to be pinned down. The matter is complex to be sure, but classical Confucians do display great confidence that

their *dao*—the life they urge us to live—is *better than* alternatives such as that offered by the Mohists for example.

As the passage from the Mencius quoted above illustrates, Confucian were also quite willing to make their case by appealing to *Tian* as a source of norms. This is the basis of Altman and Van Norden's and de Cruz' charge that Confucianism was an ableist philosophical tradition that was being challenged by Zhuangzi by way of his thorough going perspectivism. The matter is quite a bit more complicated though. Zhuangzi's perspectivism does challenge Confucianism, but not for its teleological account of *Tian*, or its ableism. Nor is his perspectivism absolute. But Zhuangzi does not need to quite so radical in order to make the salutary points Altman and Van Norden and De Cruz want him to make. That at least is what I will now argue.

Zhuangzi's Real Challenge

What is it in Confucianism that Zhuangzi is objecting to? Altman and Van Norden and de Cruz suggest it is, first, the grounding of value in nature and, by extension, the view that physical impairment is intrinsically bad. By contrast, these thinkers see in Zhuangzi's perspectivism anticipations of the social model of disability that has been developed in recent years by a number of scholars.⁴

The social model distinguishes *impairments* from *disabilities*, arguing that uncommon traits in a person arising from an injury or condition that diminishes or destroys a common ability becomes a disability only in environments that make the impairment a liability. To use a stock example, being confined to a wheelchair because of an *impairment* that makes walking difficult or impossible is only a *disability* in a social environment that does not readily accommodate wheelchairs. With ample deployment of ramps, self opening doors, wide walkways, elevators, and so on, an environment can be configured in such a way that being in a wheelchair is hardly confining at all, and so not a significant disability.

As this suggests, the social model of disability begins as a metaphysical thesis—it is saying something about what makes something a disability. To enlist Zhuangzi as a supporter is to commit him to a similar view. While this is one way to read his perspectivism, I am not convinced that it is the best way.

One reason for my doubt is that to read Zhuangzi as denying that some perspectives are better than others is to embroil him in well known difficulties. For one thing, parity of reasoning would suggest Zhuangzi celebrates criminality, among other questionable things. If I am right that he is parroting Mencius' analogy between virtue and normal anatomy, we'd have to believe Zhuangzi thinks those lacking in basic moral sentiments

⁴ The literature here is vast. For a recent summary see Barnes, Colin. "Understanding the social model of disability: Past, present and future." In *Routledge handbook of disability studies*, pp. 14-31. Routledge, 2019.

and a sense of right and wrong are doing just fine, just as Shu is doing just fine despite his impairments. There's also a familiar worry about a performative contradiction: this reading seems to leave us with no reason to prefer Zhuangzi's take on things to that of anyone else—who is to say his views are better than those of the Confucians he targets?⁵

In any case, the text itself speaks against such a reading in a pretty explicit way. Consider this passage:

[The Dao is] obscured by the small accomplishments already formed and completed by them. Words are obscured by the ostentatious blossoms of reputation that come with them. *Hence we have the rights and wrongs of the Confucians and Mohists, each affirming what the other negates and negating what the other affirms. But if you want to affirm what they negate and negate what they affirm...nothing compares to the Illumination of the Obvious.*⁶

Here Zhuangzi is doing two things. One is pointing to the partiality of the Confucian and Mohist teachings—they each affirm what the other denies. But the passage also points to the *cost* of being dogmatically committed to any such partial view. Confucianism and Mohism both obscure the *Dao*, or way, by seizing one small part of it and trying to make it the whole. Here *Dao* is presumably being used to refer not to a set of human teachings, but to a more comprehensive way of things truly appreciated only the illuminated, or enlightened, person—the sage. The un-darkened way harmonizes and subsumes the partial understandings of the Confucians and Mohists. It is, in short, the way of the best lived life.

If this is right, what is wrong with Confucianism is not that it moves from 'natural' to 'good'—I'm suggesting Zhuangzi makes the exact same move. The problem is that the Confucian understanding of *Tian* and the *Dao* is impoverished and shallow. The good of Zhuangzi is not so inclusive as to be meaningless, but it is much more expansive than the narrow and pinched goods of the more conventional philosophical schools. As I read him, Zhuangzi's warning is not against trying to discover and live by a substantive good tied ultimately to the proper ordering and understanding of things. Rather it is a warning against reducing such a good to a static and conventional set of unimaginative standards rather than the fully illuminated way.

⁵ For this and related challenges to a thorough going perspectivist reading of the *Zhuangzi*, see Alexis McCleod, *Theories of Truth in Chinese Philosophy*, London: Rowman and Littlefield, (2016), Chapter 5. See also Bryan Van Norden, *An Introduction to Classical Chinese Philosophy*, Chapter 9. Van Norden and McCleod both entertain the not implausible position that there is no coherent position to be found in on this matter in the *Zhuangzi* as a whole, though McCleod argues that something like what I am suggesting is found in the chapter I am drawing from.

⁶ *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings*, translated by Brook Zyporn. (Hackett Classics). Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. Kindle Edition

Though I do not think he meant to propose or support anything like the social model of disability, I do think Zhuangzi nonetheless offers a way to promote elements of it as an *ethical* picture rather than as a metaphysical one. The example of how social environments determine just how debilitating an inability to walk might be is compelling mostly as a *moral* imperative to be mindful of ways in which impairments are allowed to become preventable disabilities. This easily happens when a lack of concern with or commitment to the well being of those whose bodies and minds fall outside the norm joins forces with our penchant for unthinking habits and lazy thinking. Imaginatively broadened perspectives can also allow us to see, like Zhuangzi, how some of these differences can be advantageous in surprising ways, and they can liberate us from prejudice in the process.

How Ableist is Confucianism?

By way of conclusion, I will suggest now that Zhungzi is not the only classical Chinese philosophers from whom we can glean some ideas for better thinking about disability. I think the charge that Confucianism is ableist is too quick as well.

The normative reading of human nature we see in Confucianism goes well beyond what is typical of human bodies. Human needs and wants are taken as universal, as are their culinary tastes, and a fondness for beautiful sights and sounds. These common human sensory experiences and preferences are properly refined and elevated in music, culinary traditions, embroidery, dance and other arts. The ability to be socialized into a thriving culture that celebrates and perfects such achievements is taken to be at the heart of our humanity as captured in the concept of *li*, or ritual propriety. This common human endowment all reflects, as we see in Mencius, a common psychological endowment and the typical presence and importance of certain feelings and thoughts as well.⁷

As important as all this is, however, the most fundamental Confucian appeal to the typical and normal in human affairs is found in its focus on relationships and community. The moral salience of certain relationships and their corresponding roles—starting with the family but including civil bonds—is at the core of Confucian ethics. Mencius' introduction of the *Wu Lun*, or five relations, ties each to sentiments that again are taken as both natural and a source of what makes a life worth living, a point made in a different way by Xunzi who also sees something uniquely human in our ability to interact as parents and children, spouses, friends, and so on.

Put succinctly, what Confucianism sees as a full and fully satisfying human life is infused with a *very expansive sense* of what is normal or typical in human physiology and psychology. Unlike those those philosophical views typically targeted as ableist,

⁷ This is to simplify a good bit—Xunzi obviously has a different sense of what our initial psychology looks like. However, despite his disagreements with Mencius on this point, the two agree with the human potential to become refined and morally accomplished beings.

Confucianism does not reduce humanity to a single cognitive function such as reason or a single trait such as autonomy. It finds our humanity in a great number of different things. This, it seems to me, makes a very big difference.

The fundamental danger with ablism is the easy slide from ‘X lacks an typical ability or feature of humans’ to ‘X is less than fully human’.⁸ The slide happens when the ability is taken to be essential to our humanity and is then tied to what is good or valuable. The inevitable and deeply troublesome conclusion is that X’s life is less valuable, or less worthy of moral consideration or protection, or possesses less dignity. As is well known, such arguments taper seamlessly with those that would see the killing of the disabled as a less serious matter than the killing they typically abled if the disabilities are serious enough.

Confucianism, despite its appeal to the goodness of nature, does not readily invite this chain of reasoning precisely because it is less inclined than those steeped in Western philosophy to put as much stock in a single human attribute as opposed to the range of cognitive, affective, and relational features noted above. This provides a much broadened range of opportunities to recognize someone’s humanity even if they depart from the typical in other ways.

An example of this approach can be seen in the work of Eva Kittay and in her meditations on her cognitively disabled daughter Sasha in particular.⁹ Seeing the delight we take in music as a core human faculty, to take just one example, allows us to see Sasha’s humanity in her enormous capacity to enjoy music despite her cognitive limitations. While Kittay willingly concedes her daughter remains a stranger in some respects due to her inability to speak and her comparative lack of autonomy, many other elements of her full humanity is on full display. In addition to her love of music, she is effusive in her affection for those she recognizes, and readily capable of empathetic sadness as well as joy—she seems, in short, to enjoy a range of recognizably human emotions.

Kittay is able to acknowledge all of this while grappling honestly with the question of whether Sasha’s life is, in some all things considered sense, diminished compared to those who don’t suffer from her cognitive limitations. Wisely, I think, Kittay opts to argue that while it is better, all things considered, not to be so impaired, we can say this while affirming that Sasha’s life is nonetheless a good one, and without any doubt a fully human one. Kittay has argued more generally that the fact of being someone’s son or daughter is all the basis we need for recognizing the full humanity of a person, and for insisting on their possessing as much dignity and worth as any of us. This strikes me as a very Confucian picture.

⁸ Quite typically, the idea of a human being who is not *fully* human is masked by a distinction between ‘humans’ and ‘persons.’ This is not a distinction, I will be arguing in effect, that would make sense in the Confucian picture.

⁹ See Eva Kittay, *Learning From My Daughter*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.