

What, according to Zhuangzi, does being virtuous look like? What virtues should we try to embody, and how should we embody them?

During the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States era, with the initial proposal by Laozi and significant support from Zhuangzi, they together formulated one of the most significant ideologies in ancient China: Taoism. The core belief of Taoism, also articulated by Zhuangzi in his works, is to align with nature, allowing events to develop naturally without human intervention. When applied to human's behavior, this concept can be termed a virtue, wherein individuals transcend strong emotions and find themselves within nature. The first three books of Zhuangzi—Carefree Living, On Seeing Things Evenly, and The Basics of Nurturing Life—mainly discuss how people should act to maintain a natural state and draw inspiration from nature. In the story of "Qin Shi Didn't Cry," when Qin Shi, a friend of Laozi, visited Laozi after his passing, he did not express sorrow by crying, unlike other disciples. Qin Shi directly expressed, "Laozi was born when it was time for him to enter the world, and he died when it was time to depart. If you allow events to unfold and abide by natural changes, there is no need to feel grief (45)." This illustrates the virtue esteemed by Zhuangzi, wherein one maintains composure despite strong emotions during events following natural patterns, even when they appear to be significant changes. Another example is the story of "The Useless Shu Tree," which discusses a tree seemingly useless to those around it. Zhuangzi, however, suggested that such a majestic tree cannot be deemed useless, as people can at least find shade beneath it. Zhuangzi used this example to demonstrate that everything in the world follows its own "Dao (way)", and people should naturally

accept themselves as they are. By recognizing these patterns, individuals can cultivate the ability to maintain a peaceful state and reduce strong negative emotions. For instance, they can reduce feelings of sadness and anxiety when experiencing loss in life, embracing each situation with tranquility, believing that events happen according to the best arrangement.

The second virtue encourages people to be diligent in their thinking processes. "The Cook Carves Up a Cow" provides a compelling example supporting the belief that individuals should think before they act and aim to achieve maximum gain with minimal effort. The story contrasts two cooks: one who can use a knife for years because he knows how to carve a cow without cutting its bones, and another who lacks this skill and can only use the knife for months. The experienced cook attributes his skill to understanding the Dao (Taoism) of his work. By showcasing King Hui's praise for this cook at the story's conclusion, it also reflects Zhuangzi's appreciation for those who comprehend the Dao and diligently seek paths. To possess this virtue, people should consistently engage in critical thinking and refrain from blindly proceeding without seeking improvement. By embodying this virtue, individuals can lead easier and more efficient lives, which is always beneficial as it enables progress toward their goals.

Thirdly, a virtue involving interaction between people is modesty, always bearing in mind that there are individuals more skilled and proficient in areas where one may be confident, and respecting others regardless of their strength or weakness. In the story "The Summer Cicada and the Wonder Tortoise," several young people admire the age

of an elder but eventually notice objects such as the tortoise and the geri-tree, which are much older. In the following story, "The Little Sparrow's Small Happiness," the Peng-bird is huge and enjoys life flying high in the sky, while other ordinary birds do not understand the Peng-bird's life and find their own lives meaningful by being close to the earth. Zhuangzi stated at the end of the story, "We shouldn't laugh at the little sparrow in its small, self-contained world; nor should we envy the great Peng-bird in its grandeur (11)." These virtues are very relevant to people's daily lives and can be beneficial for people to always keep in mind. When facing setbacks, they should remember that there are individuals who are better and more hardworking, deserving of success, but when they achieve their goals, they should realize that others who aren't at the same stage might just be living their own different lives. With this mindset, people can lead lives with less pride, jealousy, and diffidence.

Personally, I find Zhuangzi's Taoism highly inspiring. It not only prescribes various virtues or actions to follow in specific situations but also advocates for a combination of aligning with nature and maintaining self-awareness, granting us the ability to learn from natural patterns. Hundreds of thousands of years ago, humans learned from cryptogams to thrive through quantity, and today, we can learn from spermatophytes to patiently wait for the right time to flourish. Just as human society has rapidly evolved and individuals are constantly changing, natural environments also vary. Consequently, certain rules once believed to be true may become outdated. However, if one learns not merely from old regulations but from the subjects around them, they will remain in a state of continuous learning. They can even glean new

insights from the same story when in different circumstances. Particularly in the three virtues mentioned above—aligning with nature, diligent thinking, and modesty—I find myself progressing towards embodying these states.