How to be useless

Follow the Daoist way – reclaim your life and happiness by letting go of the need to produce, strive or serve a purpose

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12 January 2022

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In the first chapter of the ancient Daoist masterpiece the *Zhuangzi* (attributed to Zhuang Zhou, *c*369-286 BCE) there is a parade of marvellous animals and plants: a fish named Roe, measuring thousands of miles in length, who turns into a magnificent bird named Peng, with a wingspan thousands of miles across, and a caterpillar and a rose of Sharon that both live for thousands of years. The chapter concludes with a discussion of another wonder of nature: an immense, gnarled, wart-ridden tree – so twisted and knotted as to make its wood unusable for carpenters.

Huizi, a logically minded thinker, censures the tree as 'big and *useless*, and so everyone alike spurns [it]!' But his friend Zhuangzi responds in defence of the crooked tree:

> plant it in Not-Even-Anything Village, or the field of Broad-and-Boundless, relax and do nothing by its side, or lie down for a free and easy sleep under it.

Throughout the book, Zhuangzi suggests in a similar vein that it is *good* to enjoy yourself. That is, we should not always aim for usefulness. We should not always strive to produce or do things that benefit ourselves or others.

Zhuangzi lived in an extraordinarily vibrant and fertile period in the development of Chinese thought. These few centuries, referred to as the Warring States period, witnessed the growth of thinkers and schools of thought, later named Daoism, Confucianism, Legalism, Sophism, Yangism and, significant to our discussion on 'usefulness', Mohism. These were 'disputers of the Dao [the Way]', who passionately debated the question: what is the good life?

Zhuangzi argued that we can reclaim our lives, and be happier and more fulfilled, if we become more useless. In this, he went against many influential thinkers of his time, such as the Mohists. These followers of Master Mo (*c*470-391 BCE) prized efficiency and welfare above all. They insisted on cutting away all 'useless' parts of life – art, luxury, ritual, culture, leisure, even the expression of emotions – and instead focused on ensuring that people across the social classes receive essential material resources. The Mohists viewed many practices common at the time as immorally wasteful. Rather than a funeral rich with rituals following tradition, such as burial within three layers of coffins and a years-long mourning period, Mohists recommended simply digging a pit deep enough so the body doesn't smell. You were permitted to cry on your way to and from the burial site, but then you needed to return to work and life.

Although the Mohists wrote more than 2,000 years ago, their ideas sound familiar to modern ears. We frequently hear how we should avoid supposedly useless things, such as pursuing the arts, or a humanities education (see the all-too-frequent slashing of liberal arts budgets at universities). Or it's often said that we should allow for these things only insofar as they benefit the economy or human welfare. You might have felt this discomfort in your own life: the pressure from the meritocracy to serve some purpose, have some benefit, maximise some utility – that everything you do should be, in some sense, useful.

However, as we will show here, Zhuangzi offers an essential antidote to this pernicious means-ends way of thinking. He demonstrates that you can improve your life if you let go of the anxiety of wanting to serve a purpose. To be sure, Zhuangzi doesn't altogether spurn usefulness. Rather, he argues that usefulness itself should not be life's bottom line.

Key points

- **We don't always need to be useful; it's *good* to simply enjoy yourself.** In our society, as in Zhuangzi's, usefulness is often presented as the measuring rod, the bottom line against which we should gauge all policies and life decisions. Zhuangzi shows that this mindset traps us in a calculus in which we end up seeing ourselves and people around us as a means to an end. This prevents us from enjoying our own lives, and the things around us, on their own terms.

- **Celebrate gnarly trees and disabled bodies.** Zhuangzi takes certain disabled people as exemplars of the good life: their lives are good precisely because their lives (like ours) are not mere means to other people's ends (eg, as work forces or in the military). What matters for a good life is not being useful but living out your years in a free and easy way.

- **Being useful to others isn't always good for *us*.** In the *Zhuangzi*, we can find at least two main problems with framing decisions and policies in terms of usefulness: (1) being useful is not always to our own benefit – sometimes, we are being used as a means to someone else's end, and we end up miserable as a result; and (2) the lenses themselves of usefulness and uselessness can obscure our view of the good life.

- **A useless life is free and easy wandering.** By letting go of our concern over whether we (or things in our lives) are useful, we can become happier by being more in line with nature, we can celebrate the wondrous diversity and difference of people and of things as good in their own right, without thinking of some bottom line. You are not a mere tool, but a glorious part of a wild and diverse Universe.

Think it through

Celebrate gnarly trees and disabled bodies

Let's return to the wizened old tree, which Zhuangzi's friend Huizi complains is too 'gnarled and bumpy to apply a measuring line to, its branches too bent and twisty to match up to a compass or square.' No worries, Zhuangzi replies:

> Axes will never shorten its life, nothing can ever harm it. If there's no use for it, how can it come to grief or pain?

The point is that a tree, and by extension a human being, cannot be reduced to its usefulness. The gnarly tree simply *is* – in all its grandeur. Because it is not useful to others, it cannot come to grief, in this case, be chopped down and used for timber. And once Huizi stops his own focus on its usefulness, he might come to enjoy the tree after all, relaxing under the shade of its ample branches.

We see similar ideas in Zhuangzi's descriptions of disabled people such as 'splay-limb' Shu, who is described as having his 'chin stuck down in his navel, shoulders up above his head, ponytail pointing at the sky, his five organs on the top, his two thighs pressing his ribs.' In contrast to the non-disabled dukes, kings and lords who populate the early Confucian texts, Zhuangzi celebrates individuals who are without a foot, or are 'hunch-backed'. They should be celebrated for who they *are*, and not try to be 'fixed' or altered. (To this effect, he tells the story of a mythological figure named 'Chaos', who is without 'holes in his head', that is, without eyes, ears, nostrils or a mouth. Well-intentioned individuals, in an effort to pay him back for the hospitality he had extended to them, drill holes into Chaos's head, one by one, killing him.)

Zhuangzi describes disabled individuals' lives as good ones. 'Splay-limb' Shu, for instance, gets by, sewing and washing rather than doing hard labour on the fields:

> When the authorities call out the troops, he stands in the crowd waving goodbye; when they get up a big work party, they pass him over because he's a chronic invalid.

His life is good precisely *not* because he is useful, and he's able to live in peace and follow the Dao (a central idea in Chinese philosophy, which can roughly be translated as the Way or the Path). Much like the magnificent overgrown tree, disabled bodies in the *Zhuangzi* challenge the utilitarian calculus that underlies much of our contemporary daily existence.

Being useful to others isn't always good for *us*

Within the *Zhuangzi*, we can identify another reason for why we should not strive to be useful: trying to be useful can end up being harmful to yourself. The gnarly tree can remain standing because it is deemed useless, whereas the tree that is neat and straight is cut down for timber. Zhuangzi later tells the story of a dream in which a similarly deformed oak tree says of its more useable brethren: 'Their utility makes life miserable for them, and so they don't get to finish out the years Heaven gave them, but are cut off in mid-journey.' Sometimes uselessness is survival, or even enables one to thrive.

Zhuangzi then considers a counterexample to this idea. As he says, a goose that cackles is not killed (because its cackles are useful; they help to guard and alert its

owner to approaching people), whereas the useless goose that doesn't cackle is killed. In this case, it was usefulness that allowed the goose to survive. So, an interlocutor asks Zhuangzi, which is better: usefulness, or uselessness?

Zhuangzi laughs at the question and says:

> you'll never get away from trouble there. It would be very different, though, if you were to climb up on the Way and its Virtue and go drifting and wandering, neither praised nor damned, now a dragon, now a snake, shifting with the times, never willing to hold to one course only.

He argues that we should reject casting ourselves and our doings in terms of how much we contribute in the first place. Framed in terms of today, we should not reduce ourselves to tools that serve others, or the economy, the greater good, or even our future selves (for example, the urge for young workers to work very hard to secure their future career). Rather, as Zhuangzi put it, drifting, easy wandering, not caring about praise or condemnation – this is true freedom.

In another story, Huizi tells Zhuangzi of a large gourd, by rough estimate weighing around 600 pounds, which he received as a gift from a king. Huizi has no use for it. Too large to serve as a ladle, too heavy to use as a water container, Huizi smashes this wondrously large gourd into bits. Zhuangzi suggests to his friend that he might have too much clutter in his head. Had he thought, instead, of taking the marvellous gourd and floating, meandering, wandering freely around the rivers and lakes?

A useless life is free and easy wandering

The title to the first chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, 'Free and Easy Wandering', can be read as a proposal for how to live such a free and easy life, one that rejects the very idea of use, and instead suggests we consider a life of wandering or 'play'. Throughout the book, Zhuangzi places the notions of freedom and play in opposition to usefulness – and thereby suggest what a life spent wandering with the Dao might look like, a life not guided by the static categories of usefulness and uselessness.

One example is a story in Book 17, where the King of Chu sent two officials to ask Zhuangzi to become his chief administrator, a position of wealth and prestige. Zhuangzi sits fishing and doesn't even turn around. He says:

> I have heard that there is a sacred tortoise in Chu that has been dead for 3,000 years. The king keeps it wrapped in cloth and boxed, and stores it in the ancestral temple. Now would this tortoise rather be dead and have its bones left behind and honoured? Or would it rather be alive and dragging its tail in the mud?

The officials agree it would rather be alive, so Zhuangzi concludes: 'Go away! I'll drag my tail in the mud!' Infinitely better to drag your tail in the mud than to be a fancy official, unless being a fancy official is your way to hook into the Dao.

According to Zhuangzi, we don't really need to strive to strike a balance between usefulness and uselessness. We need to reject the idea of use altogether. Societies based on usefulness do not make us happier or more in harmony with nature.

Why it matters

But how many of us would reject the offer of a highly paid political office, and would rather drag their tail in the mud? Bills must be settled, mortgages paid off, reputations upheld. It is important to keep in mind that Zhuangzi does not recommend that we completely shut ourselves away from society. In this respect, his philosophical view differs from the vision in the *Daodejing*, the slim 81-verse classic attributed to the mythical Laozi, who argues for a life in utopian agricultural simplicity. By contrast, Zhuangzi frequently points to paradigmatic figures who are 'in but not of the world', such as a butcher, or a carpenter who makes bell-stands, or an artisan who chisels wheels, or a swimmer who navigates a roiling river. But this teaching applies not only to people who are marginalised in society. In Zhuangzi's world, dukes, ministers and scholars can live good lives too.

So, you should not necessarily give up a lucrative position and become a recluse in a mountain cabin. Rather than fleeing the social world – itself an impossible task – Zhuangzi repeatedly suggests the idea of being *in*, but not *of*, the world. What Zhuangzi is responding to is a mindset: that usefulness should be the bottom line when we evaluate our life choices.

In contrast to Zhuangzi's idea is the concept of welfarism, according to which the value of something, or someone, is constrained by whether we, or others, benefit from it. Only a few philosophers in the West have argued against welfarism. Examples include Susan Wolf, who praises 'good-for-nothings', and Bertrand Russell, who wrote the essay 'In Praise of Idleness' (1932). Wolf argues that 'we should think more creatively and imaginatively about the value of things we love in ways that are not confined to identifying some way in which we or others benefit from them.' But how can we get rid of this mindset that the good of something consists of its usefulness?

Against the claim that humans (and other things) always have to serve some greater good, Zhuangzi argues that it is fine for you to simply be. For example, imagine you are happy and doing well as, say, a doctor in a hospital, delighting in your skill and feeling it is in line with the Dao, then it is fine to continue as you are. But if you are miserable, and stressed, and the main reason you are a doctor is for your good salary or even for the good of society, think again. It is OK and in fact desirable to choose a less useful option.

Underlying Zhuangzi's vision is a faith in a benign Universe where each person lives true to what gives them energy and vitality; resources then are abundant, people live satisfied lives as part of the Way, and conflict and harmful competition cease. Scholars have referred to this idea as finding one's 'knack' or identifying one's 'skill' in life. In

everyday terms, Zhuangzi's vision might be helpfully likened to 'getting in the groove', 'finding your zone' or 'flow'. Those who enjoy computers become programmers, others become historians, tennis players, a surgeon, a gardener, a business owner or a political activist. Such a world does ask society, rather than internalising a strict social hierarchy rewarding some and not others, to celebrate diversity, difference, wildly varied ways of living life well.

Zhuangzi also recommends flexibility in our life choices. We should drift and wander, not seeking praise or denunciation, shifting with the times. If life-changing events cause you to re-evaluate your life, then you should not dismiss that as a crisis, but rather as an opportunity to reassess what you want.

Most of all, you should not think of yourself as some sort of tool or object and reduce yourself to your usefulness. You are so much more than that. You are not a mere tool in the building of a larger project, or a vessel in a grand ritual; you are a glorious part of the greater Universe, and when you plug in, or hook into, or become one with this ceaseless energy – when you become one with the Dao – you become your true self.

Links and books

An excellent way to start with Zhuangzi (also rendered as Chuang Tzu) is to read a contemporary translation. Classic among these is Burton Watson's *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (1968). All quotations above from the *Zhuangzi* are from Watson's work, with minor silent amendments. Also see Brook Ziporyn's *Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings* (2020), with extensive supporting footnotes.

On Zhuangzi and disability, see John Altmann and Bryan W Van Norden's opinion piece 'Was This Ancient Taoist the First Philosopher of Disability?'(2020) in *The New York Times*.

For a discussion of ancient Chinese thinkers – including a chapter on Zhuangzi and the view that, rather than believing in and then searching for a genuine self, we can more powerfully craft a good life by creating the self we'd like to be through rituals, routine and more – see Michael Puett and Christine Gross-Loh's book *The Path: What Chinese Philosophers Can Teach Us About the Good Life* (2016).

For selections from prominent philosophers, Confucians, Mohists, Daoists and more, in the Warring States Period in which Zhuangzi wrote, see Philip J Ivanhoe and Bryan W Van Norden's edited volume *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy* (3rd ed, 2023).

Ian James Kidd's paper '"Following the Way of Heaven": Exemplarism, Emulation, and Daoism' (2020) examines what it means in the *Zhuangzi* to take nature as a guide. Unlike his interlocutors the Confucians, who saw wise people (eg, Confucius, the sage kings of the past) as models to emulate, Zhuangzi recommends that we take inspiration

from nature, including from animals such as the tortoise dragging its tail in the mud, or free-flowing water, to become one with the Dao.

Bertrand Russell's accessible essay 'In Praise of Idleness' (1932) gives a Western critique on the notion of usefulness or work being good for its own sake. Russell writes: 'I think that there is far too much work done in the world [and] that immense harm is caused by the belief that work is virtuous ...'

In a similar vein, Susan Wolf's essay 'Good-for-nothings' (2011) pushes back against usefulness, specifically on the idea of welfarism.

The late Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a prominent contemporary psychologist, identified what he named as 'flow' to be a central component of happiness. This mental state is, in a number of important ways, similar to Zhuangzi's idea of 'knack' or 'skill'. A good place to start is Csikszentmihalyi's popular book *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life* (1997).

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