

EAST ASIA

HANS-GEORG MOELLER and PAUL J. D'AMBROSIO:

Genuine Pretending: On the Philosophy of the Zhuangzi.

x, 221 pp. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017. \$35. ISBN 978 0 231 18399 4.

doi:10.1017/S0041977X19000545

With a humoristic perspective, Hans-Georg Moeller and Paul J. D'Ambrosio examine witty allegories, exaggerated narratives, sarcastic expressions and incongruent arguments in the *Zhuangzi*, and argue for a new form of good life through genuine pretending. In contrast with Confucian ideas, which promote sincerity (*cheng* 诚) – a complete commitment, and a psychophysiological embodiment of roles constructed by society, genuine pretending refers to an existential mode of play with no self and no role to commit to. Genuine pretenders are people who playfully act along with contingent appearances in life without personally committing to fixed social roles or moral values and thus live a physically healthy and emotionally peaceful life. They pretend since they do not attach themselves to any roles and relationships. Paradoxically, it is because of this lack of authentic self that one can genuinely move along with unexpected occurrences and changes in life to act efficiently, sanely, and peacefully.

This book builds its main arguments based on three observations. First, the authors challenge the possibility and credibility of a Confucian ideal of sincerity. As noted in the *Zhuangzi*, such a Confucian ideal only produces contrivance, hypocrisy, ineffectiveness, and unhappiness. Second, influenced by the division between sincerity and authenticity discussed by Lionel Trilling, Charles Taylor, and R. Jay Magill, many scholars argue for an authenticity-oriented interpretation of the *Zhuangzi*. However, reflections on sincerity do not necessarily lead *Zhuangzi* towards authenticity, as happened in the West. Third, taking insights and features from hybrid sources of humour, including relief theory, incongruity theory, play theory, and carnivalesque theory, this book identifies three philosophical features of humour that are important for the *Zhuangzi*: a mode of childhood play as a practical form of genuine pretending; the experience of meaninglessness and emptiness; and a playful engagement in amoral thought and communication.

Taking us through the death of Hundun who perishes from accepting an identity socialization and attachment; the master jester Huzi who teaches a physiognomist a lesson by chasing him away; the carnivalesque genuine pretender Horsehead humpback who has complete efficacy, power and health which are paradoxically based on nothing; and the comical anti-Confucian rebel robber Zhi who thrives and lives happily as a deviant outcast, this book brings many allegories together and opens up the philosophy of genuine pretending using a humorous key.

The Zhuangzian philosophy of genuine pretending is embodied by genuine pretenders (*zhenren* 真人). Expressed through exaggeration and incongruity, this book presents *zhenren* not as authentic persons, traditionally understood as encouraging the individual in the process of self-making. Instead, associating the poetic expressions of the *zhenren* with the surreal and imagination, and thereby depersonalizing them, it reads *zhenren* as having no personhood. Ironically, it is because of their complete absence of self-knowledge that they

are able to play any role presented to them without committing to any particular one, thus remaining selfless.

Genuine pretending is also manifested by skilful craftsmen. This book reinterprets stories including the famous all-too-skilful Cook Ding; the surreal anonymous swimmer at the Lüliang waterfall; the bizarre drunkard falling off a cart; and woodworker Qing refusing the identification of art from Marquis Lu. They disengage themselves socially and psychologically from their skills, disowning their specialized activities and thus disassociating themselves from their professions.

The Zhuangzian affirmation of the contingent and the playful attitude of moving along in daily life aimlessly with ease is best represented through the term *you* 游 (rambling, travelling, roaming). *You* refers to an existential and epistemological state of emptiness without limits or bounds, just as someone sent into exile in childhood (*ruo sang* 弱丧) has no sense of returning home. Such individuals always feel at ease wherever they go since they have no hometown. *You* therefore also connotes excellence of adaptation and fit. The authors argue that as long as one can *you*, it will naturally lead to psycho-physical well-being and sanity, an idea expressed through *de* 德. Since there is no personal commitment and investment in one's roles and tasks, one is naturally immune to emotional afflictions and psychological anxieties.

Notwithstanding these marvellous philosophical reconstructions, some points are still worth further discussion. First, while liberating us from the division of sincerity and authenticity in the West, this book turns instead to Western humour theories. To read ancient Chinese views and sense of humour anarchistically could result in a loss of its broader functions. Humour is culturally embedded. Apart from the above-mentioned four features of humour which are indeed prominent in the *Zhuangzi*, we should not ignore its function in persuasion, motivation, deception, remonstrance, or resistance, elements that are not universally applicable, as demonstrated by Stephen Halliwell in *Greek Laughter, a Study of Cultural Psychology from Homer to early Christianity* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), and Mary Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome, on Joking, Tickling and Cracking up* (University of California Press, 2015).

Second, some ideas could be explained further. For example, how does a selfless genuine pretender fundamentally differ from someone who willingly "accepts" and attentively "adapts to" changes in life with equanimity (pp. 166, 177). Or when arguing that genuine pretenders are not completion-oriented, one is still curious why the extreme swimmer in Lüliang explains himself as coming to completion with fate while lacking a fixed Dao.

Third, one might question how practical and even ethical it is being a genuine pretender. Could this be a way that takes advantage of others when one empties oneself of any identity while assuming that others all follow established rules and values. As the authors suggest, "The new wild card differs from all the others precisely by being the only one that can be the same as all others" (p. 2).

Despite these critical questions, this book has successfully subverted traditional readings of the *Zhuangzi* with its solid philosophical and philological analysis. The authors succeed in explaining humour with witty language.

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