



## AFTER APPROPRIATION: EXPLORATIONS IN INTERCULTURAL PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION

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# The vices of ethics: The critique of morality in Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Daoism

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The call to transcend or go beyond morality is sometimes associated with an amoral relativism or religious exception, with dangerous repercussions for the social order. Nietzsche and Kierkegaard are two thinkers who issue pleas to loosen the constraints of morality. In Nietzsche's case, it is often presumed to clear the way for an untrammelled creativity, while Kierkegaard hopes to provide an avenue for the unmediated relationship between the individual and God. In both cases, there appears to be a profound concern that the authenticity of the individual is hampered by strict moral edifices. Daoist thinkers are also suspicious of moral strictures, and the relentless sarcasm with which Confucian moral pedantry is often treated could easily be interpreted in the West as praise for the virtues of individual creativity. However, upon careful reading, one begins to recognize that in Daoist philosophy, adherence to moral prescriptions not only ushers in the possibility for conflict but is accompanied by a burgeoning

egoism as individuals begin to use moral appearances to solicit the admiration of others. Furthermore, it is associated with a rigidity that prevents open adaptation to others, which would allow for genuinely harmonious relationships. From a Daoist perspective, morality does not prevent egoism but rather cultivates it.

A reading of the writings of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard in conjunction with Daoist philosophy helps to shed light on the criticism of egoism that is at the centre of their philosophies as well. According to Nietzsche, morality feeds on egoism while at the same time trying to mask it, and his plea to go beyond good and evil is also an exhortation to unhinge us from the hubris that mars our being. Kierkegaard insists that faith catapults us beyond an engagement with the world in which other human beings become mere extensions of the self. By examining these thinkers' pleas to go "beyond good and evil," it appears that morality may require something other to itself in order to be saved from its own vices.

## NIETZSCHE'S "BEYOND"

Nietzsche's attack on Judeo-Christian mores is perhaps one of the most ruthless in the history of philosophy. He insists that it is part of the quest to render human beings knowable and thus ensure that a certain degree of conformity associated with the herd mentality defines our behaviour.

Our eye finds it more comfortable to respond to a given stimulus by reproducing once more an image that it has produced many times before, instead of registering what is different and new in an impression. The latter would require more strength, more 'morality.' Hearing something new is embarrassing and difficult for the ear; foreign music we do not hear well.<sup>1</sup>

Michael Weston points out that the formation of the herd represents a dramatic shift in our mentality, promoting the abstract, perfect man or the universal individual rather than cultivating a human being embedded in a particular cultural context.<sup>2</sup> The pressure to conform exerted by moral systems of the herd fosters a profound egoism because it is not based on genuine community but rather demands a constant evaluation of the self according to external standards. The narcissism that morality promotes

creates a human being obsessed with itself and this eventually destroys it from within. The moral system, in his view, has laid the groundwork for its own destruction.

Nietzsche's account of morality famously begins with the master-slave dialectic, which describes the ebullient energy of the masters, who conceive of the good "spontaneously out of themselves."<sup>3</sup> The *pathos of distance* between masters and their underlings marked the genesis of value judgments such as good and bad: "The pathos of nobility and distance, ... the protracted and domineering fundamental total feeling on the part of a higher ruling order in relation to a lower order, to a 'below' – *that* is the origin of the antithesis of 'good' and 'bad.'"<sup>4</sup> These terms were not yet laden with moral value but simply marked a power dynamic that separated the strong from the weak. Nietzsche is making the point here that value judgments were originally brazen assertions of power and difference, in order to remind us of their relative value.

In an ironic twist of history, Nietzsche suggests that the weaker slaves triumphed by introducing a conceptual revolution that permitted the mind to triumph over the body. The slaves, subjected to the power of the master

... with awe inspiring consistency, dared to invert the aristocratic value equation (good = noble = powerful = beautiful = happy = beloved of God) and to hang on to this inversion with their teeth, the teeth of the most abysmal hatred (the hatred of impotence), saying 'the wretched alone are the good; the poor, impotent, lowly alone are the good ... and you, the powerful and noble are on the contrary, the evil, the cruel the lustful, the insatiable, the godless to all eternity; and you shall be in all eternity the unblessed, the accused, the damned.'<sup>5</sup>

The slaves accomplished this by transforming their inaction in relation to the masters into a virtue, suggesting that the masters were incapable of choosing not to act. Furthermore, the shift from good and bad to good and evil denotes a shift from relative values to permanent moral ideals that impute to good and evil an essential nature, inherent in the disposition of human beings themselves.

Nietzsche does not want to repudiate the birth of such moral decorum entirely because he suggests that the self divided in this manner also made

possible the birth of the sovereign individual, who could assert conceptual control over her/his own activity by making promises and thereby planning her or his future:

If we place ourselves at the end of this tremendous process, where the tree at last brings forth fruit, where society and the morality of custom at last reveal what they have simply been the means to: then we discover that the ripest fruit is the *sovereign individual*, like only to himself liberated again from morality of custom, autonomous and supramoral.<sup>6</sup>

However, this came at a tremendous price, namely the festering *ressentiment* against an outside world which is then negated:

... slave morality from the outset says No to what is 'outside,' what is 'different,' what is 'not itself'; and *this* No is its creative deed. This inversion of the value-positing eye – this *need* to direct one's view outward instead of back to oneself – is of the essence of *ressentiment*: in order to exist, slave morality always first needs a hostile external world.<sup>7</sup>

A schism is established between human beings and their environs, and, unlike the self-affirmation of the master, which is spontaneous, this affirmation is secondary, and derived from contempt: "he has conceived 'the evil enemy,' *the Evil One*," and this in fact is his basic concept, from which he then evolves, as an afterthought and pendant, a 'good one' – himself!"<sup>8</sup> For Nietzsche, the propensity to judge others is an automatic outgrowth of morality. Egoism in his view is an obsession with the self that is always looking to others for its assessment of itself.

According to Nietzsche, the irony of this development is that the sovereign potential of the individual is undermined almost as soon as it is born, for the success in asserting control over the masters depends upon a remarkable degree of assimilation amongst the slaves. The herd mentality that ensues is solidified as measurable external standards are used to evaluate the self. It is important to reiterate that the herd is *not* a community but rather each individual is left to conform to abstract and external standards of morality and justice. According to Nietzsche,

the creditor-debtor relationship contributed to the development of this relationship, and he highlights the etymological connection in German between guilt (*Schuld*) and debt (*Schulden*).<sup>9</sup> The monetary relationship between creditor and debtor made it easier for one person to measure himself “against another.”<sup>10</sup> Monetary debts are easy to measure, and a strange notion of equivalence developed whereby gruesome punishment was exacted based on the debt that was owed.

However, this system was not as effective at obtaining the internal repression of the debtor. For this, the invention of God was necessary, whose debts could never be repaid. The Christian God “as maximum god attained so far, was therefore accompanied by the maximum feeling of guilty indebtedness on earth.”<sup>11</sup> According to Nietzsche, the moral system that we ascribe to has its roots firmly anchored in religion, and, with the decline of faith, it too begins to crumble. Christian values in his eyes cannot survive the death of the Christian God. This god, in relation to whom we always fall short, exacerbates individual self-contempt that impels us to direct our rage against our own bodies and nature itself. However, in Nietzsche’s view, the humility that we experience is false, for it also masks the enormous hubris that underlies it. God is a metaphor for what we would like to be, namely omnipotent and omniscient, while at the same time reminding us of what we are not.<sup>12</sup> Eventually our resentment is directed against this God himself, symbolized in Nietzsche’s work by the ugly man in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* who announces that he has murdered God: “You could not endure him who saw you unblinking and through and through, you ugliest man! You took revenge upon this witness.”<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the constant self-deprecation that Christian humility demands also fosters a narcissistic obsession with the self and is matched by a readiness to quickly cast judgment on others. The love of our neighbour, which Christianity extols, in reality manifests our attempt to solicit from others not companions but wellsprings of approval:

You invite in a witness when you want to speak well of yourselves; and when you have misled him into thinking well of you, you then think well of yourselves.... One man runs to his neighbour because he is looking for himself, and another because he wants to lose himself. Your bad love of yourselves makes solitude a prison to you.<sup>14</sup>

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Zarathustra becomes an unwilling witness to this perverse form of Christian love, when a tightrope walker who manifests his courage is sent plummeting to his death by a buffoon, who, knowing only scorn, deliberately destroys his concentration by calling him lamefoot.<sup>15</sup> The dead tightrope walker is simply abandoned by the community and nobody makes any effort to provide him with the proper burial that is owed to him by Christian standards. Only Zarathustra remains by his side and buries him with his own hands.

Nietzsche seeks redemption from Christian morality by trying to infuse life into the very sentiments Christianity purports to espouse, namely universal love, but a love which is based on affirmation. It is significant that Nietzsche chooses the figure of Zarathustra, who represents the Zoroastrian religion that demarcated good and evil in the first place, to journey beyond it. This indicates that Nietzsche wants us to take his desire to overcome resentment seriously by making the perpetrator of morality an agent of its renewal. While Zarathustra is often seen as the epitome of the sovereign individual, trying to create new worlds in a sea of conformity, what is ignored is that he is on a voyage to become humble to the extent that he can recognize that he is only one part of an infinite universe that he will never control. This humble attitude, however, is self-affirming rather than deprecating because it is without guilt in the face of an omnipotent god. Undoubtedly Zarathustra has difficulty with this mission. He must descend from his heights on the top of the mountain and go into the valley. He struggles with his arrogance but is in search of companions, refusing to be “herdsman and dog to the herd.”<sup>16</sup> Zarathustra is constantly on a quest to find friends who will interrupt the lonely dialogue within himself and enable him to reach new heights:

I and Me are always too earnestly in conversation with one another: how could it be endured, if there were not a friend. For the hermit the friend is always the third person: the third person is the cork that prevents the conversation of the other two from sinking to the depths.<sup>17</sup>

Zarathustra hopes that his friends will also be enemies, indicating that self-overcoming demands a kind of sparring that catapults one to new horizons: “In your friend you should possess your best enemy. You should

feel closest to him when you oppose him.”<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, no attempt should be made to reduce the friend to oneself for the friend should be a master of “keeping silence: you must not want to see everything.”<sup>19</sup> Although Zarathustra appears to long to redeem himself from the treadmill of his own egoism, the friend is still an intermediary that provides new fodder for his conversation with oneself. This demonstrates how wedded Zarathustra is to egoism, even in spite of his genuine desire to escape its clutches.

The transformation beyond the ego requires an openness of spirit that is represented by the three metamorphoses of the camel, the lion, and the child. The camel or weight-bearing spirit simply takes upon itself all the loads that are bequeathed upon it but in so doing wanders into the lonely desert. The camel takes pride in the burdens it carries and its ability to comply with demands. Ironically, this gives birth to the ego, for the camel must resist his own impulses in order to do its duty. The split self allows for its transformation into the lion who rebels against the commands imposed upon it, wanting to be the master of its own desert. Against the “thou shalt” that the camel has simply accepted, it roars “I will” and bellows “no” to all external imposition. All that is sacred is profaned by the lion who “finds illusion and caprice even in the holiest.” Nietzsche ingeniously demonstrates the close connection between subjection and domination. But Nietzsche’s story does not end with this thunderous rebellion of the lion but rather with the child, who is “innocence and forgetfulness, a new beginning, a sport, a self-propelling wheel, a first motion, a sacred Yes.”<sup>20</sup> The metaphorical child is able to affirm life without judgment, playing with things to transform them into something new, without asserting its dominion over the world. Above all, the child is not poisoned by resentment; it loves the world without conditions or presuppositions. In fact, throughout his journey, Zarathustra is in search of these children whose arrival he still awaits as he exclaims at the end of the book: “My children are near my children.”<sup>21</sup> Yet, in the end, Zarathustra is unable to make the movement beyond egoism: “And once more Zarathustra became absorbed in himself and sat himself again on the great stone and meditated.”<sup>22</sup> He greets the world as *his* own while he still waits in vain for his children to come: “This is *my* morning, *my* day begins: *rise up now, rise up great noontide.*”<sup>23</sup>



Perhaps there is only one moment in the text that provides a glimmer of what a movement beyond egoism would look like. The metaphor of the eternal recurrence of the same is an illuminating parable that offers the possibility of affirmation without ego attachments. As human beings, we are suspended between the lane running into the future and the lane running into the past.<sup>24</sup> All things that will happen have already happened and we are but an infinitesimal threat on this tremendous wheel of recurrence, which binds all things together. Everything lies along these paths that eventually meet: the good and the evil, as well as the ugly and the beautiful. While Zarathustra is contemplating this phenomenon, a dog calls his attention to a peasant with a serpent coiled in his throat. The wheel of recurrence that goes on forever also can easily claim our lives. Zarathustra sees the peasant choking and tries to help him but fails to release the grip of the serpent. Eventually, he tells the peasant to bite and the peasant takes his advice and is able to spit out the head of the serpent. He is completely transformed as a result: “No longer a shepherd, no longer a man – a transformed being, surrounded with light, laughing. Never yet on earth had any man laughed as he laughed.”<sup>25</sup> The shepherd had both taken his life seriously and fought to hold onto it, but in the very same breath recognized the fragility of his own existence. This is a laughter of affirmation that regales in the paradoxes of existence and is freed from the fetters of his own ego and resentment. He affirms eternity, even though it has almost cost him his life. This is very different from the mocking laughter of the herd watching the tightrope walker. The peasant has accepted existence in its entirety: the good and the evil, his death and his life. He can laugh at the cosmos and can laugh at himself, realizing both the significance and insignificance of his existence.<sup>26</sup> Zarathustra himself fails to achieve this level of awareness.

## FAITH ECLIPSES MORALITY: KIERKEGAARD

While Nietzsche’s exhortation to go beyond good and evil demands that we jettison the chains of the Christian religion, Kierkegaard maintains that faith in God alone can not only eclipse morality but throw it into question. Like Nietzsche, he detests the abstract levelling of the crowd, lamenting the absence of individual authenticity and the complete lack of commitment that typifies it: “Not only in the business world but also in

the world of ideas our age stages *ein wirklicher Ausverkauf*. Everything can be had at such a bargain price that it becomes a question of whether there is finally anyone who will make a bid.”<sup>27</sup> In Kierkegaard’s view, only faith can resuscitate a moribund particular and elevate it above the universal in such conformist environs. However, it is important to recognize that Kierkegaard is not suggesting that we dispense with morality altogether to make room for faith but rather suggests that, without faith, morality may become too closely wedded to an attachment to one’s own. In other words, morality may undermine the community spirit that it is supposed to foster.

The paragon of bourgeois morality in Kierkegaard’s philosophy is Judge Wilhelm, who is very proud of his propriety and exemplary position in society. He does everything a bourgeois citizen is supposed to, working hard and extolling the virtues of the married life. As the mouthpiece of bourgeois values, he appears to waver between Hegelian and Kantian ethical philosophies. On the one hand, he maintains that the purpose of the ethical individual is to transform the “self into a universal individuality,”<sup>28</sup> thereby shielding it from a kind of heteronomous wandering that Kant also regards with suspicion. However, his Hegelian voice comes forward when he suggests that the concrete individual is not simply supplanted by the universal but mediated by it for he must do this without “taking off his concretion,” instead “interpenetrating it with the universal.”<sup>29</sup> However, unlike the Hegelian, the ethical individual cannot subsume all possible outcomes into the progressive dialectic of history. The ethical individual must show himself capable of making a decision, recognizing that he cannot waver between “either/or” but rather must choose between them and take responsibility for the consequences. According to Judge Wilhelm, he “is transparent to himself” and does not “allow vague thoughts to rustle around inside him or let tempting possibilities distract him with their juggling.”<sup>30</sup>

This certainty and self-assurance that characterizes the ethical sphere is laden with problems in Kierkegaard’s view. Enjoying the “outside himself within himself,”<sup>31</sup> the ethical individual feels completely at home in the world and is not infected with the insatiable yearning for the infinite nor plagued with the sentiment that he does not belong. Judge Wilhelm’s God does not impose strain on the individual in the form of value collisions, nor does he contribute to the soul’s torment: “It takes away from

him the vain joy of being out-of-the-ordinary in order to give him the true joy of being the ordinary. It brings him into harmony with all existence, teaches him to rejoice in it, because as an exception as an out-of-the-ordinary person he is in conflict."<sup>32</sup> Even one's erotic and sensual fantasies are ministered to by God, who would select a "young and beautiful wife."<sup>33</sup>

While Kierkegaard recognizes the need of having a comfortable abode in the ethical sphere, we must also be shaken out of our slumber, if ethics is to have meaning. Like Nietzsche, he implies that if values are simply repeated, they eventually grow hollow. Faith, in Kierkegaard's view, disrupts the bourgeois ordinariness of experience in dramatic fashion. It fills the individual with an insatiable yearning for the infinite. However, it is important to recognize that faith does not supplant the ethical but rather is engaged in its "teleological suspension." This term in itself is replete with irony, for a veritable teleology does not allow for suspension but rather progressively moves towards its ultimate goal. A suspension suggests that ethics is put on hold, perhaps temporarily. It is a rupture in the ethical fabric but does not replace it.

The most dramatic rendition of such a suspension of the ethical is the story of Abraham and Isaac that Kierkegaard retells in *Fear and Trembling*. Abraham, a stalwart member of a community and founder of a people, is asked by God to sacrifice Isaac, his progeny. He does so without questioning God's word, in spite of being a thoroughly ethical individual: "In ethical terms, Abraham's relation to Isaac is quite simply this: the father shall love the son more than himself."<sup>34</sup> Kierkegaard reminds us repeatedly that Abraham's act is not comprehensible and cannot be reasoned away in Sunday sermons. The pseudonymous teller of the tale is so perplexed by the story that he imagines four alternate beginnings, which render Abraham's behaviour more comprehensible. For example, in one story, Abraham begrudgingly complies with Abraham's request but loses his faith in God. In another, Abraham assumes that God cannot really be asking this of him and refuses to go through with the dreadful act.

The tale of Abraham is absurd because, in Kierkegaard's view, Abraham becomes himself at the moment where he is prepared to relinquish that which he holds most dear, namely his own son. In this he is utterly alone, and he cannot make sense of his mission to others in ethical terms and therefore is forced to remain silent. The command that he faces is issued to him by a God who is radically other, and he must respond as

an individual without having recourse to the support of the community. According to Kierkegaard, only the complete alterity of a transcendent God can break the shackles of self-interest, while at the same time speaking to Abraham most intimately. God, in this story, is both infinitely distant and intensely close.

Abraham's situation transcends the rational for another reason. His faith impels him to follow through with God's wishes but also leads him to believe that his son will be returned to him. However, this is not meant to diminish the impact of sacrifice. Ironically, Abraham believes both that he will lose his son and, against all logic, that his son will be returned.<sup>35</sup> To make this clear, Kierkegaard contrasts this story with the account of the knight of resignation who has let love infiltrate every fibre of his being, but then surrenders it. The example he gives is of a young swain who is in love with his princess but cannot have her due to the constraints of custom. He feels blissful delight in letting love palpitate in every nerve.<sup>36</sup> He gives up his princess but transforms his love into an eternal as opposed to a temporal love. She becomes a recollection, and he needs no finite occasion "for the growth" of his love.<sup>37</sup> In so doing, he becomes sufficient unto himself and resides in the eternal sphere, cutting his ties to the temporal realm. The princess is metamorphosed into an abstraction: "In infinite resignation there is peace and rest; every person who wills it can discipline himself to make this movement, which in its pain reconciles one to existence."<sup>38</sup> He consoles himself with the thought that what he has achieved is on a higher plane than the finite sphere and therefore his sacrifice is worth it.

The knight of faith is not like the knight of infinite resignation for he does not give up the finite:

He does exactly the same as the other knight did: he infinitely renounces the love that is the substance of his life he is reconciled in pain. But then the marvel happens; he makes one more movement even more wonderful than all the others, for he says: nevertheless I have faith that I will get her – that is by virtue of the absurd by virtue of the fact that for God all things are possible.<sup>39</sup>

The real courage for Kierkegaard lies in making this sacrifice and yet fully embracing the finite world: “But it takes a paradoxical and humble courage to grasp the whole temporal realm now by virtue of the absurd and this is the courage of faith. By faith Abraham did not renounce Isaac, but by faith Abraham received Isaac.”<sup>40</sup> The Isaac that he receives is an individual in his own right, who is not simply an extension of himself. In short, Abraham recognizes that the infinite is in the finite and that the infinite is difference, not assimilation.

In the story of Agnes and the merman, also recounted in *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard demonstrates that in some situations, faith may be necessary in order to embrace the universal. The merman seduces Agnes “and in wild lust seizes and breaks the innocent flower standing on the seashore.”<sup>41</sup> When he is on the verge of carrying her to the depths of the sea, her faith breaks his resolution:

Agnes looks at him once more, not fearfully, not despairingly, not proud of her good luck, not intoxicated with desire, but in absolute faith and in absolute humility, like the lowly flower she thought herself to be, and with this looks she entrusts her whole destiny to him in absolute confidence.<sup>42</sup>

The merman cannot “withstand the power of her innocence,” which amounts to a kind of radical openness to another, and ceases his seduction, refusing to whisk her away to her certain death in the sea. Because he is a merman, who is precluded from belonging to the universal, only faith will allow his entry into its port:

When the single individual by his guilt has come outside the universal, he can return only by virtue of having come as the single individual into an absolute relation to the absolute.... The merman, therefore, cannot belong to Agnes, without, after having made the infinite movement of repentance, making one movement more: the movement by virtue of the absurd.<sup>43</sup>

If difference is to be accommodated in the universal, it also requires a tremendous leap of faith. What Kierkegaard is describing here is a radical openness that transcends ethics in order to make ethics possible. The open

acceptance of the other who is not reduced to the same is necessary if ethics is to function. Kierkegaard's tale is about the importance of including difference and the leap of faith that is required in order to do so.

## NOTHING IS VIRTUOUS: DAOISM

Daoist philosophy, like that of Nietzsche, espouses an ethical philosophy that is not dependent on moral values, going so far as to spurn them. The word *dao* (道) signifies process, way, and movement, but it can also signify language. The opening line of the text of the *Daodejing* begins with a paradox. The English translation of this line is "the way that can be spoken of is not the constant way."<sup>44</sup> The Chinese text reads *dao ke dao fei chang dao* (道可道非常道).<sup>45</sup> This could be translated as follows: "the *dao* that can be *dao*'d is not the constant *dao*." To speak of the *dao*, or to "*dao* the *dao*" is both a part of the process of the *dao*'s movement and is, at the same time, inadequate to convey what the *dao* is. Language is part of the rhythm of the *dao*; it does not transcend it. Both the beauty and limits of language are conveyed here. The *dao* is beyond each particular thing; yet, it is in each particular thing and thus is always close and far at the same time, like Kierkegaard's God. This is why it must be spoken of, even though it cannot be spoken of. The *dao* does not speak, nor does it issue decrees like Kierkegaard's God. It moves constantly because all living things are part of it, coming into being and passing away, but because it comprises the movement of everything, it is also motionless.

There is a thing confusedly formed,  
Born before heaven and earth  
Silent and void  
It stands alone and does not change  
Goes round and does not weary  
It is capable of being the mother of the world.  
I know not its name  
So I style it 'the way.'<sup>46</sup>

Value judgments are rooted firmly in the trappings of language, which tries to fix impermanent things into permanent categories. In fact, morality is necessary when "the great way falls into disuse" and this marks

the birth of the Confucian values of “benevolence and rectitude.”<sup>47</sup> Moral language also fixes dualities, which cannot make sense except in relation to each other, and therefore, according to the text, the good and the bad as well as the beautiful and the ugly are one: “The whole world recognizes the beautiful as the beautiful, yet this is only the ugly; the whole world recognizes the good as the good, yet this is only the bad.”<sup>48</sup>

Daoist thinkers point out that the attempt to fix categories by means of language and morality is akin to a kind of desire for possession, and all possession is linked to the pursuit of personal advantage or *li* (利). Even the good and the bad are united in the one. Both hold onto the *dao* and the *Daodejing* uses wordplay to underline their similarity. The good man treasures the *dao* (*shan ren zhi bao*; 善人之寶), while the bad man tries to hold onto it and preserve it (*bu shan ren zhi suo bao*; 不善人之所保).<sup>49</sup> The phonetic *bao* links these phrases. In one case, it means to treasure, and, in the other case, it means to hold onto or preserve. Evil is thus a derivative of goodness. The bad man does not repudiate the *dao* but rather tries to contain it and in so doing reduce it to a possession:

The Tao [*dao*] is the innermost recess of all things  
It is what the good man cherishes  
As well as what the bad man wants to keep.  
With the Tao, beautiful words can buy respect;  
Beautiful deeds can be highly regarded.  
How can the bad man desert the Tao.<sup>50</sup>

The last line in this passage reads somewhat differently in Chinese, namely *ren zhi bu shan he qi zhi you* (人之不善, 何棄之有),<sup>51</sup> which asks “how can the bad man abandon having.”

The similarity between the bad and the good man in terms of possession is also illustrated in the *Zhuangzi*, which is a more iconoclastic text than the *Daodejing*. Robber Zhi is the brother of Liu Xia Ji, a friend of Confucius. This link is symbolically indicative of the link between the alleged “good” and “bad.” Confucius berates his friend for not raising his brother properly in accordance with the laws of ritual propriety. When his friend responds that nothing can be done when one’s brother resists this education, Confucius sets out to see Robber Zhi and lecture him on proper behaviour and the cultivation of virtue. His hopes are soon crushed for Robber Zhi flies into a rage and berates Confucius:

The more you say the more ridiculous it is. You eat yet you do not plough, wear without ever weaving. You wag your lips and use your tongue like a drumstick. You just decide what you think is right and wrong and lead the rulers astray, preventing scholars from studying the roots of the whole world. You establish notions of filial piety and fraternal duty just as you fancy, yet you also want to wriggle your way into favour with the princes, the wealthy and the nobility.... Get off home now, for if you don't then I will take your liver and add it to this meal.<sup>52</sup>

Furthermore, Zhi points out that the emperors who are so revered create a "great walled city." This is in marked contrast to the time of Shen Nong, when the people lay "down in peace and rose in serene security."<sup>53</sup> The Yellow Emperor could not sustain this era of virtue because he established kingdoms and ministers. The only difference between a criminal and an emperor inheres in the difference of scale. Robber Zhi has maligned all the heroes of the Confucian tradition.

The Daoist antidote to morality is the cultivation of nothingness. Nothingness does not refer to simple absence but rather is the kind of openness that makes presence possible. The opening lines of the *Daodejing* make reference to the centrality of *wu* (無), which is the beginning of heaven and earth:

... 'non-existence' I call the beginning of Heaven and Earth. 'Existence' I call the mother of individual beings. Therefore does the direction towards non-existence lead to the sight of the miraculous essence, the direction towards existence to the sight of spatial limitations.<sup>54</sup>

Some commentators, such as Wang Bi, argue that nothingness is central to the text arguing that non-being is a point of origin:

... all being originated from nonbeing. The time before physical forms and names appeared was the beginning of the myriad things. After forms and names appear, 'dao' develops them, nourishes them, provides their formal shape and completes their formal substance, that is, becomes their Mother.<sup>55</sup>



It is also clear that nothingness and being interact in a complementary manner and that one is not independent of the other. We must learn to cultivate nothingness because as one of the “ten-thousand things” we are not as attuned to the beginning of heaven and earth and tend to venerate existence rather than nothingness.

In the *Zhuangzi*, the value of diversity is much more pronounced than in the *Daodejing*. Nothingness is no longer simply associated with the beginning of heaven and earth but is clearly linked to the celebration of multiplicity. The habit of issuing moral judgments is very much connected to the desire to “wait for one voice to bring it all together,” which Zhuangzi asserts is “as pointless as waiting for no one”<sup>56</sup> Morality contains and tries to limit the diversity of things. Zhuangzi brings up the relationship between being and nothingness or being and not-being as a response to questions of right and wrong:

With regard to what is right and wrong, I say not being is being and being is not being. But let us not get caught up in discussing this. Forget about life, forget about worrying about right and wrong. Plunge into the unknown and the endless and find your place there.<sup>57</sup>

Nothingness reminds us that all things are undifferentiated and thus interrelated. Yet, at the same time, they are differentiated from each other. Nothingness is an openness that allows things to connect, and, yet, it is the space between them that allows them to be different. This is why it is also being. Furthermore, only things that are different can connect to each other and thus become one. Oneness does not make sense without difference and difference does not make sense without oneness. The sage is able to navigate amongst this multiplicity of perspectives and thus “manages to harmonize right and wrong” rather than ensuring that right triumphs. More often than not, right is a matter of upholding one’s own interest: “Imagine that you and I have a disagreement, and you get the better of me, rather than me getting the better of you, does this mean that you are automatically right and I am automatically wrong?”<sup>58</sup> Right and wrong are defined against one another, and this is why Zhuangzi reminds us that being and not-being are connected. Those things that we assume are our opposites are in reality closely intertwined. Harmony as a goal is

more important than the cultivation of moral virtue. Moral virtues step in where harmony has failed.

Nothingness also offers a kind of formlessness that is necessary for the flourishing of form. This interaction is personified in a dialogue between the outline and the shadow. The outline is frustrated with the undecidability and fidgety nature of the shadow: “first you are on the move, then you are standing still; you sit down and then you stand up. Why can’t you make up your mind?”<sup>59</sup> The last line of this section in Chinese could read: “Why don’t you hold on in a distinctive way” (何其無特操).<sup>60</sup> The shadow responds:

Do I have to look to something else to be what I am? Does this something else itself not have to rely upon yet another something? Do I have to depend upon the scales of a snake or the wings of a cicada? How can I tell how things are? How can I tell how things are not?<sup>61</sup>

The shadow recognizes that each being is dependent upon another and does not care about maintaining its own form. Rather, it adjusts its shape to whatever being it encounters. Nonetheless, it could not do so if other things did not have form. While the shadow is formless, it too has an outline and therefore has form in the midst of its formlessness.

The sage in Daoist texts is someone who is able to cultivate nothingness within himself and thus has no need for morality: “the perfect man has no self. The spiritual has no merit; the holy man has no fame.”<sup>62</sup> The Chinese expression for “the perfect man has no self” is *zhi ren wu ji* (至人无己).<sup>63</sup> *Ji* is used when a more egotistical conception of the self is being referred to, while the other term for self, *shen* (身), refers to an interconnected being. This is why the sage cultivates his *shen* but not his *ji*. Ironically, the cultivation of *shen* has little to do with constructing a self-identity because it refers to the interconnected aspect of one’s being. This does not mean that we deny ourselves but rather that we live an embodied existence that is always already connected to other beings. Zhuangzi points out that we “go around telling everybody ‘I do this, I do that’ but how do we know that this ‘I’ we talk about has any ‘I’ to it?”<sup>64</sup> Wang Youru points out that Zhuangzi, in arguing for the elimination of the distinction between subject and object, self and other, also makes the distinction

between right and wrong irrelevant.<sup>65</sup> If self and other are not perceived of as distinct, there is no need for morality.

Cultivating nothingness is also closely connected to the art of *wuwei* (無為) or “actionless action”:

The sages are quiescent, not because of any value in being quiescent, they simply are still. Not even the multitude of beings can disturb them, so they are calm.... The sage’s heart is stilled! Heaven and Earth are reflected in it, the mirror of all. Empty, still calm plain, quiet silent, non-active, this is the centredness of heaven and Earth and of the Dao and of Virtue.<sup>66</sup>

Actionless action does not mean that one is indolent but rather implies that one acts without prior preconceptions or a will that one brings to one’s activities. Openness allows one to remain responsive to other beings. This means not only that one allows them to be but one must recognize their uniqueness in order to act upon it. The sage must be an astute judge of character and situation. The sage is non-active because through his action he does away with the subject-object dichotomy. Instead, he provides an opening through which the diversity of other beings can thrive, which is why his heart is like a mirror. Confucian rituals are assumed to be demonstrative and thus cannot be associated with the art of *wuwei*.

A man of the highest virtue does not keep to virtue and that is why he has virtue. A man of the lowest virtue never strays from virtue and that is why he is without virtue. The former never acts yet leaves nothing undone. The latter acts but there are things left undone.<sup>67</sup>

In Chinese, the opening line of the text reads: “*shang de bu de, shi yi you de*” (上德不德 是以有德),<sup>68</sup> which suggests that the virtuous man has virtue because he is not virtuous. Once again, the multivalent nature of the language is played upon. *De* (德) can be translated as virtue but is also associated in Daoist thought with the flourishing of particular characteristics of each things. Each thing is assumed to have its own *de*. Thus, he may cultivate difference, while rejecting moral virtue. Unique characteristics can only emerge in interaction with other beings, and thus differentiation and

oneness are revealed in the title of the text *Daodejing* (道德經) through the juxtaposition of the terms *dao* and *de*. Everyone has a different *de* that must be cultivated: “The Dao begets all creatures, the virtue rears them, promotes them, nurtures them.”<sup>69</sup> The importance of *de* in its title is often underestimated.

In order to stress that the cultivation of virtue takes on many forms, texts like the *Zhuangzi* offer some very unconventional models of the sage. In contrast to the Confucian sage, who plays a very traditional role within the social order, the Daoist sage is often a social or even political rebel. This contrast comes to the surface in a dialogue between an old fisherman and Confucius. The old fisherman remarks about Confucius: “so benevolence is benevolence, yet he won’t escape without harm to himself. Exhausting the heart and wearing out the body puts his true nature in jeopardy. Sadly, I believe he is far removed from the Dao.”<sup>70</sup> Although Confucius is ridiculed in this interaction, he nevertheless treats the fisherman with a respect that surprises his disciple: “Now this old fisherman stood tall before you with his pole, while you bent double like a musical chime bar, and you always bowed twice before speaking to him.”<sup>71</sup> Confucius is not represented as a complete fool, only a partial one. He recognizes the sagacity of the fisherman but ironically turns this into a lesson on moral virtue and cannot dispense with his exaggerated display of deference:

If you meet a person who is older than you and are not respectful, then this is a failure of etiquette. If you meet a worthy person and fail to offer respect, this is a lack of benevolence.... Now the old fisherman most certainly has the Dao, so how can I not offer respect to him.<sup>72</sup>

Confucius has received the message of the fisherman and recognizes the power of the *dao* but at the same time is deaf to the fisherman’s advice to abandon moral virtue. Even a fool like Confucius cannot help being receptive to the *dao* at some level, but at the same time its message falls on deaf ears. Confucius is both mocked and respected in this passage. No one, not even the most hardened Confucian, can be completely unaware of the *dao* even if he perverts its message. In the spirit of openness, the Daoist text embraces even those it mocks.

## CONCLUSION

According to Daoist thinkers, morality operates on the basis of a profound dualism that fosters egoistic tendencies that it aspires to keep in check. It is based on an attachment to concepts that are often reified and inextricably woven into the social fabric. Because good needs its opposite, namely the bad or evil to define itself, morality often becomes a line dividing insiders from outsiders, or the noble from the base. This gives rise to rituals of performance surrounding morality, which are often less concerned with virtue than they are with occupying the proper rung on the social hierarchy. For Daoist thinkers, hypocrisy is a natural companion to morality and not merely an unfortunate side effect. Confucius is often presented in Zhuangzi's parables as a pedant who tries to curry favour with government officials, albeit to no avail. Both morality and its opposite are linked to the desire to possess or *you* (有), which means that one tries to bring others into the fold of the self or one's community rather than opening oneself up to spontaneous interaction with them. An egoistic mindset sees the self as a kind of walled entity that thrives on the approbation of others and tries to avoid disapproval or scorn. However, even in so doing, it does not let others penetrate its boundaries.

Instead of promoting codes of moral conduct, Daoist thinkers recommend cultivating openness and nothingness that would allow one to connect to others based on their particular virtues or dispositions (namely, *de*). Oneness and difference are not seen as mutually exclusive in the Daoist canon but rather as correlated, since oneness is based on the interconnection of different beings. The Daoist sage is blissfully unconcerned with her own identity, which is fluid and changes from moment to moment, depending upon who surrounds her.

Both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche would concur with Daoist thinkers that morality often breeds conformity and self-righteous judgment. Kierkegaard acknowledges that ethics cannot be dispensed with altogether since the need for a comfortable abode wherein parameters are clear and behaviour is routinized holds much appeal. Nietzsche's invective against morality is somewhat more acerbic, for he insists that it develops out of a resentment on the part of the weak against the strong and is intended to make the behaviour of others more palatable and predictable. The focus on

predictability suggests that Nietzsche, like Daoist thinkers, links morality to the desire to know the world.

Nietzsche and Kierkegaard both argue that it is important to try to shed the chains of egoism, but this process is very much centred on feats of self-overcoming. In Kierkegaard's case, it demands faith in God, who is radically other, to wrench one away from the hold of self-interest. In his view, only this will allow one to treat the other as a particular other, who is irreducible to the self. This is in marked contrast to the thought of Daoist philosophers, who remark that the *dao* is never completely other. No intermediary between self and other is necessary because they are always already connected. The *dao* does not bellow commands from the outside. In fact, its presence is hardly noticed. There is no problem of the other in Daoist thought because all others are linked to one's self in the *dao*.

For Nietzsche, the journey beyond egoism is toilsome, as he illustrated by his metaphor of the three metamorphoses, which celebrates the child. It is extremely difficult to return to the openness of the child who plays with things without prior presuppositions. Furthermore, it is not clear that, according to Nietzsche, egoism can ever be overcome completely. The peasant must assertively defend himself to protect his life and yet, at the same time, overcome this defensiveness in peals of laughter. Zarathustra himself has more trouble with this since he is constantly agonizing about the opinions of his foes and his enemies.

Perhaps the most marked difference between these approaches is that the issue of self-identity and authenticity is very much a concern for Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, whereas the Daoist sage or genuine person is freed from the desire for self-identity. This is most poignantly depicted in the famous butterfly dream of Zhuangzi, who cannot decide whether he is a man dreaming he is a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming he is a man. On one level, this is irrelevant to him. Yet, at the same time, he pronounces that there "must be some sort of difference between Zhuangzi and a butterfly. This is the transformation of things."<sup>73</sup> Zhuangzi and the butterfly are one and the same because they are part of the movement of things that constitutes the *dao*. If they were not different, they could not be connected this way. What this passage reveals is the beauty of celebrating diversity without clinging to one's identity. Thus, according to Daoist thinkers, one cannot cling to one's identity and be liberated from the fetters of egoism. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, on the other hand, are

very much preoccupied with the task of self-making and self-overcoming, and they excoriate moral systems that attempt to undermine this process. Nietzsche and Kierkegaard's authentic individuals are never satisfied with who they are at a particular moment since they strive to go beyond it while the Daoist sage is always satisfied with his current state and for this reason undergoes constant transformation almost painlessly. He has no need for morality because his contentment with himself ensures that he has no reason for doing others harm.

## Notes

- 1 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (New York: Modern Library, 1968), Sect. 192.
- 2 Michael Weston, *Kierkegaard and Modern Continental Philosophy: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2003), 67.
- 3 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (New York: Modern Library, 1968), Sect. I:11.
- 4 *Ibid.*, I:2.
- 5 *Ibid.*, I:7.
- 6 *Ibid.*, II:2.
- 7 *Ibid.*, I:10.
- 8 *Ibid.*, I:11.
- 9 *Ibid.*, II:4.
- 10 *Ibid.*, II:8.
- 11 *Ibid.*, II:20.
- 12 Robert Solomon remarks that Nietzsche often directly adapted the views of Feuerbach: "Nietzsche's case against Christianity depends in large part on his basic acceptance of Feuerbach's view that human beings invented God by divesting themselves of any sense of their own powers." This suggests that human powers are displaced and imputed to God. Robert Solomon, *What Nietzsche Really Said* (New York: Schocken, 2000), 88.
- 13 Friedrich Nietzsche. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Middlesex: Penguin, 1968), 276.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 87.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 48.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 51.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 82.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 83.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 83.

- 20 Ibid., 53.
- 21 Ibid., 334.
- 22 Ibid., 336.
- 23 Ibid., 336.
- 24 Ibid., 178.
- 25 Ibid., 180.
- 26 Mark Weeks offers a different conception of Nietzsche's laughter. He suggests that Nietzsche's notion of laughter is hierarchical and differentiates the laughter of the height and the laughter of the herd. He makes note of Nietzsche's repeated allusions to "higher laughter" or supra-laughter. Mark Weeks, "Beyond a Joke: Nietzsche and the Birth of Super Laughter," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 27 (Spring 2004): 14. However, I argue that the peasant's laughter is different from that of Zarathustra, which is why he cannot comprehend it.
- 27 Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 5.
- 28 Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 256.
- 29 Ibid., 256.
- 30 Ibid., 258.
- 31 Ibid., 259.
- 32 Ibid., 304.
- 33 Ibid., 44.
- 34 Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 57.
- 35 Mark Taylor points out that in Kierkegaard's philosophy, God and human beings are *not* one and remarks that the absolute paradox is due to their absolute antithesis. In this, Kierkegaard's thought differs dramatically from that of Hegel, for whom God and human beings are synthesized. Mark Taylor, *Journeys to Selfhood: Hegel and Kierkegaard* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 131.
- 36 Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 42.
- 37 Ibid., 44.
- 38 Ibid., 45.
- 39 Ibid., 36.
- 40 Ibid., 49.
- 41 Ibid., 94.
- 42 Ibid., 94.
- 43 Ibid., 98–99.
- 44 Laozi, *Tao Tè Ching*, trans. D.C. Lau (London: Penguin, 1963), Sect. 1.
- 45 Laozi, *Daodejing* (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 1995), Sect. 1.
- 46 Laozi, *Tao Tè Ching*, Sect. 25.
- 47 Ibid., Sect. 18.
- 48 Ibid., Sect. 2.
- 49 Laozi, *Daodejing*, Sect. 62.
- 50 Laozi, *Tao Tè Ching*, Sect. 62.
- 51 Laozi, *Daodejing*, Sect. 62.
- 52 Zhuangzi, *The Book of Chuang-tzu*, trans. Martin Palmer (London: Arkana Penguin, 1996), chap. 29, 262.
- 53 Zhuangzi, *The Book of Chuang-tzu*, chap. 29, 262.
- 54 Laozi, *Tao Tè Ching*, Sect. 1.



- 55 Wang Bi, *Commentary on the Lao-Tzu*, trans. Arianne Rump with Wing-tist Chan (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1981), 13.
- 56 Zhuangzi, *The Book of Chuang-tzu*, chap. 2, 20.
- 57 Ibid., chap. 2, 19.
- 58 Ibid., chap. 2, 19.
- 59 Ibid., chap. 2, 20.
- 60 Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzzi duben* (Taipei: Sanminshu, 1988), chap. 23, 23.
- 61 Zhuangzi, *The Book of Chuang-tzu*, chap. 2, 20.
- 62 Ibid., chap. 1, 3.
- 63 *Zhuangzi duben*, chap. 1, 5.
- 64 Zhuangzi, *The Book of Chuang-tzu*, chap. 18, 80.
- 65 Wang Youru, "Philosophy of Change and the Deconstruction of Self in Zhuangzi," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 27, no. 3 (2000): 358.
- 66 Zhuangzi, *The Book of Chuang-tzu*, chap. 13, 106.
- 67 Laozi, *Tao Te Ching*, Sect. 38.
- 68 *Daodejing*, Sect. 38.
- 69 Laozi, *Tao Te Ching*, Sect. 51.
- 70 Zhuangzi, *The Book of Chuang-tzu*, chap. 31, 286.
- 71 Ibid., chap. 31, 286.
- 72 Ibid., chap. 31, 286.
- 73 Ibid., chap. 2, 20.