

Why Wouldn't Zhuangzi Have a Positive Political Philosophy?

Zhuangzi does not have a positive political philosophy. This talk asks if there are interesting *philosophical* reasons why. I will argue that the lack of a positive political philosophy in the *Zhuangzi* can best be explained on philosophical grounds if we attribute to the *Zhuangist* one of two positions:

1. THE ZHUANGIST CONFLICT THESIS: Any ideal of political flourishing would deeply conflict with other *Zhuangist* ideals.
2. THE ZHUANGIST CONCEPTUAL THESIS: The very idea of political flourishing is conceptually confused.

After briefly discussing the Conflict Thesis, I give three arguments for the Conceptual Thesis.

1. *Zhuangzi* has no positive political philosophy. Why not?

Distinguish between a *positive* and *negative* political philosophy. *Positive*: some picture of what ideal social and political organization might look like, or of how to change society for the better. *Negative*: a critical engagement with a positive political philosophy.

The main strands of Classical Chinese political thought¹ certainly all have positive political philosophies.²

Zhuangzi has a negative political philosophy, frequently criticizing Confucian and Mohist approaches to politics,³ but has no positive political philosophy. In particular, the following don't see to count in the right way:

1. Discussing how to deal with an existing government⁴
2. Celebrating a government-free, unstructured primordial state,⁵ or celebrating ideal sovereigns who "rule but not ruling"⁶
3. An esoteric political philosophy, implementable only by a sage.

Why wouldn't *Zhuangzi* have a positive political philosophy? Distinguish between *historical* and *philosophical* explanations.⁷

Historical explanations – (1) Perhaps *Zhuangzi* simply did not wish to engage in political discourse. But he spent a good amount of the criticizing the political thought of others! (2) *Zhuangzi* and the *Zhuangist* tradition did not have the political imagination to develop a positive picture.⁸

Philosophical Explanations – Here's a general question: what philosophical reasons might there be, in general, for a thinker to lack a positive political philosophy?

Adrian Liu,
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References at adrianliu.me/zz

¹ Confucians, Mohists, Legalists, Daoists

² See Angle (2022) and Jiang (2020)

³ Jiang 2020, 290-291f

⁴ See Rathnam (2020)

⁵ "When the springs dry up, the fish have to cluster together on the shore, blowing on each other to keep damp and spitting on each other to stay wet. But that is no match for forgetting all about one another in the rivers and lakes. Rather than praising Yao and condemning Jie, we'd be better off forgetting them both, letting their courses melt away in their transformation. (*Zhuangzi*, trans. Ziporyn, 56)"

⁶ *Zhuangzi*, trans. Ziporyn, 69-70.

⁷ We could gloss this as the difference between asking why *Zhuangzi* himself might have a certain view and asking what reasons a *Zhuangist* might have to hold a certain view.

⁸ Jiang (2020, 468) argues for this claim.

We can distinguish two types of claims about political philosophies being untenable from the standpoint of a certain perspective:⁹

1. *Conflict Theses*: From a given philosophical perspective, some positive political philosophy (or perhaps *any*) would conflict in important ways with the other commitments of the perspective.
2. *Coherence Theses*: From a given philosophical perspective, the very idea of having a positive political philosophy makes no sense.

2. *The Zhuangist Conflict Thesis*

[**The Zhuangist Conflict Thesis**]: “[Confucian and Mohist] ideals of political flourishing conflict with other Zhuangist ideals in a way that makes it ultimately not sufficiently valuable.”

A Zhuangist argument for the Conflict Thesis: Confucian and Mohist political ideals are *harmful*. For example: Jiang analyzes Zhuangzi as seeing ritual as both excessive and inadequate: excessive in leaving no room for the personal in its all-encompassing nature, inadequate in being too rigid and unable to accommodate the changes of the world (2020, 304).¹⁰

Zhuangzi’s Conflict Thesis argues against specific political ideals and values. So Zhuangzi’s conflict thesis is not an all-purpose critique of any positive political philosophy. In particular, it leaves open the possibility of a Zhuangist approach to political philosophy that is more compatible with Zhuangist ideals.

3. *The Zhuangist Conceptual Thesis*

A Zhuangist Conceptual Thesis goes farther than the Zhuangist Conflict Thesis considered above. It says that, from a Zhuangist perspective, the *very idea* of political flourishing or a political ideal involves a conceptual confusion. Given how humans are, and given what it involves to have a political philosophy or engage in politics, no such project could succeed. In short:

[**The Zhuangist Conceptual Thesis**]: “The very idea of political flourishing is conceptually confused.”

In the rest of this talk: three arguments for the Zhuangist Conceptual Thesis: an argument from *skepticism*, an argument from *radical Zhuangist ideal*, and an argument from *the nature of persons*.

3.1 *The Argument from Skepticism and Relativism*

Can the skepticism and normative relativism often attributed to Zhuangzi¹¹ give any purchase to the claim that the very idea of political flourishing is conceptually confused? I think it can. The

⁹ Explanation:

Suppose this thinker takes on a certain philosophical perspective towards the world. Then from this perspective, the existence of a positive political philosophy is either *coherent* or *incoherent*.

If the perspective takes the existence of a positive political philosophy is either *coherent*, there are two further options: A particular political philosophy and its ideals of political flourishing and political structure could either be in *normative accord* or *normative conflict* with the broader philosophical perspective.

¹⁰ Commenting on Confucius’ alleged complete internalization of ritual norms by age 70 (so that he could follow his heartmind’s desire without overstepping what is right), Zhuangzi laments that such cultivation calcified Confucius’ heartmind into an artificial and rigid entity and necessitated a loss of a heartmind that could roam free and unfettered. Note that this doesn’t require thinking that the ideal is incoherent.

¹¹ To avoid delving too far into the literature on Zhuangist skepticism and relativism, I will work with a general outline of Zhuangist skepticism and normative relativism (for discussion see, for example, Hansen (2022), §§4.5-4.8, Wong (2009), van Norden (2011), 143-146, Ivanhoe (1996), 202-206).

Zhuangist need only assert that any idea of political flourishing will be ultimately monist, and that this monism is tenuous from a skeptical perspective.¹²

As I will understand it, *Zhuangist normative relativism* is the thesis that normative facts are relative to beings and perspectives: what is good for one being from one perspective may not be good for another being or from another perspective.

But first-order relativism is in principle compatible with a kind of *pluralism* about the good.¹³ And pluralist strategies are all monist at the meta-level: they all privilege some meta-level conception to order the first-level conceptions of good. And Zhuangist skepticism challenges the idea that one can know whether one holds a privileged perspective or not.¹⁴ Schematically:

- i Any ideal of political flourishing, even one that accommodates pluralism or relativism, must have some ultimate level that affirms some meta-level goods to protect and denies others.
- ii For any ideal of political flourishing to hold the authority to guide political organization, it must have some claim to being correct.
- iii But for any affirmation of some goods and denial of others, we do not know if it is correct or not.¹⁵
- iv [Conceptual Thesis] So the very idea of political flourishing is conceptually confused from a skeptical Zhuangist perspective.

3.2 *The Argument from the Radical Zhuangzi*

Consider Yearley's (2010) description of the 'radical Zhuangzi:

The ideal state sought by the radical Zhuangzi is an intraworldly mysticism where you focus intently on the perception that is directly present before you but pass on to another perception when a new perception comes or the old one fades. (127)

Here, the Zhuangist ideal is detached, open to the myriad changes and transformations. It is perhaps epitomized in the Zhuangist image of the heartmind as a mirror, "rejecting nothing, welcoming nothing: responding but not storing."¹⁶

The radical Zhuangist ideal also manifests in the description of ideal rulers in Chapter Seven. Here the ideal ruler "establishes his footing in the unfathomable and roams where nothing at all exists."

What picture of political philosophy should we derive from the radical perspective? One in which we have a best- and second-best scenario, neither of which involve any explicit political theorizing or organization. The ideal scenario is that of the mutual forgetting of the fish and friends of Chapter Six. The second-best scenario is that of the sage who rules through non-action. Why is this already second-

¹² By 'monist,' I mean simply that even a political philosophy that accepts a plurality of goods and values must have a unified picture of how to manage and protect these goods and values in a political way.

¹³ Various such pluralisms have been defended by Berlin (2013), Wong (2009, taking Zhuangist inspiration), Rawls (2002), and others.

¹⁴ The availability of different perspectives that contradict one's own should shake one's sense of the correctness of one's own perspective. So we do not know whether there is something to ultimately vindicate the view that different ideals of flourishing should be protected.

¹⁵ So the challenge for political philosophy from Zhuangzian skepticism and relativism comes more directly from the skepticism than from the relativism: It is the second-order skepticism about normative knowledge that creates the real challenge, not the first-order relativism, which can be accommodated through pluralist techniques.

¹⁶ Zhuangzi, trans. Ziporyn, 54.

best? Because in the ideal scenario the people do not even depend upon the sage, and so the sage does not count as ruling at all.¹⁷

So suppose that the relevant ideal of flourishing is the radical ideal: that of detached, non-abiding, forgetting wandering. Then the problem with any positive picture of political organization¹⁸ is that it creates abiding distinctions, and thus undermines the very ideal of flourishing it aimed for.¹⁹ Schematically:

- i Any ideal of political flourishing must accommodate the radical Zhuangist ideal.
- ii But any model of political organization (aside from the non-rule of the sage) will create enduring distinctions that undermine personal realization of the radical Zhuangist ideal.
- iii [Conceptual Thesis] So the very idea of political flourishing, to the extent that it needs some model of political organization, is conceptually confused from a radical Zhuangist perspective.

3.3 *The Argument From the Nature of Persons*

What if, as political thinkers, we concede the Zhuangist charge that all we are doing is something like creating a better way for fish to keep themselves wet out of the river, and that we are not trying to recreate the river? Can Zhuangzi argue that even this project, which does not try to recreate the radical ideal, is conceptually confused?

Zhuangzi suggests a story in which the harms of the Confucian and Mohist approaches are based on a conceptual confusion about the nature of persons.²⁰ The Confucians and Mohists create an artificial *person-in-society*, defined by ritual and ethical norms or by standards like worthiness for universal care.

Once these artificial people-in-society are created, it is coherent to imagine a political organization that protects them and allows them to flourish. But what is the value of this type of artificial life? Why is this particular form of living worth preserving?²¹ Schematically:

- i Any ideal of political flourishing must have some vision of personal flourishing.
- ii But any model of political organization²² will replace the flourishing of 'persons' with the flourishing of 'persons-in-society,' and it is unclear what value the latter has.
- iii So the very idea of political flourishing, to the extent that it protects the 'person-in-society' rather than the prepolitical 'person,' is of dubious value from a Zhuangist perspective.
- iv [Conceptual Thesis] And to the extent that an ideal that preserves the 'person-in-society' thinks it is preserving the 'person,' it is conceptually confused.

¹⁷ In the second-best scenario: "People may try to emulate [the sage] as their model, but how much more it would be to bind oneself equally to each and all of the ten thousand things, to let oneself rely on each transformation, on all transformation!" (Zhuangzi, trans. Ziporyn, 56).

¹⁸ except for the esoteric rule of the sage

¹⁹ Just like no amount of efficient spitting will recreate the river, no amount of political organization can retrieve the radical ideal.

²⁰ Specifically: Zhuangzi sees a pre-political ideal of personal flourishing, and the Confucians and the Mohists see a political ideal of personal flourishing-in-society, but the Confucian/Mohist "person-in-society" is not the same as the Zhuangist "person," and in particular the Zhuangist "person" may already be lost once the person-in-society is created.

²¹ Creating and preserving a person-in-society seems to be exactly the type of fixed struggling that Zhuangzi laments in Chapter Two:

"Shooting forth like an arrow from a bowstring: thus is our presumption as we arbitrate right and wrong. Holding fast as if to sworn oaths: thus is our defense of our victories. Worn away as if by autumn and winter: such is our daily dwindle, the flailings of a drowning man unable to get him any closer to the shore. . . . All our lives we labor, and nothing is achieved. Worn and exhausted to the point of collapse, never knowing what it all amounts to—how can we not lament this? (Zhuangzi, trans. Ziporyn, 12-13)."

²² aside from the non-rule of the sage