

ON BUDDHIST AND TAOIST MORALITY

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Abstract: Arthur Danto argues that all Eastern philosophies – except Confucianism – fail to accept necessary conditions on genuine morality: a robust notion of agency and that actions are praiseworthy only if performed voluntarily, in accordance with rules, and from motives based on the moral worth and well-being of others. But Danto’s arguments fail: Neo-Taoism and Mohism satisfy these allegedly necessary constraints and Taoism and Buddhism both posit moral reasons that fall outside the scope of Danto’s allegedly necessary conditions on genuine morality. Thus, our initial reaction, that these Eastern philosophies offer genuine moral reasons for action, is sustained rather than overturned.

In *Mysticism and Morality: Oriental Thought and Moral Philosophy*, Arthur C. Danto argues that necessary conditions on genuine morality include a robust notion of human moral agency and constraints that recognize that actions are praiseworthy (i.e., have positive moral worth) only if they are performed voluntarily, in accordance with explicitly moral rules, and out of a motive of concern for the moral worth and well-being of others. Danto goes on to argue that all philosophical systems of the East, with the exception of Confucianism, are primarily concerned with personal enlightenment and practices that enable one to escape from suffering, lacking these necessary conditions on genuine morality, none of them are able to support genuine moral theories. As we shall see, this is a gross and false generalization, and Danto’s arguments stand in need of sharpening. Nevertheless, Danto’s conclusion, that Eastern philosophy has nothing to say to Western Ethical theorists, is still fairly widespread. It would seem that in order for contemporary Western Ethicists to take Eastern contributions to moral theorizing seriously, Danto’s views need decisive refutation. Once these views are dismissed, it follows that Eastern contributions to ethical theory may not be so easy to dismiss by Western ethicists.

DANTO'S MAIN ARGUMENT

Danto's main motivation for writing *Mysticism and Morality* is to show that while it may be tempting for philosophers in the Western tradition to look to the East for new ideas that might aid us in our moral theorizing, we cannot reasonably expect to transplant Eastern ideas into our Western theories. In order for Eastern ideas about moral conduct to be applicable to philosophers in the West, there must be a plausible connection between our factual and moral beliefs. Without this connection, Eastern ideas will simply fail to have any traction or appropriate application. But, so he argues, the factual presuppositions of Eastern philosophical systems are inconsistent with the factual presuppositions of the West. In particular, Eastern views (again, with the sole exception of Confucianism) on human agency and moral motivation and decision-making are incompatible with the necessary conditions on any genuine morality. Therefore, Eastern philosophical theories are unable to sustain genuine moral theories. Before articulating and criticizing this argument in more detail, let us first consider Danto's meta-ethical views in greater detail.

DANTO'S META-ETHICAL VIEWS

Danto thinks that we cannot give a truth-functional analysis of moral belief because moral beliefs are about how the world ought to be and not how it actually is. Accordingly, moral beliefs are neither true nor false and it follows that their appropriateness can only be indirectly evaluated in terms of what they assume or presuppose to be true. Insofar as the assumptions and presuppositions of moral beliefs are true or false, moral beliefs can be judged to be either applicable or inapplicable. (For example, it is appropriate to judge that the actions of witches are wicked only if witches exist. But 'we' don't think that witches exist, and so any moral beliefs regarding the wrongness of their purported actions just aren't applicable.) On Danto's view, then, strictly speaking, "moral beliefs" are not beliefs at all, but rather prescriptive rules of morality that have conditions of applicability. Consequently, for Danto, to have a moral belief is to accept a certain rule of conduct as morally obligatory, a rule that "is regarded by the holder of the [relevant factual] belief[s] as binding upon those who come under its [prescriptive] scope" (Danto, 1976, p. 9). Consequently, one has good reasons for accepting and acting in accord with a particular moral rule only

if one has good reasons or justifications for accepting the factual presuppositions of that rule. (For instance, rules that condemn witchcraft falsely presuppose that people can cast spells, which precludes the applicability of moral rules against witchcraft.) Since the conditions of applicability of a given moral rule crucially involve factual propositions, if one does not share the factual assumptions of a particular moral rule or theory, then one cannot rationally accept the rules of conduct that the theory recommends (Danto, 1972, p. 4-9).

According to Danto, we ought to accept moral rules that are most applicable “to us” given “our” deepest needs, interests, and longings. According to Danto these needs, interests, and longings arise only for people accept and live within (or inhabit) a concrete form of life. A form of life is “partially defined by a set of moral rules that participants in that form hold as binding upon each other and by a set of factual beliefs, some of which constitute application conditions for the former” (Danto, 1972, p. 13). Note that having a form of life requires being rooted in a community and is expressed in traditions and rituals, songs, works of literature, as well as through cultural and artistic mediums, such as dress, custom, etiquette, and the like. It is not the sort of thing that a *solitary* individual can have. Accepting a way of life is rationally applicable or inapplicable to a particular individual only if it is appropriate given his or her factual background beliefs and presuppositions. For example, forms of life that involve worshipping tree spirits are no longer applicable to (most) human societies and for that reason moral rules about how to appease them do not apply (for the vast majority of us). Because moral theories that specify moral obligations to tree spirits are wildly implausible to us, moral rules about our alleged duties to tree spirits cannot “take root” in modern forms of life (Danto, 1972, p. 13-21).

Danto argues that since Eastern and Western forms of life are so very different, and because their factual presuppositions are radically dissimilar, Eastern rules regarding conduct and behavior that philosophers and moral theorists in the West might be tempted to characterize as moral actually have nothing to do with morality at all. Thus, (virtually) no Eastern rules and standards of behavior can be imported into Western moral categories or theories. (Again, only Confucianism recognizes genuine other concern and the validity of moral rules and obligations.)

With his general argument in place, let us consider Danto’s specific arguments against the possibility of Buddhist and Taoist moral theorizing.

DANTO ON WHY BUDDHISM CANNOT SUSTAIN A GENUINE MORALITY

Danto writes that all Buddhist philosophies address the problem of suffering and how one can escape from it and its effects and that death does not end one's suffering. Unless something drastic is done, one cannot break out of the cycle of life and death, *samsara*, but will be ever subject to suffering. How is one to escape from *samsara* and find freedom from suffering, or *moksha*? The Buddha's answer is that we suffer because we fail to realize that everything undergoes constant and radical change and that all things are essentially impermanent. This is the First Noble Truth, namely, that all things are *dukkha* – every thing is impermanent and subject to change, conditioned by other things, and so involves or inevitably leads to suffering. According to the Second Noble Truth, the cause of suffering is attachment to *dukkha*. Specifically, suffering arises when we vainly strive to find and to hold on to that which is impermanent and subject to change as if it were changeless and permanent. Such activity can only lead to increased suffering. The Third Noble truth states that there is a way out of suffering. That way out, set forth in the Fourth Noble Truth, is to follow the Eight Fold Path: cultivate and practice Right Views, Right Intentions, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration.

Danto falsely assumes that all forms of Buddhism accept that every thing, and so therefore, persons, too, is nothing other than impermanent, transitory manifestations of Non-being or Nothingness (in Sanskrit, *shunyata*, or “emptiness” or “voidness”, namely, empty or void of Being). As it turns out, different forms of Buddhism understand these core Buddhist teachings differently. Consequently, Danto's criticism applies only to those forms of Buddhism that accept what we might call The Impermanency Thesis: namely, that all things are empty of being (*shunyata*). Clearly, the Impermanency Thesis is inconsistent with the view that humans are substantial persons. Because Danto accepts that a necessary condition on morality is that there are substantive moral agents, Danto thinks that any view that affirms The Impermanency Thesis is inconsistent with the view that humans are moral agents. Let us, then, take Danto's objection to “Buddhism” to apply only to those forms of Buddhism that teach the Impermanency Thesis. And recall Danto's view that any plausible form of life ought to be acceptable to us insofar as it is applicable to humans *qua* social and moral agents. So, then, we may therefore refine Danto's objection to be that forms of Buddhism that affirm The Impermanency Thesis cannot of-

fer a genuine moral theory or sustain a genuine moral community (Danto, 1979, p. 65-83).

DANTO ON TAOISM'S INABILITY TO SUSTAIN A GENUINE MORALITY

Danto extends his argument that Buddhism cannot sustain a genuine morality to Taoism. That is, he argues that Taoism accepts the Impermanency Thesis, and that that goes to show that Taoism, too, is inconsistent with the view that humans are moral agents and so cannot offer a genuine moral theory or sustain a genuine moral community. As is the case with Buddhism, there are various forms of Taoism. Likewise, Danto's objection has traction only against those forms of Taoism that really do affirm The Impermanency Thesis. Danto doesn't just retool this argument this argument, however. Rather, he thinks that there are additional, more general epistemological reasons for thinking that Taoism cannot sustain a genuine morality.

Danto writes that Taoism accepts a skeptical attitude towards propositional knowledge regarding moral conduct. Following the *Tao* is something you can know *how* to do but this how-to knowledge cannot be put into words. Danto writes that Taoists do not seek anything like a cognitive understanding of their activities in that they do not make plans or reasoned decisions on the basis of beliefs and desires. Rather, Taoists act in accord with the principle of *wu-wei*, a principle of "non-action" that prescribes that one ought to be content to accept things the way things are and thus advocates avoiding imposing one's will on the world. Success in life, happiness, and contentment result from discovering the natural grain of things and learning how to naturally follow the *Tao* (literally, the way), which is a matter of engaging in activities only in so far as they are necessary and do not inhibit "naturalness." Taoism advocates a return to nature and the rejection of traditional socio-political structures and institutions, and Taoists are harsh critics of traditional politics and government: "one ought to rule the empire like one would fry a small fish; too much stirring things up just makes a mess" (*Tao te Ching*, Chapter 60).

Danto argues that the Taoist's call to follow the *Tao* is tantamount to a rejection of the very moral obligations and responsibilities that are essential to any genuinely moral theory and, consequently, that acting in accord with the principle of *wu-wei* is to act *without* moral deliberation or rational choice. But both of these views are inconsistent with the concept of moral responsibility. Danto concludes:

It is extremely difficult to derive a moral philosophy ... if the very possibility of morality presupposes the mechanism of the will and the possibility of acting contrary to or deliberately in what one takes to be conformity to the world. Exactly the space that Taoism intends to collapse is what makes morality possible at all. By this I mean the possibility of morality as such, not this or that moral system (Danto, 1972, p. 119).

Once more, Danto over-simplifies and over-generalizes. Not everything he has to say about “Taoism” applies to all forms of Taoism. But, clearly, there are strands of philosophical Taoism that affirm moral skepticism or anti-realism. Let us, then, take Danto’s arguments against “Taoism” to apply only to these forms of Taoism.

ARE DANTO’S OBJECTIONS CORRECT?

What are we to make of Danto’s arguments? I think that although Danto calls attention to important issues that we must keep in mind when thinking about various Buddhist and Taoist ethical theories, his arguments are unsound and unconvincing. Danto’s mistake is to falsely assume that genuine moral theorizing is possible only if one makes characteristically ‘Western’ assumptions about the nature of the will, the self, and the nature of morality, and the like. Because he makes this false assumption, Danto is unable to recognize that the forms of Taoism and Buddhism he considers can offer genuine moral theories on their own terms. In the next few sections, then, I will show how forms of Buddhism and Taoism that Danto finds to be objectionable are able to offer genuine moral theories after all.

TAOISM AND GENUINE MORALITY

A fitting way to show how Taoism offers a genuine moral theory is to begin with a critique of Confucian morality from a Taoist perspective. But before proceeding, it is necessary to introduce the core components of Confucian morality. (Doing so will also reveal why Danto does not think that Confucianism is not also subject to the objections that he mounts against Buddhism and Taoism.)

Confucians are concerned about *jen*, or human heartedness, and how one should go about cultivating it. *Jen* is “...the manifestation of pure untarnished human nature in accordance with the requirements of morality ... it embraces all the moral qualities governing – and expressed by – the

ideal behavior of one human being toward another” (Fischner, et al, 1999, p. 160). Confucius held that “a single thread” runs through all of his doctrines, namely, conscientiousness (*chung*) and altruism (*shu*) (*The Analects*, in Chan, 1963, p. 27). According to Wing-Tsit, “*chung* means the full development of one’s [originally good] mind and *shu* means the extension of that mind to others.” *Chung* is “the way of heaven” and *shu* is “the way of man” and the goal of morality is unify the way of heaven and the way of man (*The Analects*, in Chan, 1963, p. 27). Confucius writes that, “A man of humanity, wishing to establish his own character, also establishes the character of others ... [this] may be called the method of realizing humanity” (*The Analects*, in Chan, 1963, p. 31). And when asked about the essence of *jen*, Confucius replied, “Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you.” Once, when a disciple asked him about *jen*, Confucius replied, “Love your fellow men” (*The Analects*, translated by Lau, 1998).

From this very brief sketch of Confucianism, it is easy enough to see why Danto thinks that it can provide the foundations of a genuine morality. In short, because Confucianism accepts ‘Western’ notions of moral agency and responsibility, it can sustain a genuine moral theory. To better appreciate Taoist and Buddhist moral theories that do not accept these assumptions, it is helpful to consider why Taoists reject the Confucian account of morality. To understand that, it is essential to realize that although Taoists reject Confucian views about how to cultivate *jen*, they did not thereby endorse or enact a wholesale rejection of morality.

While I am obviously working with only one interpretation of what is central to Taoist morality, it is standard and representative one. As I understand it, the Taoist rejection of the Confucian (and hence ‘Western’) account of morality is that there is available to us a deeper, more authentic, and more genuine expression of *jen* than Confucianism can allow for. Specifically, Taoists accused Confucians of diluting, polluting, and degenerating the noble ideal of striving for perfect benevolent to such an extent that it because nothing more than the ability to perform the rituals and rites of *li* perfectly (see Chan, 2000, p. 300-304). On their view, the genuine expression of *jen* was confused with the perfect performance of Confucian rituals, ceremonies, and rights (*li*). From a Taoist perspective, Confucian morality amounts to nothing more than arbitrary rule following, and that cannot possibly lead to the cultivation of *jen*. (Of course, there are other critiques of Confucian morality, too. They also argue that Confucian rituals contrary to nature, to basic human equality, and to our place in the cosmos. But I will not develop these sorts of objections.)

With the above understanding of the Taoist critique of Confucian morality in play, let us consider Chapter 38 of the *Tao Te Ching*:

Those who are ritually correct [the Confucians] act, but if others do not respond, they roll up their sleeves and resort to force. And so, when the Way [the Tao] was lost there was Virtue; when virtue was lost there was benevolence; when benevolence was lost there was righteousness; when righteousness was lost there were the [Confucian] rites [*li*]. The rites are the wearing thin of loyalty and trust, and the beginning of chaos (Lao Tzu).

According to my interpretation (informed by Chan), Confucian morality is what gets in the way of acquiring *jen*. Moreover, this text advocates an unquestionably *non*-Confucian way of acquiring *jen*. One does not develop *jen* through forced and willful actions; it is not cultivated by striving and mindless rule following. Rather, *jen* is cultivated by activity that accords with the principle of *wu-wei*. Note that the principle of *wu-wei* does not advocate “non-action”, as Danto mistakenly claims. Rather, the principle of *wu-wei* advocates spontaneous activity that accords with one’s original nature. (On this understanding of *wu-wei*, also see Abe 1997.) Effectively, to return to one’s original nature is to cultivate *jen*. Through the practice of *wu-wei*, one is able to “equalize or harmonize all things by overcoming artificial human distinctions” (Wei-hsun Fu, 1997, p. 517). Taoists accept that only by refraining from “calculative reasoning” and favoring spontaneous, natural action that accords with one’s original nature, are we able to love others without distinction and without partiality and so embody the virtues of “gentleness, peaceful perseverance, and sympathy” (Hochsman, 2001, p. 46). Paradoxically, only when one gives up trying to be moral and embraces one’s original nature is one able to have and express genuine love for others and so embody moral virtues. It is in this spirit that Lao Tzu writes: “Those of highest Virtue do not strive for Virtue and so they have it” (Lao Tzu, Chapter 38).

On love, Chuang Tzu writes, “the highest love is incomparably high. The [Confucian] concept of filial piety is insufficient to describe it. What I mean is not that filial piety is too broad but that it does not go far enough” (Burton, 1996, p. 100). Concerning the Sage’s love, “his love of others never has an end” (Legge, 1962, p.115). Commenting on Chuang Tzu’s view of “the highest love”, Hyun Hochsman writes that one ought to, “Be like space. Hold all things in love” and that highest love “transcends all differences” and is “completely impartial.” To cultivate the highest love, we cannot strive to change ourselves, but rather we can only be placed into

the relation of expressing highest love towards by allowing our original natures to be “spontaneously and naturally” uncovered (Hochsmann, 2001, p. 56-57).

Taoists maintain that in order to act naturally and spontaneously, one must realize the deeper unity of all things, which in turn involves realizing that one’s own well-being or suffering is no more or less important than that of any other living thing. This requires the recognition that all of nature is an expression of the *Tao* and that, as such, everything has a proper place in the “grand scheme of things.” It is for these sorts of reasons that Taoists accept what many take to be ‘skeptical’ or ‘anti-realist’ philosophical theses, namely, that we ought to refrain from making judgments about whether things are right or wrong or good or bad, but rather we hold all such things loosely, without strong desire and in a clam and non-assertive manner. As Chuang Tzu puts it, one ought to develop a “mirror-mind”, a cognitive attitude that merely accepts or reflects what truly is without trying to impose our egocentric viewpoints onto the world, in some sort of attempt to make the world conform to what we take it to be or would rather it turn out to be. When one cultivates this mirror-mind, then one sees things for they, as spontaneous, natural expressions of the *Tao*, and so one no longer takes there to be any morally relevant distinctions between persons (humans) and non-persons (animals, trees, the natural environment, etc.), or between subjects and objects more generally. (See also Brannigan, 2000, p. 140-141.)

To sum up, according to Taoism, characteristically “Western” moral reasoning, theorizing, and higher order thinking of the sort that Danto advocates is unnecessary and often harmful. Moral theorizing and striving to articulate and then act in accord with ethical principles does not lead to *jen*, but merely encourages one to remain blindly oblivious to the real, fundamental moral fabric of the universe, the ‘natural way’ of the uncut, unhewn, and pristine *Tao*. Taoists do set aside their belief that there is a substantial self, are skeptical of moral rules, moral reasoning, and moral deliberation, and so set aside the views of moral agency and moral responsibility that Danto takes to be necessary to any genuine morality. However, they do not do so from an egoistic and selfish desire for personal enlightenment, as Danto claims, but for the reasons and considerations just described. From the Taoist’s point of view, it is Danto’s allegedly necessary conditions on any genuine morality that must be set aside if one is to cultivate *jen*. As Philip Ivanhoe writes, “[the] higher-order perspective is alien to the Daoist ideal. The Daoist sage is guided by prereflective intuitions and tendencies rather than by preestablished or self-conscious policies or principles”

(Ivanhoe, 2002, p. XXI). Again, “Those of highest Virtue do not strive for Virtue and so they have it” (Lao Tzu, Chapter 38).

BUDDHISM AND GENUINE MORALITY

Whereas Danto thinks that Taoism fails to offer a genuine moral theory on account of its similarities to Buddhism, I think that Buddhism can offer a genuine morality in much the same way that Taoism can. According to Robert Carter, the Buddhist critique of Western morality is that it arises in a network of selfishness, “in the midst of egos in conflict.” The function of morality in the West is to constrain our egos and to keep them in check. Moral rules and prohibitions are accepted because without their influence we would cause great harm to one another. The core ethical insight of forms of Buddhism that affirm The Impermanency Thesis is that bonds of mutual interdependence unite all things, and so the good for any one thing is intimately connected to the good of every other thing. On this view, suffering is caused by attachment to selfish desires that are perpetuated by (false) beliefs that there are distinct, substantial selves. Hence, we are doubly deluded to think that we must posit the existence of moral agents who strive to act in accord with moral rules and prohibitions in order to eliminate the selfish desires that lead to attachment and thus to further suffering. Rather, genuine moral conduct requires the elimination of selfishness, and only by first dispensing with false and illusory notions of self-hood can selfishness be eliminated (Carter, 2001, p. 18-24).

The cessation of suffering requires the dissolution of selfish desire, which in turn requires letting go of false constructs of ‘the self.’ The Eight Fold Path (right views, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right meditation) and the Five Precepts (non-injury, avoiding theft and cheating, avoiding sexual misconduct, avoiding lying and wrong forms of speech, and sobriety) are followed in order to eradicate ego-attachment, not on account of some egoistic and selfish desire for personal enlightenment. (True, Buddhists may grant that one might *initially* choose to follow the Eight Fold path and the Five Precepts for (purely) selfish motives. After engaging in Buddhist practice for some time, selfish motives dissipate and one becomes less and less attached to selfish desire. One’s selfish motives are replaced by motives of universal compassion. Eventually, however, one becomes utterly selfless and “ego free” and it is only then that one is capable of selfless, compassionate, and genuinely moral behavior.)

GENUINE TAOIST AND BUDDHIST MORALITY VINDICATED

Danto's criticisms of Eastern morality fail. His allegedly necessary conditions for genuine morality are the very conditions that many Buddhists and Taoists reject as obstacles to genuine morality. Eastern philosophical systems do make factual presuppositions that many in the West cannot accept. Because this is so, many Westerners do not think that uniquely Buddhist and Taoist moral theories are attractive, compelling, or plausible. But, as we have seen, Buddhism and Taoism can offer genuine moral theories without relying on Danto's allegedly necessary conditions on genuine moral theorizing. Once one correctly grasps these moral theories, our initial view of the matter, namely, that Taoist and Buddhist reasons for action are profoundly moral, is borne out and vindicated rather than overturned. Consequently, rather than giving us reasons for thinking that Buddhists and Taoists cannot offer any genuine moralities, we see that Danto fails to consider how genuine moral theories other than those typically found in the West are possible. Western moral theorists can, therefore, find much that is interesting, relevant, and significant to moral theorizing when they consider the religions and philosophies of the East.

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