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Daoist Metaethics

Abstract: This paper seeks to show how classical Chinese Daoist philosophy (道家) contributes to contemporary metaethics. Daoism offers an early form of moral error theory and provides unique suggestions for what one can do with a false discourse like morality. Recent error theorists have disagreed about whether they should conserve moral discourse (moral conservationism), retain it only as a useful fiction (revolutionary moral fictionalism), substitute it with a discourse concerned with subjective normative attitudes (moral substitutionism), or abolish it altogether (assertive moral abolitionism). In Daoist texts, I argue, we find unique versions of abolitionism and fictionalism that go a long way to resolving debates between error theorists. They can do so because the motivation Daoists have for holding their metaethical views is primarily therapeutic. I argue Daoism offers a nonassertive kind of moral abolitionism and a reactionary form of moral fictionalism as means toward the achievement of tranquility and joy.

Keywords: Metaethics; Daoism; Moral Error Theory; Moral Fictionalism; Moral Abolitionism

1. Moral Error Theory and the 'Now What' Problem

Moral facts entail intrinsically prescriptive, inescapably authoritative, irreducibly normative, mind-independent, and objective categorical reasons for action. Moral anti-realism is the view that moral facts do not exist. One can arrive at this view in two ways. One can deny both that we hold genuine moral beliefs and that morality is a truth-apt discourse. Since we are expressing other mental states and not using a discourse in the business of aiming to report the facts when uttering moral judgments, there can be no moral facts to which our moral judgments correspond. This combination of psychological non-cognitivism, semantic non-factualism, and ontological anti-realism is often called moral expressivism. The other way to arrive at moral anti-realism is by retaining a cognitivist view of moral psychology and factualist view of moral semantics while still concluding moral facts do not exist. This view is moral error theory. It says we have genuine moral beliefs and moral discourse is truth-apt, but that no moral judgment ever succeeds at corresponding to moral facts. This is because there are none. Thus, morality is systematically in error.

At this point, the error theorist is faced with a problem: what to do with a false discourse like morality? Matt Lutz has called it the 'now what' problem.[1] There are a number of solutions to this problem, but error theorists have not reached a consensus. The 'now what' problem might be a reflection of Mackie's own uncertainty about what to do with morality. Each of the main solutions claim to have their source in Mackie. Before we discuss the solutions presently available, we might wonder what would constitute a good solution to the 'now what' problem. For Lutz, any solution must pay heed to "what we care about, our deepest commitments."[2] He claims that while error theorists should not fall back into believing in moral facts, any acceptable solution "must allow us to continue acting morally

[1] See Matt Lutz, "The 'Now What' Problem for Error Theory," *Philosophical Studies,* vol. 171, no. 2 (2014): 351-371.
[2] Ibid., p. 361.

when appropriate and using moral language."[3] I will offer a distinct criterion from Lutz's below, but for now let us accept it and assess the main solutions on its basis.

The first solution is moral conservationism (MC).[4] MC holds we should accept moral error theory and yet retain belief in the existence of moral facts and continue to assert moral propositions. The conservationist believes it would be prudent and natural to continue on believing in and asserting the existence of moral facts. It would be prudent because, it is claimed, a world without moral belief and discourse would be a diminished world, one losing out on the benefits for cooperation morality supplies. Genuine moral belief and assertion seems to grease the wheels of social coordination and really move us to cooperate, and so we should conserve both regardless of how convinced we are of the error theory. It would be natural to conserve morality as well because belief in moral facts might be so ingrained in us that we lack the cognitive resources to either really or consistently deny the existence of moral facts or cease genuinely asserting moral propositions. We will continue to believe in moral facts even if we also believe they do not exist in the same way we will continue to perceive one line being longer than the others in the Mueller-Lyer illusion even though we also know the lines are the same length.[5]

The second solution is revolutionary moral expressivism (RME).[6] RME agrees with MC that moral discourse is too useful in generating and sustaining cooperation to discard, but finds MC to border on being purposely deceptive and irrational. To assert a belief in something one does not really believe is to lie. To believe something one does not really believe is to be irrational. MC responds by claiming that there is no irrationality because we should conserve morality by only occurently believing in moral facts while dispositionally believing the error theory and accessing that belief in our more reflective moments.[7] Based on Lutz's criterion for an acceptable solution to the 'now what' problem, MC fails because it involves error theorists falling back into positively believing in moral facts. Avoiding the backsliding and seemingly irrational and propagandistic tendencies of MC, RME allows us to use moral discourse without slipping into self-contradiction. Instead of conserving real belief in and assertion of moral facts, RME recommends we reform our moral practice and treat moral discourse the way moral expressivists say we already do. Such treatment involves accepting and expressing moral discourse with a mental state other than belief. Also, it

[3] Ibid., p. 362.
[4] See Jonas Olson, *Moral Error Theory: History, Critique, Defence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
[5] Ibid., p. 7.
[6] See Toby Svoboda, "Why Moral Error Theorists Should Become Revisionary Moral Expressivists," *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, vol. 14, no. 1 (2017): 48-72.
[7] See Olson, op. cit., p. 192.

involves treating moral discourse as a means of communicating not in the business of aiming to fully report the moral facts. There are a variety of expressivist views. A close relative to Svoboda's RME is Richard Joyce's revolutionary moral fictionalism (RevMF).[8]

RevMF is a nonassertive kind of fictionalism, differing from an assertive kind by being a force, instead of content, fictionalism.[9] It says we should only make-believe in and quasi-assert the existence of moral facts. It suggests giving up really believing in moral facts, either as out in the world, in agents, or as real fictions. We should make-believe in moral facts instead, which would be to occurrently accept or think about moral facts without fully believing them to be real in any way. The non-cognitive state of make-belief replaces the cognitive state of real belief. Just as with MC, with RevMF we are still disposed to believing in the error theory in our more reflective moments. And rather than assert moral judgments with a tacit story operator as with an assertive fictionalism, RevMF suggests reducing the assertive force from moral utterances, thereby allowing for the use of moral discourse without having to really assert anything. Moral judgments are to be only quasi-asserted. Quasi-assertion is a way of uttering a sentence without the intention of fully referring to anything. Actors in plays do not really assert their lines, but quasi-assert them, because they are make-believing in what they say. RevMF recommends we treat moral discourse this way. According to Lutz's criterion, RevMF does better than MC by not falling back into fully believing in moral facts. It also appears to allow us to act morally and use moral language. Where RevMF falters is in failing to pay heed to 'what we care about, our deepest commitments.' For Lutz, RevMF only permits a partial commitment to what matters most to us. Indeed, it seems to trivialize what drives our interest in morality in the first place.[10] Mere pretense will not do.

What Lutz is after is a solution that allows error theorists to enjoy the benefits of commitment that come from full belief while not backsliding into fully believing in moral facts. For him, the solution must stem from reforming morality in some way. His own moral substitutionism (MS) is an example. Stan Husi has also recommended reforming (or revising) morality. He argues error theorists would be better off deflating the robustly realist truth conditions of moral discourse.[11] Lutz's MS similarly recommends substituting full belief in and assertion of moral facts with full belief in and assertion of other normative facts that are reducible to strongly held desires, preferences, and other pro-attitudes. So, when we express moral judgments we should really be asserting our beliefs in hypothetical reasons we

[8] See Richard Joyce, *Essays in Moral Skepticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
[9] See Daniel Nolan, Greg Restall, & Caroline West, "Moral fictionalism versus the rest," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 83, n. 3 (2005): 307-330.
[10] See Lutz, op. cit., p. 361.
[11] See Stan Husi, "Against Moral Fictionlism," *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, vol. 11 no. 1 (2014): 80-96.

believe pertain to us. And again these hypothetical reasons depend upon our strongly held pro-attitudes. The speaker-meaning of the substitutionist's moral utterances will differ from their surface grammar, but if one wants to know what the substitutionist really thinks about the existence of moral facts they will tell them about the error theory. Thus, MS seems to fulfill Lutz's criterion for an acceptable solution to the 'now what' problem. MS allows error theorists to avoid reverting to fully believing in moral facts, as happens with MC, while retaining the full commitment that comes from fully believing in the relevant normative features of our lives, thereby avoiding the partial commitment of only make-believing in and quasi-asserting moral facts, as is the case for RevMF.

Obviously, we should not be surprised Lutz's solution meets his criterion. But, let us take a step back and ask a more basic question about error theory and the 'now what' problem. Why would one be attracted to the view in the first place? The common answer is epistemic: we want to know whether moral judgments have truthmakers and error theory tells us they do not. The non-existence of moral facts means moral judgments are either untrue or false. The aim of metaethics in general appears to be to vindicate or debunk moral discourse. Error theory debunks it. But why might error theorists be interested in debunking morality? Indeed, why are there skeptics about anything? At least historically, the answer was not entirely epistemic. Rather, it was more therapeutic. Skepticism emerged as a historical option precisely because some wished to live without the affective and conative disturbance that usually attends false belief. In fact, most ancient philosophy, both east and west, had a primarily therapeutic motivation. Philosophy itself, including metaethics, could be regarded as a primarily therapeutic enterprise.[12] However, it is not common today for philosophy to be understood in therapeutic terms. Even those entertaining skeptical conclusions, like the error theory, aim to remain unaffected by their skepticism. Miles Burnyeat captures the phenomenon nicely:

> Nowadays, if a philosopher finds he cannot answer the philosophical question 'What is time?' or 'Is time real?', he applies for a research grant to work on the problem during next year's sabbatical. He does not suppose that the arrival of next year is actually in doubt. Alternatively, he may agree that any puzzlement about the nature of time, or any argument for doubting the reality of time, is in fact a puzzlement about, or an argument for doubting, the truth of the proposition that next year's sabbatical will come, but contend that this is of course a strictly theoretical or philosophical worry, not a worry that needs to be reckoned with in the ordinary business of life. Either way he *insulates* his ordinary first order judgments from the effects of his philosophizing.[13]

[12] See Eugen Fischer, "How to Practice Philosophy as Therapy: Philosophical Therapy and Therapeutic Philosophy," *Metaphilosophy,* vol. 42, no. 1 (2011): 49-82; Konrad Banacki, "Philosophy as Therapy: Towards a Conceptual Model," *Philosophical Papers,* vol. 43, no. 1 (2014): 7-31.

[13] See Miles Burnyeat, "The Sceptic in His Place and Time," In Miles Burnyeat & Michael Frede (eds.), *The Original Sceptics: A Controversy*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997), p. 92.

Lutz's criterion is an attempt to insulate error theorists from the severity of their ontological conclusion that moral facts do not exist. Lutz thinks MS does the best job of insulating 'what we care about, our deepest commitments' from the nihilist consequences of error theory. Diego Machua has noted that almost all the solutions to the 'now what' problem are insulationist.[14] MC, RevMF, and MS each try to redeem morality in spite of its systematic falsity. But what if one did not want to be insulated from the effects of error theory? What if one wanted reprieve from the irritation and disturbance that usually leads to and results from holding and expressing false moral beliefs? Then moral abolitionism is the best bet.

Moral abolitionism is the only response to the 'now what' problem that recommends eliminating moral belief and discourse altogether. Of course, Lutz finds abolitionism objectionable for just this reason: it does not seem to pay heed to 'what we care about, our deepest commitments.' It throws the baby out with the bathwater. Again, according to his criterion, he is right. But, insofar as Lutz's criterion is insulationist, it would be worth considering solutions to the 'now what' problem from a non-insulationist perspective. A non-insulationist criterion would say the best solution to the 'now what' problem would determine which solution best integrates into the lives of error theorists the truth of the error theory. Since all the other solutions insulate error theorists from the truth about morality, abolitionism is the clear victor. But this leads to a further question: what is the best, the least insulationist, way of being an abolitionist? It is in answering this question that we can utilize the resources of classical Chinese Daoism to formulate a superior form of abolitionism that both fulfills the non-insulationist criterion and even ends up being less of a threat to MC, RevMF, and MS than the kind of moral abolitionism presently available. With Daoism we can develop a way of being an error theorist that resolves the 'now what' problem in a way that perhaps appeases all the parties involved in the dispute. But, first, let us look at moral abolitionism closer.

Abolitionists qualify their view as being assertive. Assertive moral abolitionism (AMA) involves believing the error theory and abolishing morality and encouraging others to believe it and abolish morality as well. Richard Garner summarizes the view: "Assertive moral abolitionists construe moral judgments as false assertions, but they urge us to stop making them because they believe that any benefits that come from pretending that moral realism is true are outweighed by the harm that comes from having to promote and defend a series of easily questioned

[14] See Diego Machua (ed.), *Moral Skepticism: New Essays* (New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 213-234.

falsehoods."[15] Joel Marks, another proponent of AMA, describes how the revelation of moral abolitionism affected him:

> Finally I reached a point where I felt that, far from needing to hide my amorality from the world, I should share it with the world. It would be a gift. At the very least, it was important—perhaps the most important thing in the world! I also saw the humor in my situation: it was not lost on me that I was becoming an unbelieving proselytizer.[16]

AMA offers a number of reasons for abolishing morality and encouraging others to do the same. First, there is the general point that it would be beneficial for epistemic hygiene to abolish false ways of believing and speaking.[17] Second, since moral discourse is permeated by deep, intractable disagreements, the only way to really avoid such intractability is to avoid moral discourse in the first place.[18] Third, there is a tendency for morality to be used as a means to justify unfair distributions of wealth and power.[19] Fourth, morality is often used as a means for motivating patriotism and international war.[20] Fifth, the expression of moral judgments is driven primarily by negative emotions like sadness, anxiety, anger, contempt, disgust, resentment, and indignation.[21] There is something pathological about much moralizing. And sixth, morality is often deployed with a heightened arrogance that leaves one open to the charge of hypocrisy.[22] For these reasons, AMA recommends we abolish morality and urge others to do so as well if we are convinced of the error theory.

There are two main criticisms of AMA. One is that the criticisms leveled by AMA are moral in nature, that it sounds like it is condemning morality itself as immoral.[23] If one criticizes morality for contributing to elitism and authoritarianism, inequality and violence, sadness and anger, arrogance and hypocrisy, then all these criticisms sound not only normative in nature, but specifically moral.[24] The other, and most common, complaint leveled against AMA is that it is extreme.[25] The charge is that it would be too difficult for us to ever consistently adopt moral abolition. Nolan, Restall, & West write, "Giving up moral talk would force large-scale changes to the way we talk, think, and feel that would be extremely difficult to make."[26] It would be too socially and psychology difficult to act in accordance

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[15] See Richard Garner, "Abolishing Morality," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, vol. 10, no. 5 (2007): p. 506.
[16] See Joel Marks, *Ethics Without Morals: In Defense of Amorality* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 14.
[17] Ibid., p. 24.
[18] See Garner, op. cit., p. 502; See J. L. Mackie, *Hume's Moral Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1980), p. 154.
[19] See Garner, op. cit., p. 502; Mackie op. cit., p. 154.
[20] See Garner, op. cit., p. 502; Mackie, op. cit., p.154.
[21] See Marks, op. cit., p. 83.
[22] Ibid., p. 86.
[23] See Olson, op. cit., p. 179.
[24] See Ian Hinckfuss, *The Moral Society: Its Structure and Effects* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1987).
[25] See Lutz, op. cit., p. 357.
[26] See Nolan, Restall, & West, op. cit., p. 307.

with AMA. In response to these criticisms, I will try to develop a nonassertive version of moral abolitionism with the help of Daoism that will hopefully fulfill the non-insulationist criterion of a solution to the 'now what' problem. To do that, I must first show how the Daoists offered an early form of error theory.

2. Daoist Moral Error Theory

Classical Chinese philosophers held latent metaethical views. Such latency should not come as a surprise given that not many held explicit metaethical views prior to the twentieth century. What may come as a surprise is the degree of coherence some of these views exhibit. The predominant school of the era, Confucianism, has been noted for its naturalist moral realism.[27] Naturalist moral realism is the view that mind-independent moral facts do exist and they are either reducible to natural facts (moral reductionism) or already natural facts (Cornell realism). It is hard to tell whether Confucianism is closer to a reductionist or Cornell form of naturalist moral realism. Confucianism has also been noted for its similarity to Aristotelian virtue ethics.[28] Either way, Confucianism regards nature itself as being moral in some way. The universe takes sides and cares about what humans do, and human morality is an expression of nature's morality. That nature is morally inclined is the way it is. This moral way of nature is its *dao* 道. The *dao* of nature is the morally correct path of behavior humans are meant to follow. There are moral facts in nature because nature is imbued with a kind of moral teleology. Such moral teleology involves nature endowing humans with a certain moral power or ability. This moral power is their virtue, *de* 德. To possess *de* is to follow the *dao*.

Confucians often view virtue as a bestowal from *tian* 天, sometimes translated as 'heaven' or 'sky,' but more meaning, especially when complemented with 'earth' 地, simply 'nature.' *Tian* is often synonymous with *dao*. The way things are is natural. For Confucians, the *dao*'s moral teleology characterizes *tian*. Nature wants us to be virtuous and follow the correct path, even going so far as to elect some exemplars of moral perfection that will inspire us to exercise our capacity for benevolence or humaneness (*ren* 仁), ritual propriety (*li* 禮), filial piety (*xiao* 孝), and righteousness (*yi* 義)—the chief Confucian virtues. The key to truly following nature's moral path is to embody and express these virtues with the utmost sincerity (*cheng* 誠). Sincerity is the way one ultimately fulfills nature's moral purpose, its sincerity. The Confucian classic, the *Doctrine of the Mean*, states,

> Sincerity is the Way of Heaven. To think how to be sincere is the way of man. He who is sincere is one who hits upon what is right without effort and apprehends without thinking. He is naturally and easily in harmony

[27] See JeeLoo Liu, "Confucian Moral Realism," *Asian Philosophy*, vol. 17, no. 2 (2007): pp.167-184.
[28] See Jiyuan Yu, *The Ethics of Confucius and Aristotle: Mirrors of Virtue* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

> with the Way. Such a man is a sage. He who tries to be sincere is one who chooses the good and holds fast to it.[29]

For Confucians, there is immense therapeutic upshot to human sincerity coinciding with heavenly sincerity. Harmony with an intrinsically moral way amounts to the fulfillment and perfection of nature and society.

Daoism can be regarded as the metaethical and therapeutic foil to Confucianism. It denies Confucian naturalist moral realism in favor a moral anti-realist view that it regards as a surer means to experiencing fulfillment and perfection. For Daoists, a genuine knowledge and acceptance of nature involves appreciating and affirming the fact that it contains no real value, reason, or purpose, which thereby provides an experience of tranquility and joy untarnished by the negative affects associated with moralizing. The goal of Daoism is to empty oneself of the false beliefs, negative affects, and unnecessary desires that are basic to any experience or use of morality. The key texts in classical Daoism are the anthologies known as the *Laozi*, or *Daodejing*, and the *Zhuangzi*.[30] In them, we find explicit rejections of what we would today call moral realism.

The first point to note is that, for Daoists, purported moral facts are projections that fail to correspond to reality. Projectivism, as a description of moral phenomenology, is common to both kinds of moral anti-realism, moral expressivism and moral error theory. Hume described how we engage in a "gilding and staining [of] all natural objects with the colours, borrowed from internal sentiment," which thus "raises in a manner a new creation."[31] In other words, we project onto the world certain facts, moral among them, that may appear to be in it, but which are not really. Even if the projection is motivated by an emotional reaction to something happening in the world, the fact projected is still believed to be 'out there' and so fails to correspond to what is really there.

In the classical Chinese setting, the issue of projection emerges in the discussion of the role and function of 'names' (*ming* 名). For Confucians, the moral significance of anything is based upon its being properly named. Appropriately naming things, especially according to their importance for human relationships, is the means by which

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[29] See Wing-Tsit Chan (ed.), *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 107.

[30] For this article, I will use, with occasional slight modification, Hans-Georg Moeller's translation of the *Laozi* and Brook Ziporyn's translation of the *Zhuangzi* (See Hans-Georg Moeller (trans.), *Daodejing* (Peru, Illinois: Open Court Publishing, 2007); Brook Ziporyn (trans.), *Zhuangzi*: *Essential Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2009)). This is because I find their translations the most readable and I find myself mostly in agreement with their interpretations, which is not to say there are not other equally acceptable philosophical translations of both texts (See Philip J. Ivanhoe (trans.), *The Daodejing of Laozi* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2003); A.C. Graham (trans.), *Chuang-tzu: The Inner Chapters* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2001)).

[31] See David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1983), p. 88.

Confucians feel they discover the moral purpose of nature. A chief aim of Confucianism is the 'rectification of names,' an attempt to reform the use of names so that they properly corresponded to the moral patterns of reality. The *Analects* state,

> If names are not rectified, speech will not accord with reality; when speech does not accord with reality, things will not be successfully accomplished. When things are not successfully accomplished, ritual practice and music will fail to flourish; when ritual and music fail to flourish, punishments and penalties will miss the mark. And when punishments and penalties miss the mark, the common people will be at a loss as to what to do with themselves. This is why the gentleman only applies names that can be properly spoken and assures that what he says can be properly put into action.[32]

Daoists disagree with Confucians about names. They deny reality is intrinsically named according to any moral purpose. They claim that things are not really what they are named, the moral significance imputed to them. Moral projection fails. Instead, the Dao—for Daoists the eternal process of nature's spontaneous creation and destruction of itself through and as all things—is either unnameable or lacks a name designating a specific moral function: "As to the Dao—if it can be specified as a Dao, it is not the eternal Dao. As to a name—if it can be specified as a name, it is not the eternal name."[33] We also read in the *Laozi* that "the Dao is eternally unnamed," but "when the carving begins and there are names" the Daoist sage will "master cessation" by suspending discursive projection (carving) and match the unnamed nature of the Dao with his own silence.[34] The Daoists deny moral naturalism, and moral realism more generally, because all projection of names, all moralizing, fails to correspond to nature. Nature is intrinsically or objectively valueless, unnameable, and entirely lacking a goal or purpose, moral or otherwise.

We find further evidence for the Daoist denial of the possibility of discovering moral facts in nature in the *Zhuangzi*: "to claim that there any such things as 'right' and 'wrong' before they come to be fully formed in someone's mind in this way—that is like saying you left for Yue today and arrived there yesterday. This is to regard the nonexistent as existent."[35] The failure of moral projection to correspond to nature breeds only more error and confusion: "the transitions of Humanity and Responsibility [the chief Confucian virtues] and trails of right and wrong are hopelessly tangled and confused."[36] For the Daoists, Confucianism, and moral discourse more generally, is stricken

[32] See Edward Slingerland (trans.), *Confucius Analects: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2003), p. 139.
[33] See Moeller, op. cit., p. 3.
[34] Ibid., p. 79.
[35] See Ziporyn, op. cit., p. 11.
[36] Ibid., p. 18.

with systematic projective error. Morality is a way to misunderstand the nature of the Dao, the essence of the eternal: "to not know the eternal—this is error."[37]

The Daoists also regarded the emergence of moral discourse as a sign of degradation and loss: "when the great Dao is dispensed with, then there is humanity and righteousness."[38] The *Zhuangzi* says, "when rights and wrongs waxed bright, the Dao began to wane,"[39] with moral discourse representing a kind of punishment whereby moralists "tattoo your face with Humanity and Responsibility and de-nose you with rights and wrongs."[40] For Daoists, the chief Confucian virtues are projected onto the world only as a result of the loss of awareness of the amorality of the universe. But the universe (the Dao) or nature (*tian*) is indeed amoral: "Heaven and earth are not humane. They regard the ten thousand things as straw dogs. The sage is not humane. He regards the people as straw dogs."[41] 'Straw dogs' were ritual objects imbued with momentary normative significance during a ceremony, but which were, once the ceremony was over, cast on the ground and stomped on as garbage. These lines seems to be saying both that nothing has any value beyond momentary projection (and, even then, everything is still intrinsically valueless) and that the Confucian obsession with humanity and ritual propriety betrays the fact that the values projected are ultimately fraudulent and illusory.

By claiming 'heaven and earth are not humane,' Daoists are basically asserting nature is amoral, that there are no moral facts, no true moral names. That the *Laozi* says nothing is really or objectively morally significant in nature is perhaps the strongest rejection of Confucian naturalist moral realism found in Daoism. Daoist moral anti-realism, developed through an error-theoretic recognition of the systemic failure of projective naming, is thoroughly opposed to Confucian moral realism. But the important question is, how do Daoists live in accordance with their proto-moral error theory? How do Daoists solve the 'now what' problem?

3. Nonassertive Moral Abolitionism

Recall that while AMA does better at not insulating error theorists, it is also charged with at once sounding too moral itself in its reasons for abolishing morality and being extreme in its request that others accept the error theory and abolish morality as well. Garner responds to these charges by admitting that AMA is driven by normative, yet not moral, concerns and that AMA is not nearly as extreme as it sounds. He simply requests that others try abolishing

[37] See Moeller, op. cit., p. 41 (translation modified).
[38] Ibid., p. 47.
[39] See Ziporyn, op. cit., pp. 14-15.
[40] Ibid., p. 48.
[41] See Moeller, op. cit. p. 15.

morality for a little while and see how it goes. His hunch is that not much would change for the worse, but rather much would change for the better.[42] Other assertive abolitionists tend to admit AMA is extreme, but claim sometimes extremity is required. Just as with atheism, perhaps deluded believers and redeemers need to be confronted in order to save them from their own irrationality and to save society from the negative effects of their false beliefs. This approach need not deny there are certain benefits to belief in God or moral facts, but it argues for the greater benefits for rationality and cooperation resulting from disbelief and abolition. The problems caused by morality and religion are extreme, so only the extremity of their abolition would solve them.

A third way to respond to the charge of extremism against AMA is to simply agree and stop being assertive about one's moral abolitionism. Yet, instead of backsliding into insulation, one just goes quiet about one's abolitionism. This seems to be the Daoist proposal. Let us call it quietist or nonassertive moral abolitionism (NMA). NMA claims it is unwise to be an assertive moral abolitionist and wise to be a nonassertive one. Of course, NMA presupposes one first accepts the error theory, as we have seen the Daoists do. What distinguishes NMA from AMA is that it will not urge others to do much of anything with their error theory. NMA annihilates morality by going silent about ethical and metaethical issues instead of encouraging others to also believe the error theory and annihilate morality.

There is evidence for NMA in the *Laozi*. Daoists takes a much more passive line than AMA recommends. They aim not to contest with anyone. They find it unwise not only to encourage people to speak in certain ways, like speaking without moral discourse, but to even argue with anyone in the first place. This goes to their more therapeutic goal in doing philosophy. The Daoist approach is to go quiet, practice stillness, withdraw from intentional or deliberate activity, let events unfold spontaneously, accept nature's fated transformations, and not judge nature's amoral indifference: "the sage resides with the task of nonaction, practices the teaching of nonspeaking;"[43] "to withdraw oneself when the work proceeds—that is the Dao of Heaven;"[44] and "One who knows does not speak. One who speaks does not know."[45] The *Zhuangzi* tells us the "Great Dao is unproclaimed" and "great demonstration uses no words."[46] To abolish moral discourse internally and yet not assert that others do the same seems to be the advice on offer. NMA might be the more therapeutically sound strategy.

[42] See Garner, op. cit., p. 511.
[43] See Moeller, op. cit., p. 7.
[44] Ibid., p. 23.
[45] Ibid., p. 131.
[46] See Ziporyn, op. cit., p. 14.

The *Laozi* mentions certain benefits that come from going quiet and adopting a nonassertive approach. Silently abolishing moral discourse, quelling the affective and conative turmoil that causes and results from moralizing, is a way to experience the tranquility Daoists seek. By embodying a kind of calm self-control and equanimity, the Daoists empty their heart-minds of the beliefs, desires, and emotions that drive and result from moral projection, thus freeing them from the agitation of anxiety and contentiousness: "To reach emptiness—this is the utmost. To keep stillness—this is control."[47] The Daoist sage returns to a pliant state of stress-free acceptance, innocence, and opacity: "I am serenely among them [people] and do not show any sign, like an infant that does not yet smile. I alone have abandoned. I have the heart of an idiot. The ordinary people are distinct—I alone am undifferentiated."[48]

The *Laozi* emphasizes that such an approach will result in the very provision of social order Confucians, other moral realists, and insulationists so heavy-handedly try to impose. The quiet abolition of moral discourse actually allows people to spontaneously coordinate their interactions and even display what Confucians would regard as virtuous behavior: "Abandon sageliness and discard knowledge, and the people will benefit a hundredfold. Abandon humanity and discard righteousness, and the people will return to filial piety and care."[49] The silent example of the sage's suspension of moral judgment seems to leave dormant in people the emotional turmoil and false beliefs that drives such judgments and provides them instead with a light-hearted joy and affirmation, enabling them to simply get along: "The ordinary people are in a good mood—as if enjoying a great sacrifice or climbing the terraces in the spring."[50]

How might insulationists respond to Daoist NMA? On the one hand, they would probably still find it extreme because they believe actively expressing moral or substituted normative judgments has an essential role in providing practical benefits. On the other hand, they could find the eschewing of asserting abolition mostly non-threatening. After all, it could be that a lone, quite individual who does not use moral language is not going to disrupt conventional behavior nearly as much as someone who encourages us to abolish entire ways of speaking. For insulationists, it would be detrimental if people stopped asserting or quasi-asserting moral discourse or its normative substitute because they think morality really does get people to behave. But if a kind of error theorist were to treat their metaethical reflections

[47] See Moeller op. cit, p. 41.
[48] Ibid., p. 51.
[49] Ibid., p. 49.
[50] Ibid., p. 51.

as a means towards eventually purging from themselves any desire to think or speak in ethical or metaethical terms, it is hard to see how they could still be accused of extremity. Insulationists would probably never even notice this figure in the first place, and so the abolitionist, as nonassertive, would drop out of the debate entirely. This should make everyone happy. Insulationists do not have to try to convince this abolitionist not to abolish morality or not encourage others to do the same, and nonassertive abolitionists can enjoy their nihilism, their annihilation of ethical and metaethical debate, in peace.

At the same time, insulationists still might be nervous, especially if the nonassertive abolitionist has the effect on people the *Laozi* claims. The example of a quiet abolitionist might be a subtle influence on others to empty their own heart-minds of the agitated mental states driving moral projection, thus leading to a decrease in moral discourse. Admittedly, this would be a very rare event, and there is no sense the Daoists expect their approach to work in any sort of routinized or common way. But it is entirely possible that silence can be as effective in generating certain behaviors as assertion. The Daoist concern, however, is primarily with those rare individuals with the fortitude to pull off moral abolition. If that happens to lead a few others do the same, the total number of Daoist sages wandering amongst us would still probably be exceedingly low. It does not seem insulationists should be that worried a rash of quietist Daoist sages is going to emerge and inspire everyone to give up moralizing.

The point I want to make here is that the Daoist-inspired NMA is much less extreme and thus much less a threat to the other competing error-theoretical views. By being nonassertive, Daoists are not even contending with insulationists. Indeed, they cannot even be accused of having moral reasons for abolishing morality as assertive abolitionists are. They quietly abolish morality for their own mental health, not because they are especially concerned with combating the purported injustice, elitism, and authoritarianism morality causes. Instead, they simply check out, and by doing so defuse any ethical or metaethical disagreement much more effectively than AMA could. This is a benefit Daoism offers to both someone seeking reprieve from the pathology of morality and a contemporary metaethicist trying to figure out which kind of error theorist they might like to be. The insulationists still might prefer abolitionists keep on using moral discourse or a normative substitute, but they should not mind certain quiet abolitionists keeping their abolition of morality to themselves. At least they are not explicitly seeking to convert anyone else to their view. This seems to be the only real way to overcome the intractability of ethical and metaethical debate. It is the best non-insulationist solution to the ‘now what’ problem.

4. Reactionary Moral Fictionalism

While there does seem to be evidence for a nonassertive kind of moral abolitionism in the *Laozi*, there are other moments in the text that sound more fictionalist. It is not as if the Daoist sage resides in some isolated state of total ignorance and silence. Rather, when he is stuck in social situations and has to do and say things, he remains detached from all that he does and says, which allows him to do and say it all with ease. The *Laozi* reads, "the sage knows without going, names without seeing, completes without acting."[51] There is further emphasis on speaking and acting without assertive force or intentionality, leading to the now-famous claim that the sage "does nothing," thus leaving "nothing undone."[52] With respect to speaking, the sage also says nothing and so leaves nothing unsaid, thus exhibiting a "spontaneous silent speech."[53]

These paradoxes can be taken to mean the sage subtracts assertive force from his utterances much like a revolutionary fictionalist might. The major difference is that the revolutionary fictionalist, while employing a discourse through pretense, is still active in the sense of reforming a kind of speech. RevMF involves the activity of revolt, revolt against the everyday attitude toward and practice of morality as involving full moral belief and assertion.[54] Such revolt is much too active for the Daoist. Even as the Daoist sage acts and speaks, he does neither, but rather pretends to when required, without feeling or belief, and only as a reaction, never an initiation. I will call this Daoist kind of fictionalism 'reactionary' (ReactMF) to distinguish it from the 'revolutionary' kind. To be clear, ReactMF can be regarded as a kind of RevMF insofar as it involves moral make-belief and quasi-assertion. However, ReactMF is unlike RevMF insofar as it does not recommend we treat morality in a fictionalist manner as a means to redeem morality and insulate us from the consequences of error theory.

An advocate of RevMF is supposed to be out in the world uttering moral judgments and engaging in moral disagreements because such an approach is supposed to foster greater cooperation. The reactionary fictionalist only engages with false moral discourse if they have to. Daoists do not go out propagating fictions for the sake of their social utility. Rather, if they find themselves trapped in situations saturated with moral discourse, they will play along and make the requisite moral noises while merely pretending to really believe what they are saying and so subtracting any assertive force from their utterances. Daoists play along. They never start the game. Daoists would always rather go quiet and employ NMA, but since they may find themselves in social situations where moral discourse is commonly

[51] Ibid., p. 113.
[52] Ibid., p. 115.
[53] Ibid., p. 59, translation modified.
[54] See Joyce, op. cit., p. 73.

used and it would be personally detrimental not to virtue signal to the group, they will utter the minimally necessary moral-sounding sentences in order to avoid bringing attention to themselves. The main motivation for Daoist ReactMF is again the therapeutic benefit of eliminating as much morality from one's life as possible.

We see more evidence of this approach in the *Zhuangzi*. This text is concerned with making sure the Daoist sage gets along with others in social contexts without engendering in them too many doubts about his sincerity. Moeller and D'Ambrosio have recently labeled this Zhuangian technique "genuine pretending."[55] The key balance to strike is to appear committed to moral discourse without starting any moral conversations or getting into moral disagreements or letting oneself fall into the trap of having genuine moral beliefs. The *Zhuangzi* counsels, "Don't let the external compromise get inside you and don't let your inner harmony show itself externally."[56] Just react to moral discourse if you have to, chime in unremarkably, but even then only make-believe and quasi-assert moral propositions. This approach seems to maximize freedom and well-being: "The Consummate Person uses his mind like a mirror, rejecting nothing, welcoming nothing: responding but not storing. Thus he can handle all things without harm."[57] The 'Consummate Person' has

> the physical form of a human being, but not the characteristic inclinations of a human being. Since he shares the human form, he lives among men. Since he is free of their characteristic inclinations, right and wrong cannot get at him. Minute and insignificant, he is just another man among the others. Vast and unmatched, he is alone in perfecting the Natural (*tian*) in himself.[58]

The *Zhuangzi* makes use of two figures that best approximate the ReactMF approach: Mr. Mengsun and the pretending tree. There is a story of a conversation between Yan Hui and Confucius where Yan asks about the odd behavior of Mengsun Cai, who was recognized for being a great mourner even though when his mother died he "wailed but shed no tears, unsaddened in the depths of his heart, observing the mourning but without real sorrow."[59] Confucius explains that Mr. Mengsun has seen through to the end of the issue and behaves in the way expected of him but remains detached from any social roles or moral beliefs or feelings humans are thought to have: "Others cry, so he cries too. And that is the only reason he does so."[60] Mr. Mengsun reacts because it is expected of him, and it would create

[55] See Hans-Georg Moeller & Paul D'Ambrosio, *Genuine Pretending: On the Philosophy of the* Zhuangzi (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).
[56] See Ziporyn, op. cit, p. 29.
[57] Ibid., p. 54.
[58] Ibid., p. 38.
[59] Ibid., p. 47.
[60] Ibid., p. 47.

difficulties for him if he refused, but he neither really believes nor feels proper mourning is valuable or virtuous. He does not even feel genuine loss. He feels very little.

And there is the story of Carpenter Shi and his disciple who pass a massive, gnarled, bizarre-looking tree that had been turned into a shrine. The disciple asks the Carpenter why the tree has not been cut down and the Carpenter says the tree is useless and worthless. Nothing of quality or endurance could be made from the tree. That night the tree tells the Carpenter in a dream that his judgments about him might be premature considering he has found a way to survive by being so useless. After the Carpenter tells the disciple about the dream the disciple asked why the tree was a shrine if it was so useless. The Carpenter castigates the disciple, explaining that the only way the tree could get away with being useless, and so not getting chopped down, was if it pretended to be a shrine, with such a pretense being an effective way to hide one's liberating worthlessness by performing a particular social role. Pretending to be a shrine, just like pretending to be an excellent mourner, thereby reactively embodying what society expects of one without being even slightly attached to the fiction, is a therapeutically sound way, according to the *Zhuangzi*, of enjoying the denial of objective moral significance.[61]

Joyful detachment from the moral fiction through which one reacts to society's expectations is encapsulated in the Daoist notion of 'wandering' (*you* 遊). Wandering is the positive aspect of ReactMF. The *Zhuangzi* reaches a pitch of delirious affirmation whereby one treats as 'right' whatever one encounters in their spontaneous, pointless, rambling, wandering life. Wandering involves saying yes to everything with joyful abandon. It is the way of treating everything as right, correct, and acceptable without believing or feeling much of anything. Wandering is the perfection of the Daoist goal of detached equanimity. The *Zhuangzi* calls wandering "going by the rightness of the present 'this,'" and when it is done without knowledge or effort, "it is the Dao."[62] The delight brought by "going by the rightness of the present 'this'" is best expressed in the story called "Three in the Morning:"

> A monkey trainer was distributing chestnuts. He said, 'I'll give you three in the morning and four in the evening.' The monkeys were furious. 'Well then,' he said, 'I'll give you four in the morning and three in the evening.' The monkeys were delighted. The change of description and arrangement caused no loss, but in one case it brought anger and in another delight. He just went by the rightness of the present 'this.' Thus, the sage uses various rights and wrongs to harmonize with others and yet remains at rest in the middle of Nature the Potter's Wheel. This is called 'Walking Two Roads.'[63]

[61] Ibid., p. 30.
[62] Ibid., p. 14.
[63] Ibid., p. 14.

Elsewhere, this harmonizing is called "the Radiance of Drift and Doubt," which "is the sage's only map. He makes no definition of what is right but instead entrusts it to the everyday function of each thing."[64] Such is the "joy" of opening oneself to all things without losing fullness,

> taking part everywhere as the springtime of each being. Connecting up with 'this' [what is regarded as right], your own mind becomes the site of the life-giving time. This is what is called keeping the innate powers [*de*] whole.[65]

Now, how might insulationists respond to Daoist ReactMF? One of the criticisms against RevMF is that it would be unfeasible to expect people to successfully consistently make-believe in and quasi-assert moral propositions, that it would be too difficult to effectively revolt and reform moral discourse. By being reactionary instead of fully revolutionary, the Daoist approach seems to make being a moral fictionalist much more feasible. If one only pretends when one has to, and even then only in a detached and indifferent manner, the pretense becomes a much easier performance. The motivation to pretend is not that of aiming to use false moral discourse to preserve social order and motivate cooperation, as with RevMF, but to experience as much of the joyful equanimity of being free from moral belief, sentiment, and concern as possible. Conservationists may still want error theorists to continue on believing in and asserting moral judgments, and assertive abolitionists may want to encourage others to eliminate morality, but they should not find the Daoist reactionary form of fictionalism to be as much a recipe for doxastic disaster as they regard the revolutionary form. Daoist ReactMF would use morality less often and with less intensity, and only ever in response to an overwhelmingly moralized social context. The Daoist approach is more benign as well insofar as it is less likely to lead to moral pretenders getting caught and accused of insincerity, for their pretense is merely a fun way of wandering through and adapting to our pointless lives.

To conclude, we can emphasize a point hinted at by Lutz: solutions to the 'now what' problem can be combined and seen as workable in different circumstances. The Daoist view can be summarized as one of active silence and reactive pretense. The former is the predominant approach while the latter is a contextual response when silence is not an option. There is nothing incoherent about such a combination. Rather, it the best strategy for integrating into one's life the truth of moral error theory. If moral abolitionists toned down their assertiveness regarding the wisdom of abolition and moral fictionalists emptied themselves of the revolutionary zeal with which they aim to reform and retain moral discourse, perhaps error theorists could be more unified in their moral anti-realism

[64] Ibid., p. 15.
[65] Ibid., p. 37.

and obtain greater personal well-being from their metaethical reflections. Since their motivation for being error theorists in the first place was therapeutic and not merely epistemic, the Daoists develop a non-insulationist solution to the 'now what' problem that allows for the de-escalation and diminishment of deep, intractable ethical and metaethical disagreements. Going nonassertive about abolishing morality and reactive about pretending to believe in and assert moral propositions might be more effective at obtaining both greater social order and personal joy than any attempt to insulate oneself from the error theory.