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ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to the emerging field of comparative metaethics by placing the thought of the Neo-Daoist, Guo Xiang 郭象, within the taxonomy of contemporary metaethics in order to offer two novel views: nonassertive moral abolitionism and reactionary moral fictionalism. These views help answer the 'now what?' question that arises for moral error theorists after they come to believe that all moral judgments are false. The views also assist in the understanding of Guo's attempt to combine Daoism and Confucianism through his synthesis of *ziran* 自然 and *mingjiao* 名教, spontaneity and morality. The paper defends the claims that Guo was a proto-error theorist and used a distinct criterion to answer the 'now what?' question. With this criterion, Guo recommends morality's quiet abolition along with the reservation of occasionally implementing a passive and reactive pretense performance of moral speech-acts when socially required.

1. Contemporary metaethics

Guo Xiang 郭象 (ca. 252–312 CE) is the author of the most important commentary on the Chinese Daoist classic, the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, a text he also compiled and edited down to its present, 33 chapter form. Guo was a key member of a unique and original philosophical movement that emerged following the fall of the Han dynasty 漢 (206 BCE-220 CE). This movement came to be referred to as 'dark learning' (*xuanxue* 玄學), or Neo-Daoism (Chan, 2019; D Ambrosio, 2016). Guo's commentary on the *Zhuangzi* is as much a philosophical achievement in its own right as the classic upon which it is the commentary. Guo developed many novel views on the nature of the Dao, identity, selfhood, action, transformation, and so on. His thought was also characterized by the ever-present issue for the Neo-Daoist movement of trying to reconcile *ziran* 自然 and *mingjiao* 名教, spontaneity and morality, Daoist self-so and the Confucian teaching of names. While there have been many excellent studies on the normative and moral implications of Guo's attempted synthesis of *ziran* and *mingjiao* (Bender, 2024; Chiu, 2024; Coles, 2019; D'Ambrosio, 2024; Fraser, 2020; Shen, 2013; Tan, 2024), there have been no papers dedicated to explicitly determining the metaethical consequences of Guo's thought. This paper contributes to the emerging field of comparative metaethics by placing Guo within the

taxonomy of contemporary metaethics in order to offer two novel views that contribute to answering the 'now what?' question for moral error theorists (Marshall, 2019). These views are nonassertive moral abolitionism and reactionary moral fictionalism. The paper, therefore, has two goals: to invite contemporary metaethicists, in particular moral error theorists, to consider Guo's metaethical reflections as possible answers to the 'now what?' question, and to invite contemporary comparative philosophers and scholars of Chinese philosophy to consider Guo's commentary in terms of the possibly clarifying taxonomy of contemporary metaethics.

Let us start, then, with a rough-and-ready guide to metaethical taxonomy. Metaethics is the study of the psychological, semantic, metaphysical, and epistemological conditions of possibility for moral theory and practice (Miller, 2013; Sayre mccord, 2023). There are thus many ways to slice the metaethical pie. One could start with questions of moral psychology. When one utters a moral judgment, what sort of mental state does one express? If the answer is belief—that is, a representational mental state that serves as the carrier of a proposition—then what we have is moral cognitivism. If the answer is a different mental state, say a cognitive or affective state like a desire or emotion, then this is moral noncognitivism. Semantic questions usually follow these psychological questions. The main one is, is morality a meaningful, truth-apt discourse in the business of possibly representing the moral facts? If yes, then this is moral factualism. If no, then we have moral nonfactualism. Moral cognitivism and moral factualism usually come together as a package deal. If we are expressing moral beliefs when we utter moral judgments, then that likely entails that morality itself is a meaningful, truth-apt discourse. Likewise, moral noncognitivism and nonfactualism often come together, though there are exceptions like Mark Eli Kalderon's hermeneutic moral fictionalism which combines moral noncognitivism with moral factualism (Kalderon, 2005). The more common view is that if morality is the means for the projection of desires, prescriptions, emotions, and so on, then it is not likely going be a strictly-speaking meaningful or descriptive discourse (van Roojen, 2024).

Questions about moral metaphysics quickly follow from these psychological and semantic questions. If we are expressing beliefs when expressing moral judgments and using the meaningful, truth-apt discourse of morality, and beliefs are representational, then what is that of which these beliefs are meant to be the representation? What is morality meant to be meaningfully about? 'Moral reality', is the usual answer, but what's that? Moral realism is the view that there exist mind-independent, objective moral facts of the matter, and these facts can be cashed out in terms of moral properties, moral events, moral relations, moral states of affairs, and so on, depending on one's metaphysical preferences. These moral facts can be described in terms of reasons, values, or character traits like rightness and wrongness, goodness and badness (or evil), and virtue and vice. Moral anti-realism would be the contrary view. It would doubt or deny the existence of mind-independent moral facts. Now, moral cognitivism, factualism, and realism often come together. It appears to be the most common view amongst contemporary Anglophone professional philosophers (Bourget & Chalmers, 2023, p. 7). The unity starts to break down, however, when moral realists need to discern where precisely these moral facts are meant to be. One group, moral non-naturalists, claim moral facts are neither themselves natural facts nor reducible to any natural facts given that the normativity of morality, its being an issue primarily of 'oughts' and not 'ises', renders them truly a different sort of entity than anything described or explained by any natural or even

social science. Moral naturalists, by contrast, do claim that moral facts are already themselves natural facts or are reducible to natural facts.

There are two main ways one could be a moral anti-realist. One could hold the corresponding seemingly obvious combination of moral noncognitivism, moral non-factualism, and moral anti-realism. If morality is technically not a meaningful discourse, but instead the means for the projection of non-representational mental states like desires and emotions, then it would not seem that there could be any moral facts about which morality could serve as the representation. This way of obtaining moral anti-realism is not usually explicitly argued for by moral noncognitivists and nonfactu-alists, however. Indeed, many noncognitivists try to salvage the apparent realist sur-face grammar of morality by insulating themselves from the anti-realist consequences of their views by developing surrogates like a logic of attitudes (Blackburn, 1984; Gibbard, 1990).

The other way of being a moral anti-realist is more forthright about its metaphysical denial of moral reality. This is moral error theory (Joyce, 2024, 2001; Mackie, 1977; Olson, 2014. It combines moral cognitivism and factualism with anti-realism. Here moral episte-mology becomes more important. If moral realists are partial success theorists, claiming some moral judgments are true and some are not, and if moral noncognitivists claim morality is technically neither true nor false, then error theorists will offer a third option whereby all moral judgments will be false. They often make a point about moral meta-physics in order to argue for the total falsity or untruth of all moral discourse. This point is that there is something off about the very nature of moral facts. Moral facts are supposed to provide reasons for action that are objective, categorical, authoritative, prescriptive, non-negotiable, and over-ridding. That is what makes them moral. But there is nothing like that detected in the known universe as covered by any legitimate science. The very concept of a moral fact might even be inherently incoherent (Kalf, 2015). So, moral facts must not exist at all, which means every atomic judgment aiming to represent them fails. Error theorists think that if moral facts did exist, then the non-naturalist would be right about them, but since they do not, given that there is nothing non-natural, then such a robust realist view must be false. Robust moral anti-realism is the way to go.

While there are a variety of less robust moral realist and anti-realist views, we can now move on to how metaethicists respond to their views. The questions is, now what? Now what do we do with morality after we have sliced up the metaethical pie and arrived at some metaethical views? The answer to this question depends upon what one wanted to get out of doing metaethics in the first place. For most metaethi-cists, the motivation for doing metaethics is to provide the grounds for the vindication and preservation of some moral views, that is, some normative or applied ethical views. This obviously matches up with most metaethicists being moral realists of some sort. Moral anti-realists, on the other hand, likely feeling compelled by some urge for epistemic hygiene, are mostly motivated by the instinct to debunk meaningless or false discourses. While strong, this instinct is often quickly checked, however. We have already seen how moral noncognitivists aim to avoid the anti-realism of their views by developing a logic of attitudes. Error theorists also insulate themselves from, and inoculate themselves against, their anti-realism by answering the 'now what?' question in ways that fulfil a social or collectivist criterion (Machuca, 2018). Such a criterion is primarily concerned with retaining as much of morality as possible, regardless of its

systemic falsity, because they find it to be too psychologically and socially useful for generating human coordination and cooperation to be jettisoned. For example, Matt Lutz writes,

> [T]he best solution to the 'Now What' Problem must meet three criteria: It must not endorse any positive moral beliefs. Nonetheless, it must allow us to continue acting morally when appropriate and using moral language. And the moral language and (in particular) action cannot be based on acceptance of a moral proposition . . . (Lutz, 2014, p. 362).

For Lutz, any solution must pay heed to 'what we care about, our deepest commitments' (Lutz, 2014, p. 361). Likewise, Toby Svoboda has argued that an acceptable solution 'ought to preserve morality because of its useful features, including interpersonal coordination and intrapersonal motivation' (Svoboda, 2017, p. 6). Any effective answer to the 'now what?' question should preserve 'advantages including possessing the conceptual means to avoid moral error while retaining useful features, such as the ability to allow and to account for moral motivation, moral disagreement, and moral reasoning' (Svoboda, 2017, p. 8). So, error theorists have mostly agreed that what matters when it comes to answering the 'now what?' question is preserving morality's apparent psychological and social utility.

The most obvious way an error theorist could retain morality's apparent psychological and social utility is to simply continue on genuinely asserting full moral beliefs in most contexts as if nothing had happened by coming to believe the error theory. This is the approach of the moral conservationist (Olson, 2014, pp. 190–196). Another group of error theorists, revolutionary moral expressivists, offer another answer to the 'now what?' question. Revolutionary moral expressivists say 'cognitivist moral discourse and judgment should be replaced with non-cognitivist moral discourse and judgment' (Svoboda, 2017, p. 7). The mental state one is in when expressing a moral judgment should not be belief, but emotion or desire, thus replacing cognitivism with a noncognitivist or expressivist view like emotivism or prescriptivism. Also, the speech act one performs should not be assertion, but rather expression of approval or disapproval through an emotion or command. A version of revolutionary moral expressivism that has received a lot of attention is revolutionary moral fictionalism (Joyce, 2024, pp. 151–198, 2001, pp. 206–231). As opposed to Nolan, Restall, & West's content moral fictionalist view, which says error theorists should replace genuine assertion of full belief in moral facts with genuine assertion of full belief in moral fictions, Joyce's force fictionalist version of the view recommends error theorists replace genuine assertion of full belief with quasi-assertion of make-belief in moral facts, with such a pretense performance being an expression of a noncognitive (or less-than-fully cognitive) mental state like make-belief (Nolan et al., 2005, pp. 307–330).

While there are a variety of other answers to the 'now what?' question, we can move on to the view most error theorists are trying to avoid: assertive moral abolitionism. Perhaps abolishing morality is the most intuitive answer to the 'now what?' question. Assertive moral abolitionism recommends error theorists give up entirely on asserting beliefs in moral facts (Garner, 2007). Of course, to most error theorists, the proposal of abolishing morality makes it impossible to retain what is apparently useful about it. The abolitionist claims that the goal of achieving 'what we care about, our deepest commitments' is achieved precisely by abolishing morality because morality does more harm than good

since it renders disagreements intractable, provides cover for social inequalities and structural injustices, and is often used to motivate international war. Thus, to obtain what it was thought morality was useful for obtaining (coordination and cooperation), it is best to abolish morality altogether.

Assertive moral abolitionists are concerned not merely with the negative social effects of morality, but with the pathological nature of moral belief and discourse as well. Moral discourse, with its perennial attendant intractable disagreements, involve deep emotional disturbance. A moral abolitionist like Ian Hinckfuss has emphasized that morality is often the cause and effect of psychological distress (Hinckfuss, 1987). Whether one is a cognitivist or not, it is obvious that moral judgments are often vehicles for the experiencing and discharging of deeply felt emotions. The emotions that are predominant in the expression of moral judgments are mostly negative ones. If morality is so skewed toward the negative, it makes sense to view it as pathological. Almost no one expresses moral judgments from a condition of general mental health or well-being. Morality is more often than not a vehicle for the projection of sadness or anger or anxiety. Morality is rarely a means for the expression of calm or joy. Moral abolitionism is thus partially driven by a desire to abolish morality because it would likely be better for everyone's mental health. Moral abolitionism thus sounds to be offering a moral, or at least normative, critique of morality. We will return to these issues below as we develop Guo Xiang's proto-error theory, his novel criterion for answering the 'now what?' question, and his answers to this question.

2. Trace error theory

Throughout his twenty-plus years of translating and commenting upon Guo Xiang's commentary on the *Zhuangzi*, Brook Ziporyn has consistently emphasized that Guo's primary concern was the reconciliation of *ziran* with *mingjiao*, of self-so, natural spontaneity with purposive, 'artificial' morality (Ziporyn, 1993, 2003, 2013a, 2013b, 2015). For Ziporyn, Guo's chief aim was to identify as closely as possible 'what we do prior to any consideration of what we ought to do [with] what we do after such consideration' (Ziporyn, 1993, p. 511). Ziporyn writes,

> Guo wanted to identify the realms of social morality and spontaneity much more thoroughly than had been done before, so that the eradication of the former realm could no longer be thought of as a possibility. Rather than merely harmonizing the two realms, he wanted to make them identical, so that morality was itself conceived of as spontaneous. To do this he would have to extend the realm of self-so to include its opposite, so that 'the teaching of names' could itself be seen as self-so, and thus be given the highest value. (Ziporyn, 1993, p. 512)

As odd it may sound, the approach Guo took to achieve this identification involved first clarifying the basic falsity of what is broadly considering to be the common content of morality. Indeed, Guo ended up indirectly recommending a kind of 'eradication' of morality in order to render it perfectly spontaneous, as we will see. The best place to start with Guo's metaethics, and his entire thought, is his distinction between *ziran* and *ji* 跡, spontaneity and traces. For Guo, in themselves, all things are *ziran*: self-so, natural, and spontaneous. They are independent and self-sufficient. They are self-causing, self-

creating, and self-generating processes of momentary actual existence, especially insofar as 'causation', 'creation', and 'generation' are understood here in an absolutist and necessitarian sense. Things are events, situations, or states of affairs of nonpurposive, nondeliberate, unconscious transforming emerging, and vanishing. They just happen. That is all they are and all they could be. Moreover, for Guo, they are the way they should be, inherently perfect and self-so. The problem is that we do not see things that way.

Humans introduce relations into things. Through abstraction, they draw contrasts between things, establishing relative distinctions between internal and external, self and other, cause and effect, here and there, this and that, right and wrong, good and bad, and so on. Humans project relations in order to know and evaluate things, so to give them purpose and utility, and they do so because they are conscious beings. For Guo, consciousness is a disaster. Consciousness amounts to a loss of spontaneity, the loss of the 'Heavenly Impulse' (*tianji* 天機) essential to all things. Guo writes, 'Without conscious recognition, without understanding, the Heavenly Impulse spontaneously emerges, so they [things] are as if oblivious' (Ziporyn, 2009, p. 193). Consciousness, and all the categories of thought it projects, results from and entails a loss of spontaneous selfhood and existence. As Guo tell us, 'what we call the mind bent on knowledge, the understanding consciousness, is born of losing one's proper match with what one is' (Ziporyn, 2009, p. 166). Consciousness is a kind of secular fall from grace. It means unfitness, lack of self-identity, a separation from something's nature or natural determinacy (*xing* 性). As Ziporyn puts it, 'To be conscious of anything indicates a problem, a lack of fit, a lack of self-rightness/self-so' (Ziporyn, 1993, p. 516). Guo states, 'He who still has consciousness of fitness is not yet really fit' (Ziporyn, 2013b, p. 160). Without consciousness, things naturally fit both with themselves, within their allotted (*fen* 分) nature and boundaries, and with all other things. Spontaneously, things fittingly vanish (*ming* 冥) into each other. Things are naturally fit and so they naturally fit. They exhibit spontaneous fitness and thus naturally fit together. They are 'comfortable' (*shi* 適) to the degree of mutual unconscious oblivion and forgetting. Things are 'vast and open and yet comfortably fitted to every situation', Guo says (Ziporyn, 2009, pp. 178–9). And yet the pathology of consciousness interrupts all this, the inherent spontaneous fitness of all things.

For Guo, consciousness, and all the all-too-human loss and unfitness it entails, is a trace left by what is natural, self-so, and spontaneous. Consciousness is a sort of inadvertent and unintended epiphenomenon secreted by things in themselves. Thus, whatever consciousness projects, most especially relations, are also traces, more mere epiphenomena. Guo's distinction between what leaves traces and the traces they leave is closely connected to the issue of normativity and morality, which, as modes of thought and talk concerned with reasons, also require the projection of relations. The issue of the ontological status of moral entities comes to the fore in Guo's discussion of traces. Purported moral facts are traces left by that which is not itself a trace, but which leaves them, which is itself amorally self-so. Moral facts, then, are projections that, at least in terms of their conceptual content and semantic extension, fail to retain and thus remain the natural spontaneity of what expresses them. Values, rights, wrongs, norms, everything normative, evaluative, axiological, in this Chinese context: names—they are all traces born of unfitness. As Guo says, 'Right and wrong are born from unfitness, discomfort' (Ziporyn, 2003, p. 74). Moral entities carry the same pathology as consciousness itself, which makes sense considering it is conscious minds that project them. Moral entities are traces left by what is

natural. They are the seeming epiphonema secreted by the spontaneity of things, and insofar as that is what they are, they amount to failed entities, entities which fail to be what they are. Their emergence amounts to a degradation and a loss, a separation from nature and a thing's nature. Ziporyn writes, 'there is no normative or Mencian dimension to the content of *xing* for Guo' (Ziporyn, 2003, p. 58). Moreover, moral traces are entities whose propositional content fails to correspond to what they themselves actually are or what anything else actually is. They are in error. They are false. Guo offers us, therefore, a trace error theory, which includes a moral error theory.

It is thus true not only of moral traces, but of all traces, that they are false. As Ziporyn puts it, 'traces invite . . . falsification and the loss of spontaneity' (Ziporyn, 2003, p. 57). In his commentary on the 'Horses Hooves' chapter from the *Zhuangzi*, Guo's general principle is that 'when something beautiful [i.e. good, attractive] is produced in front, falsification is born behind' (Ziporyn, 2003, p. 57). One even gets the sense that all traces result from errant evaluative or normative projection, that there is something inalienably normative about all consciousness, knowledge, relations, and so on, which makes all traces false. Ziporyn notes that 'traces—the effect of one spontaneous event or moment on another [are] held over due to erroneous valuation' (Ziporyn, 2013b, p. 166). Ziporyn makes the further point that the problem is not that traces offer only a completely errant, instead of partially successful, morality, but that they entail any conscious evaluations of anything at all: 'The problem for Guo is not that the world has false values so much as that it has any cognitive values at all; values, that is, the conscious esteeming of one thing as inherently more worthy than another, are necessarily pernicious' (Ziporyn, 1993, p. 525). Morality, knowledge, relations, and consciousness all exhibit the same error of failed projection, the same degradation and loss stemming from the intentionality and imposed purposiveness of trace-cognition. Traces are in error, then, because they either follow from or entail normative, evaluative, and moral projections which are themselves in error. Morality, *mingjiao*, either infects or is infected by all human conscious, intentional thoughts, assertions, and endeavors with the same basic mistake and loss. Systemic falsity and chronic morbidity is the human condition. But we may wonder why. Why are traces like this? Why is morality like this?

Guo provides a proto-genealogy of morality to explain how names emerge, how traces are secreted such that they necessarily involve false normative and evaluative projection. It is again rooted in consciousness and the universal human tendency to set up relative oppositions. It is further rooted in the desire for permanence and the need to imitate past excellence. Value is an expression of esteem for what has past. When one views an admirably spontaneous expression of love or integrity, say, the need to capture, idolize and imitate it—to turn it into a frozen standard of evaluation and judgment for all that follows it—is insatiable. Intentional emulation is the force driving the global error of trace-cognition. Mimesis is the host. It is the source of the sickness that characterizes human consciousness and normative projection. Guo uses the Confucian virtues to make this point. He writes,

> The concept of 'Humanity' is the trace left behind by an instance of unbiased love. The concept of 'Responsibility' is the effect left behind by an instance of bringing something to completion. Love is not Humanity, but the trace of Humanity comes from love. Completing things is not Responsibility, but the effect of Responsibility emerges from the act of completing things. Maintaining Humanity and Responsibility is insufficient to bring about an

understanding of real love and real benefit, which come from intentionlessness. Hence, they must be forgotten. But this is merely the forgetting of the traces and effects. It is not yet the wondrous comprehension into which one vanishes completely. So he has still come to penetrate them to the point of vanishing [into them]. (Ziporyn, 2009, p. 204)

Elsewhere, Guo similarly describes how the main Confucian virtues of humanity and responsibility, or 'benevolence' and 'righteousness', emerge, emphasizing their false and damaging effects:

> That which causes no harm to things does not do so because it is practicing benevolence, but the trace 'benevolence' moves in it; that which makes every principle hit the mark is not practicing righteousness, but the effect 'righteousness' appears in it. Thus hitting the mark and causing no harm are not brought about by benevolence and righteousness. But the world goes running after [these traces], discarding themselves to follow others so that they lose their ever-so [i.e., their self-so]. Therefore the disordering of the mind does not come from what is ugly but always from beautiful appearances; the disruption of the world does not come from evil, but always from benevolence and righteousness. Thus benevolence and righteousness are tools for the disruption of the world. (Ziporyn, 2013b, pp. 175–6)

Guo also discusses how moral entities emerge through the attempt to preserve the traces of a past king or sage or both. Guo, discussing benevolence further, tell us that,

> If one calls benevolence and righteousness good, then he will be willing to lose his life in his devotion to them. This is not even being benevolent to one's own nature and life. If one is not benevolent to oneself, what good can he be to others? (Ziporyn, 1993, p. 524)

Ziporyn comments on this passage in the following way: 'Benevolence is the trace of a former king in a former moment; but if one lets one's own nature, the present moment of self-so in the present situation, be subordinated to it, possessed by it, modeled by it, if "that" is made the standard for "this", the self-so of "this", its very "thisness", is perverted, and this is not good' (Ziporyn, 1993, p. 523).

For Guo, therefore, morality is not only false and baleful, but self-defeating. The attempt to be selfless and other-focused backfires. Any intentional attempt to do anything is the miscarriage of a spontaneous action. Guo says the more humans 'start thinking of acting kindly for the sake of each other, then the more conscientious they are in their kindness, the more falsity and meagreness [in actual mutual benefit] will flourish' (Ziporyn, 2015, p. 417). In a sense, morality itself may be bad, but we will have to, for the sake of space, leave unaddressed the metaethical implications of this apparently second-order moral condemnation of morality. For now, the key point is that morality emerges in 'the application of this rightness in a place other than that of its spontaneous origin' (Ziporyn, 1993, p. 524). This is what makes morality—indeed, all traces, all conscious projection, all the categories of thought that make human phenomenology possible—false and malign. Guo says that morality, all normative and evaluative judgment, all blame and praise 'are born from insufficiency' (Ziporyn, 1993, p. 527). This is rooted in the human violation of nature and all things' nature, their *xing*, their allotted natural determinacy. Guo writes, 'Each has its determinate nature; thus those endowed with much have no excess and those endowed with little have no insufficiency. But the dissipations of emotional desires never fail to disparage the little and value the much; seeing the valuable, they artificially try to copy it, thereby exceeding their own original function and harassing their self-so determinateness' (Ziporyn, 1993, p. 526). Morality,

therefore, stands condemned by Guo. So, the question is then, what to do about this situation? How can one avoid the 'falsification and loss of one's nature' that morality necessarily involves (Ziporyn, 1993, p. 528)? What to do with a false and harmful discourse like morality? What to do with traces in general, with humanity? Now what?

3. Nonassertive moral abolitionism

As noted in the first section, contemporary moral error theorists have offered a variety of responses to the 'now what?' question. None of these options, however, quite capture what Guo recommends one do in response to the reality of traces. In particular, placed in the terms of the taxonomy of answers to the 'now what?' question, Guo offers two novel answers that modify two extant views: assertive moral abolitionism and revolutionary moral fictionalism. Guo offers, instead, a nonassertive moral abolitionism and a reactionary moral fictionalism. Recall that the answers to 'now what?' question follow the collectivist or social criterion. Guo, in contrast, will employ a more individualist and therapeutic criterion. He will make only oblique recommendations, and for a quite limited number of people, if any at all. While it is the use of the collectivist or social criterion that makes moral abolitionism assertive and moral fictionalism revolutionary, Guo's use of a more individualist and therapeutic criterion will make his version of moral abolitionism nonassertive and his version of moral fictionalism reactionary. Guo's version of moral abolitionism will be more quietist, based more on Daoist notions of forgetting and ignoring, an approach rooted in calm, stillness, and reticence in the face of near-constant public moralizing and trace-mongering. Guo's version of moral fictionalism, as a kind of second moment following his more quietist moral abolitionism, will be based on the Daoist notion of emptying one's mind and mental states of intentionality and propositional content so that one can simply reflect the world back to it through a pretense performance of selective aspects of moral discourse when one is socially expected to do so. This will be found, for example, in Guo's notion of 'eremitism at court' (Jia, 2015).

The assertive moral abolitionist says not only that morality is false, but that it is overall 'bad' for people, that it generates and sustains conflict, promotes war and injustice, serves as a means for discharging primarily negative emotions, and so on. The way the abolitionist would like to abolish morality; however, is through what seems like further moralizing, further collective and public proclamations that sound, if not moral, then at least highly normative. Abolitionists are assertive about their abolitionism. They want everyone to first become moral error theorists and then to abolish morality. Assertive moral abolitionism is the view that error theorists should be directly addressing and confronting nearly everyone, pitching moral abolition to as many interlocutors as possible: non-philosophers, metaethicists, and other error theorists (Garner, 2007, p. 506). Abolitionists assert their view with a kind of zeal. Joel Marks writes,

> 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. (Marks, 2013, p. 14)

While moral abolitionism recommends that one not assert atomic moral judgments, it is assertive about metaethical and metametaethical claims. It says we should not only abolish believing in and uttering atomic moral judgments, but we should encourage others to do the same by believing the error theory and encouraging others to abolish morality. Assertive moral abolitionism asserts the truth of the error theory and the prudence of abolition. Such assertiveness on the part of the abolitionist is probably driven by the social or collective desire to save people from both the individual and collective ill effects of morality.

Revolutionary moral fictionalists are just as zealous. They are self-described revolutionaries after all. They intend to strike an agreement among fellow error theorists such that they will all start treating morality as a useful fiction together through the mutual performance of the quasi-assertion of moral make-beliefs instead of the genuine assertion of full moral beliefs. The 'revolution' involved here is one of overthrowing the normal practice of morality by convincing as many as possible of the truth of moral error theory and then convincing these believers of the psychological and social utility of morality to the degree that it becomes worthwhile to retain it but without the genuine assertion of full belief in moral properties. The better way to retain morality's utility without falling back into the irrationality of believing in and asserting what one does not believe, as it seems moral conservationists do, is to treat morality as a fiction and get as many others as possible to do the same. However, instead of genuinely asserting full beliefs in moral fictions—thereby replacing non-existent moral entities (categorial reasons) with existing fictional moral entities, as content moral fictionalists do—revolutionary moral fictionalists would like to take a force fictionalist approach and treat morality as a kind of live action role-playing game where everyone in on the game performs their lines and embodies their characters together as if they were actors in a play or film (Beckman, 2018). As we will see, Guo is somewhat sympathetic to this fictionalist approach, but we need to first see how he employs a more non-assertive kind of moral abolitionism.

Guo's immediate response to the phenomenon of traces, and hence to names and thus morality, is to quietly ignore and forget them. We have already seen how Guo describes the preferability of forgetting the concepts of Humanity and Responsibility through intentionlessness. Guo often describes the sage as perfectly self-sufficient because he 'forgets good and evil', which means he is 'precluded [from] cognizing other determinacies [natures] as worthy of esteem and censure' (Ziporyn, 1993, p. 527). Ziporyn tells us Guo 'makes a pragmatic recommendation: we should learn to ignore these traces' (Ziporyn, 1993, p. 527). Guo's recommendation of ignoring traces can be found in his reading of the *Zhuangzi*'s emphasis on 'sitting and forgetting' (*zuowang* 坐忘) and 'fasting the mind' (*xinzhai* 心齋) (Wang, 2024; Ziporyn, 2009, pp. 26–28). Guo tells us the sages 'forget heaven and earth and let all things go. Outside, they were unaware of space and time; inside, they were oblivious to their own existence' (Ziporyn, 2009, p. 149). Forgetting space and time means forgetting the categories of thought wherein relations, and thus morality, are made possible by trace-cognition. Forgetting traces and ignoring morality is even necessary for the specifically Daoist kind of metaphysical unity Guo offers:

> Forgetting what year it is, life and death are mysteriously unified. Forgetting what should or should not be, right and wrong are threaded onto a single string. The shaking loose of right and wrong, life and death, to form a oneness is the utmost guideline. The utmost guideline pervades unobstructedly without end, and thus one who entrusts herself to it is never able to be brought to halt. (Ziporyn, 2009, p. 161)

Commenting on the *Zhuangzi*'s description of a true virtuoso as being the only one capable of affirming his spontaneous fate even while playing 'around near Archer Yi's target, lurking near the bull's-eye', Guo claims that it is 'because the world is constantly at war over benefit and harm, everyone in the world is Archer Yi, and anyone who does not cast off her body, forget her understanding, and undulate along with all things is lurking near Archer Yi's bull's-eye', which I take to mean that Guo is saying the best way to survive a world of ceaseless moralizing and ubiquitous pathological emotional agitation is to simply quietly forget and ignore one's and everyone else's all-too-human trace-consciousness and its constant tendency to project moral entities onto an amorally natural and self-so world (Ziporyn, 2009, p. 35, 181). In other words, it is in forgetting all about traces that one is able to cease asserting beliefs in moral entities by quietly suspending one's assertive use of moral discourse entirely. Guo further comments on the *Zhuangzi*'s notion of the 'Consummate Person' by highlighting his intentionless and spontaneous quietude, his ability to both act and speak and yet remain still like the flowing of water and the silence of a reservoir: 'The Consummate Person's activity is heaven, his stillness earth, his motion the flow of water, his stopping the silence of the reservoir. But the silence of the reservoir and the flow of the water, the action of heaven and the stillness of earth, all are one in being self-so, free of deliberate activity' (Ziporyn, 2009, p. 208). Indeed, 'although the stillness and the action may be different, his unfathomable silence is one' (Ziporyn, 2009, p. 208).

Through such spontaneous forgetting and silence, the Consummate Person simply drops moral discourse and traces as such. The Consummate Person is nonassertive while he both acts and remains still. He abolishes morality not by asserting that anyone else should do the same, or that anyone else should do much of anything for that matter. Rather, he simply quietly forgets and ignores the inevitable internal and external emergence of traces, with their ineliminable moral content and hence systemic falsity and deleterious nature, while spontaneously wandering through a world into which he perfectly fits. Quiet oblivion is the way to answer the 'now what?' question with respect to what to do with traces and morality once one realizes their inherent falsity and virulence. Morality disrupts the world, so we should forget about it, and not let it disrupt us. But asserting such a point is either moral or at least normative, merely more traces. So, Guo counsels we should go quiet, ignoring morality in oblivion. This is nonassertive moral abolitionism.

Now, it is not that Guo does not prefer that others do this as well. It would be nice if they could: 'If they could forget what they value and preserve their pure, simple allotment, they would not exceed their "nature" and all the different endowments would be complete' (Ziporyn, 1993, p. 526). But to consciously, intentionally impose moral abolition or trace forgetfulness on anyone would only exacerbate the problem, leading to only more moralizing, more traces, more falsity, more suffering. This, then, is the motivation for the quietism of Guo's first answer to the 'now what?' question: if one could quietly avoid, ignore, forget, and thus abolish from one's own life the error and illness of traces and

morality, one could fully embody and experience one's wise overcoming of the source of humanity's problems and thus identify oneself completely with one's unconscious, non-intentional, spontaneous nature. Insofar as Guo is moved to fully integrate into his life the consequences of his trace error theory, we can consider his first answer to the 'now what?' question as non-insulationist and an expression of the application of an individualist and therapeutic criterion, as the opposed to the insulationism of the social and collectivist criterion applied by the other answers to the 'now what?' question already available.

There is another important reason Guo does not assert the need for everyone to engage in moral abolition or trace eradication: it is not possible in the first place. Guo believes traces are inevitable and thus ultimately ineradicable. While one can successfully quietly ignore them, such an approach does not eliminate them. They are always there. Why? Because, for Guo, the traces left by what leaves them are as necessary or fated as what leaves them. Indeed, they are necessary precisely because what leaves them, the self-so of the allotted natures of things, is itself always necessary. It is only natural, after all, that humans aim to emulate the excellence of the sages. Humans thus have a kind of tragic fate, condemned to always trying to imitate the inimitable, determined to always get ensnared in trace-cognition and moral projection. Of course, certain sages or consummate persons can still ignore traces. It is also in their nature to necessarily do so. But to try to abolish sages or their imitation by the majority would not quite work. For Ziporyn, this means Guo offers distinct advice from the *Zhuangzi*:

> The traces are, as we saw above, inevitable; they cannot be eradicated. This position has a practical result: Guo does not endorse the *Zhuangzi*'s suggestion for the rectification of the situation, that is, the abolition of the sages and their benevolence and righteousness, since these bring about such perversions of self-so spontaneity. Guo draws a distinction between the sages and their benevolence and righteousness, between that which leaves the traces and the traces themselves; in his view, both of these inevitably exist, but the traces can be ignored. Thus he places the blame for all perversions of self-rightness on the later generations who perceive and imitate the traces, not on the sages. These latter-born can perhaps learn not to be motivated by the traces, but the traces themselves will always exist. (Ziporyn, 1993, p. 531)

Assertively abolishing morality, then, would do the exact opposite of what was intended, which was to overcome the falsity and pathology of morality, precisely because in being done intentionally (which is akin to saying 'being done consciously, normatively, morally') it only generates more trace-cognition and moral projection. Assertively abolishing morality means intentionally abolishing morality, but Guo suggests that since morality cannot be intentionally abolished, the only way to abolish morality is let it happen spontaneously and naturally, if it is to happen at all. Morality can only be abolished by not trying to abolish it, but in it just happening because certain natures involve it happening. But, if traces are so seemingly ubiquitous, inevitable, and ineradicable, does Guo offer any further possible means by which one could overcome morality? He does, and it has to do with his notion of 'eremitism at court'. Such an approach will entail the employment of a passive and reactive force fictionalist approach whereby moral thought and talk, and thus all that follows from trace-cognition, is utilized in only a pretense mode of quasi-asserting moral make beliefs. It also how Guo synthesizes *ziran* and *mingjiao*, spontaneity and morality.

4. Reactionary moral fictionalism

Guo usually follows his description of forgetting traces with talk of 'following' or 'going along' with things, of letting them be what they are. 'following' or 'going along' with things appears to be a passive and detached way of enduring whatever one is presented with. It is a way of affirming what the world of traces offers without thereby confirming—that is, believing in, desiring, or feeling much at all for—any of its contents. This approach is passive and reactive because it is neither active nor assertive nor aggressive in its relationship to the world. It does not involve any intentional acts, whether they be bodily acts or speech acts. One just naturally always fits into one's context, into how one is always naturally determined to transform. Such an approach is how Guo describes successfully overcoming the ill effects of traces. It is how he understands the second moment of therapeutic release from the falsity and pathology of morality after its quiet abandonment. First, one quietly abolishes fully asserting genuine beliefs, but then, since one is still in human form and must exist in a human social world, one then just passively and reactively accepts whatever one encounters. There is nothing to do, nothing to add, to say, or to contribute. Yet, one needs to move around and make the requisite human sounds so to avoid attention or conflict. One needs to employ language and moral discourse in some manner. 'going along' is how Guo recommends doing this. Guo writes,

> Having forgotten all about what is or isn't suitable, he goes along with whatever is there. One who goes along with everything finds success in all things without exception. Nor have I heard of anyone who finds success in all things losing his harmony. Thus, he who releases his mind into the midst of the Course [Dao] and its Virtuosities lets himself go but never fails to hit the mark, remains vast and open and yet comfortably fitted to every situation. (Ziporyn, 2009, pp. 178–9)

For Guo, this is how one can achieve peace and oneness with what is, how one can become infinite by affirming one's finitude. A passive and reactive detached performance of what is natural to one's allotted determinacy and social context is the ticket to tranquility, effectiveness, unity, and even metaphysical identity. In this way, every encounter with traces is a liberation from them. Morality, trace-cognition, consciousness, humanity itself—they are all overcome by being presently accepted without any intentionality, belief, emotion, desire, judgment, or assertion. This is surprisingly similar to techniques employed in other traditions where the world is meant to be registered but without any commitment or attachment, like the Pyrrhonian Skeptical approach of non-assertion (*aphasia*) combined with a passive, noncognitive acceptance of appearances (Annas & Barnes, 2000, p. 6) or the Madhyamaka Buddhist notion of passively acquiescing to *lokaprasiddha*, 'what is acknowledged by the world' (Siderits, 2003, p. 202; Tillemans, 2011, p. 151). In each of these traditions, silence is joined by silent speech, a way of speaking without assertion, and non-action is joined by non-purposive action. Indeed, for Guo, silent speech and non-purposive action are the only ways one could engage with traces without being infected by them, without being induced to imitate them. Peace and oneness are found in each moment of detached performance, a performance that fulfills trace-cognition and social expectations by employing them without conscious intent, attachment, or sincerity, without the genuine assertion of full beliefs. Peace involves viewing things from the perspective of the oneness of what leaves traces all

the while reflecting back the traces themselves to a world gone sick and mad with trying to imitate and preserve them:

> Once life is forgotten, death is no longer despised, and in that case one finds peace in whatever one may encounter—as if breaking free, one is unblocked, created anew in response to each encountered impetus. This is what it means to break through like the first rays of dawn. To find peace in whatever you are currently encountering, forgetting what may have been received before or what might be received afterward— this is seeing the Singularity. (Ziporyn, 2009, p. 198)

With respect to morality in particular, Guo's strategy, as Ziporyn puts it, is 'both to transcend right and wrong and to preserve the right and wrong of each of the various determinacies or perspectives. The sage "sublates" the rights and wrongs of all things; he is beyond them without obliterating them' (Ziporyn, 2003, p. 73). Guo summarizes his approach in this way: 'He goes along with the rights and wrongs of the world, and lets them be what they are' (Ziporyn, 2003, p. 73). Thus, if Guo does not recommend assertively abolishing morality, but rather employing it without thereby fully asserting genuinely held moral beliefs, then Guo seems to be endorsing a strategy of employing morality with something less than genuine belief and full assertion. We have seen how the revolutionary moral fictionalist advocates dropping the full assertion of genuine moral beliefs in favor of adopting a pretense mood of only quasi-asserting moral make-beliefs. Guo appears to be offering something similar, but without the revolutionary zeal. Instead of initiating the moral pretense performance and encouraging others to join him, as the revolutionary moral fictionalist does, the advice is for an individual to simply passively react with a pretense performance of fictionalized moral utterances, and only when socially necessary.

A make-belief is a noncognitive mental state, something like a representation without much intentional content. Quasi-assertion is a speech act in which the assertoric force of an utterance has been unilaterally reduced. This is how one plays pretend, how one acts in a play or film, say. When Robert Downey Jr. says 'I am Iron Man' in the Marvel films, he is not really asserting his genuine belief in the fact that he is Iron Man. Rather, he is quasi-asserting his make-belief in his being Iron Man. This is because that is what actors do. It is how one plays pretend and enters into a pretense performance. Now, while the revolutionary moral fictionalist recommends that as many as possible become, first, moral error theorists and then all those error theorists revolt and start employing morality in a force fictionalist pretense manner, Guo's suggestion, by contrast, is that only those individuals especially concerned with the therapeutic overcoming of the falsity and pathology of morality and traces, after having quietly abolished morality from their own heart-minds, could employ a passive and reactive force fictionalist pretense performance of moral and human discourse in social contexts where it is expected one would make such noises. In other words, Guo favors a reactionary moral fictionalist attitude in which one goes and follows along with moral and human trace discourse and action—that is, lets it be without any interference from without, from oneself—because that particular response would enhance one's relief from traces already initiated by the previous moment of nonassertive abolition. This is the only way one can successfully deal with traces, that is, the only way to effectively eradicate ineradicable traces without, in the process, falling into the mimetic

trap of imitating them. This passage is where Guo might come closest to describing a reactionary moral fictionalism:

> Although dwelling at the convergence of ten thousand situations, he is constantly at leisure and self-fit, comfortable in himself; unconsciously, he does not feel the affairs that pass through his person, muddledly, he is not aware of the words that are coming from his mouth. But because people are deluded, they say the perfect man is exerting himself to do these things. (Ziporyn, 2003, p. 74)

We can read this 'passing through his person' as referring to the passive and reactive nature of the response, while we can read his not being 'aware of the words coming from his mouth' as the quasi-assertion of make-beliefs. Therefore, one's performance of morality, of trace discourse, has become almost unconscious and automatic. It is merely spontaneous and natural. One has completely lost oneself in the role, the role of a normal, moralizing human. One says all the moral sounding things that are expected of a human, but only as a detached, passive reaction to a moralized context, which all situations determined by traces ultimately are. One so completely and effectively performs their pretense moral utterances that they converge with the moralized contexts in which they find themselves and in which they are thus uttered. It is almost as if it is the moralized contexts themselves that are dragging the moral utterances out of oneself. Guo describes this convergence of speaker and context in terms of the *Zhuangzi*'s discussion of 'vanishing into' or 'merging with' (*ming* 冥) things. Ziporyn emphasizes that vanishing is 'not a withdrawal from interaction with things into a solipsistic non-interference, but rather a kind of interaction that does not depend on traces—i.e. on conscious knowledge and purpose', and one could add a kind of interaction that does not depend on fully asserting genuine beliefs in moral facts, in traces (Ziporyn, 2013a, p. 2276). Instead of asserting beliefs about them, or trying to know and thus imitate them, one instead merges completely with traces and vanishes into what spontaneously leaves them. It is not by isolating or excluding oneself from traces, and encouraging others to do the same, that one can avoid and abolish morality, but rather by utterly unconsciously dissolving into them, into morality's social and human ubiquity, and thereby identifying oneself with what is spontaneous and natural about traces, that one can overcome their pernicious effects, can overcome morality's falsity and pathology. One need not even avoid traces or moralized contexts, contexts where morality, and normative calculation in general, is employed. One can just vanish into such contexts and impassively reflect them back like a mirror. Thus, Guo appears to employ a reactionary force moral fictionalism as a means of reinforcing a quietist or nonassertive moral abolitionism. These two views then serve as Guo's two answers to the 'now what?' question for moral error theory.

Guo's reactionary moral fictionalism is not only the second moment of his general strategy for dealing with traces. It is also his theory of how one could effectively do one's job. Guo is not only trying to describe how he can survive the day, but how he can excel in his allotted social roles. In Guo's era, perhaps the most moralized context was the court. Jinhua Jia has argued that Guo's image of the sage shares certain similarities with the Mahāyāna Buddhist notion of the Bodhisattva in that both recommend that the sage not retreat to forests and mountains, but rather participate in socio-political affairs, while still internally enjoying the liberation and peace of a truly detached mind (Jia, 2015). For Guo, the goal is to practice 'eremitism at court', that is, to find a way to be a hermit while

engaging in political activities at court. Guo is emphatic that a sage could get away with this because his detached and emptied mind allows him to effectively perform the social tasks that are expected of him without tipping his hand that he is not really 'there'. Guo's description of the sage-hermit at court sounds like praise for a virtuoso pretense performance of allotted social roles:

> The divine-man is what we call the sage today. Although the sage stays at the temple and hall of the court, his mind is no different from how it would be in the mountains and forests. How can the common people know this! When they only see the sage riding yellow-canopied carriages and wearing jade-seals, they say this is sufficient to tie up his mind; when they see him traveling in mountains and rivers and sharing people's affairs, they say this is sufficient to make his spirit worn out. How can they know that the one who reaches the Ultimate is never deficient! (Jia, 2015, p. 552)

For Jia, Guo's notion of eremitism at court was how he succeeded in synthesizing Confucian morality with Daoist spontaneity: 'Basically, the sage he [Guo] described represented a Mysterious-Learning philosopher's ideal of unifying Confucianism and Daoism: to take up social responsibility and engage with political affairs while at the same time keeping a spontaneous and detached mind' (Jia, 2015, p. 554). It is by having 'no mind' (*wuxin* 無心) of his own—that is, no conscious or normative intentionality, no trace-cognition—that Guo's sage is able to simultaneously both be an official and a hermit. Jia underscores that, for Guo, traces and hence moral facts are 'just like floating clouds' that the sage could reflect in his empty mirror without in the process coming to believe in or assert the existence of any of them. Guo offers an image of a veritably perfect company man, someone who seems to be able to do his onerous work with ease and without complaint. Guo says his sage is 'a person who deals with ten thousand affairs, but is utterly unaware that the affairs are upon him' (Jia, 2015, p. 557). This is all because the sage has let go of right and wrong, of morality, of traces. Having quietly abolished morality from his no-mind, the sage can quasi-assert moral make beliefs and appear to perform the expected moral actions with effortless simplicity. He thus uses names without embracing them, without any Confucian sincerity. Reactionary moral fictionalism is how Guo performs the double deed of letting go of morality and letting go of letting go of morality, thereby rendering himself able to be moral without being moral, to appear enmeshed in traces without having any mental states which treat them as objects of thought or concern. In other words, pretending morality is true appears to be the best way to complete its abolition. Guo writes,

> Therefore, to deal with categories of great difference, there is nothing better than no-mind. First we let go the mind of right and wrong, and then we again let go the mind of letting go. Letting it go and again letting it go, until there is nothing left to be let go, then there is neither letting go nor not letting go. In this way the mind of right and wrong will go by itself. (Jia, 2015, p. 559)

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