



Unveiling the Ecological and Naturalistic Views in Zhuangzi's Daoism: Exploring the Concept of "The Usefulness of Uselessness"

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Abstract. This study delves into Zhuangzi's philosophy to uncover the ecological and naturalistic views it presents. The focus is on understanding the concept of "The Usefulness of Uselessness" and its implications for environmental conservation and sustainable development. Through literature analysis and conceptual interpretation, the original texts of Zhuangzi are examined to explore his discussions on nature, ecology, and "The Usefulness of Uselessness." Their relevance to the ecological environment is revealed by comparing and analyzing these concepts. The findings suggest that Zhuangzi's philosophy aligns with contemporary ecological perspectives, emphasizing the inherent functions of all things in nature, even those that may appear useless. These seemingly useless elements play a vital role in maintaining ecological balance and ecosystem health. Zhuangzi advocates for humility, harmony with nature, and the responsible use of natural resources, promoting sustainable development of the ecological environment. The insights provided by Zhuangzi's philosophy can inspire modern environmental conservation and sustainable development practices. By appreciating the value of seemingly useless organisms and phenomena in the natural world and recognizing their significance to the ecosystem, people can adopt Zhuangzi's approach of "acting without action." This mindset fosters a humble and rational co-existence with nature, promoting harmonious and sustainable ecological development.

Keywords: Zhuangzi; ecological philosophy; The Usefulness of Uselessness; view of nature; sustainable development

1 Introduction

Ecological protection is a pressing concern in modern society, necessitating the exploration of sustainable strategies. Zhuangzi's philosophy, an integral component of ancient Chinese philosophy, offers profound insights into ecological ethics, including concepts of harmonious co-existence with nature, respect for the equality of life, adherence to natural laws, and the unity of knowledge and action ^[1, 2]. Given the escalating ecological crisis, it is crucial to draw inspiration from Zhuangzi's philosophy regarding ecological protection and examine its practical implications.

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Both domestic and international scholars have extensively researched and discussed the ecological ethics found in Zhuangzi's philosophy. In China, Zhang Ke (2022) explored Heidegger's interpretation of the section "Observing Fish on the Háo" in the book *Zhuangzi* in the journal *Philosophical Research*, investigating the connection between the joy of fish and the fundamental nature of truth^[3]. Wang (2022) argues that Zhuangzi's emphasis on "uselessness" aims to advocate for a dialectical perspective on the relationship between utility and futility^[4]. In situations resembling Zhuangzi's predicament, where we face powerlessness against adversity, displaying our usefulness becomes futile and potentially detrimental. Instead, adopting Zhuangzi's approach of concealing our abilities and patiently waiting allows us to be useful without actively seeking acknowledgment. Paradoxically, this practice of embracing "uselessness" actually yields greater effectiveness and utility. Embracing "uselessness" enables the realization of even greater utility, exemplifying the essence of the concept known as "The Usefulness of Uselessness." According to Liu (2022), in examining the significance of "The Usefulness of Uselessness," it is argued that Zhuangzi's acceptance of his place in the world stems from his reverence for the natural order, leading to a profound emotional connection with life. This perspective resonates with certain elements of Confucian thought^[5]. In foreign scholarship, Mishra (2022) highlighted that Zhuangzi's debates with Huizi or other individuals in this book are founded on his utilization of the perspectives of "is" or "is not"^[6]. Rošker (2023) performed an analysis centered on the notions of "self," "transcendence," and "truth" and reached the conclusion that Chinese thought diverges from Western thought in its interpretation of the concept of "self." Rather than perceiving the self as a purely individual and autonomous entity, Chinese thought situates it within a specific domain^[7].

In conclusion, the current research on the ecological ethics of Zhuangzi's philosophy exhibits certain limitations. Firstly, the current research on the ecological ethics perspective of Zhuangzi's philosophy is primarily confined to the theoretical realm, with a notable dearth of comprehensive investigations into its practical applications. Secondly, both domestic and international scholarly endeavors have yet to establish a cohesive research framework and methodological system. To rectify these issues, it is imperative to enhance academic exchanges and foster collaborations, thereby facilitating the exploration and implementation of Zhuangzi's philosophy in the realm of ecological conservation. In light of these considerations, this study highlights the imperative of integrating Zhuangzi's ecological ethics perspective with modern science and technology while simultaneously emphasizing the exploration of practical applications. Moreover, it aims to establish a more comprehensive research framework and methodological system. By conducting thorough research and engaging in practical endeavors, this study aims to explore the significance of Zhuangzi's philosophy in ecological conservation. Through these efforts, it strives to make substantial contributions to promoting sustainable development and fostering the construction of an ecological civilization.

2 Connotation of Zhuangzi's "Uselessness of the Useful" Thought

(1) Analysis of the concept of "The Usefulness of Uselessness."

First, "The Uselessness of the Useful" is a prominent concept within Zhuangzi's philosophical framework. It serves to illustrate the existence of entities or actions that may initially seem devoid of utility but hold significant roles and functions in the natural realm. This concept finds extensive mention and elaboration in Zhuangzi's renowned work, *Zhuangzi: Free and Easy Wandering* [8]. Zhuangzi further elucidates the notion of "Uselessness of the Useful" through the use of fables and metaphors. By drawing examples from the natural world, he elucidates the distinctive functions and roles played by organisms and phenomena within the intricate fabric of the natural system. Despite their outward appearance of insignificance, these entities are indispensable for the maintenance of ecological equilibrium and the proper functioning of ecosystems [9].

Second, the concept of "Uselessness of the Useful" embodies the idea of manifestation and withdrawal as an integrated thought. Zhuangzi put forward the notion of manifestation and withdrawal, stating that the world's manifestation and withdrawal are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. Within this thought, the "Uselessness of the Useful" represents the aspect of withdrawal, where things or behaviors that may seem useless play essential roles in a state of withdrawal. Just like some overlooked organisms and phenomena in the natural world, they may not flaunt themselves but contribute and influence the entire ecosystem in their unique way. Through the concept of "Uselessness of the Useful," Zhuangzi expresses the complementary nature of manifestation and withdrawal, reminding people to recognize and cherish those seemingly useless existences.

Third, the concept of "Uselessness of the Useful" within Zhuangzi's natural philosophy entails the transformative potential of the seemingly useless. Zhuangzi's perspective on nature underscores the significance of transformation, whereby things or behaviors that may appear devoid of utility can be imbued with usefulness. According to Zhuangzi, aligning oneself with the inherent laws and rhythms of nature is vital, fostering a harmonious co-existence with the natural world. Through profound comprehension and reverence for the diversity and distinctiveness of nature, individuals can effectuate the conversion of ostensibly futile elements into valuable contributions to the ecosystem. This transformative outlook holds profound implications for the sustainable development of ecology, guiding proactive engagement in environmental preservation and sustainable practices. By achieving a harmonious co-existence between humans and nature, this perspective paves the way for the preservation and flourishing of our shared environment.

(2) Multifaceted significance of Zhuangzi's "Uselessness of the Useful."

1) "Non-worldly and non-utilitarian use."

The concept of "Uselessness of the Useful" in Zhuangzi's philosophy challenges the prevailing emphasis on secularization and utilitarianism during his time. Zhuangzi lived in an era where both objects and individuals were predominantly valued for their practicality and utilitarian functions. Various social classes, including craftsmen and

figures like Huizi and Nanbo Ziqi, viewed things from a utilitarian perspective, assessing their worth based on these criteria. In one instance, Zhuangzi, in the form of an oak tree, illustrated the potential risks faced by individuals like Ziqi, who were considered "materially useful." In contrast, he highlighted the peaceful existence and freedom attained by "ornamental trees" that served no practical purpose ^[10]. Zhuangzi's exploration of the "Uselessness of the Useful" challenges the narrow utilitarian viewpoint of his time, inviting a deeper reflection on the value and significance of things beyond their mere practical utility.

2) "Transcending perspectives and overcoming limitations of use."

The concept of "use" extends beyond narrow perspectives and limitations. It encompasses both utilitarian and humanistic viewpoints, converging to a broader perspective that reveals their inherent interconnectedness. In this broader context, seemingly "useless" entities can be understood as having latent value. Zhuangzi emphasizes the importance of considering the whole, enabling us to unlock the full potential of these seemingly unremarkable elements. Nothing in the world is truly devoid of purpose; rather, it is our limited subjective consciousness that fails to recognize the value within. Evaluating something as "useful" should not be solely based on its practicality in human activities. Even the most seemingly insignificant entities possess inherent equality. Zhuangzi rejects confined and specific forms of utility, urging us to transcend narrow perspectives and seek a use that encompasses diverse viewpoints. From alternative angles, objects that may initially appear useless can acquire profound significance. It is crucial to refrain from assessing the usefulness or uselessness of individuals, objects, or life solely based on subjective intentions and biases. Only by doing so can we avoid perceiving fragments of reality and truly grasp their holistic richness ^[11].

3) Dialectical unity of usefulness and uselessness

The terms "useful" and "useless" are often juxtaposed to indicate the presence or absence of value or significance. Understanding the dialectical relationship between these concepts involves exploring two distinct levels. Firstly, at the subjective level, factors that fulfill individual human needs are considered "useful," whereas those that fail to fulfill such needs are labeled as "useless." This dichotomy reflects the intricate interplay between subjective human needs and objective necessities. This set of contradictions exhibits two key attributes: contradictory unity and contradictory opposition. "Useful" and "useless" represent two contrasting aspects that coexist, interact, permeate, and encompass each other. Notably, under certain circumstances, these two aspects can undergo a transformation, transitioning from one to the other. In essence, "useful" and "useless" are mutually dependent, forming an interconnected dynamic ^[12].

(3) The Concept of "The Usefulness of Uselessness" and Zhuangzi's ideological system

The concept of "The Usefulness of Uselessness" in Zhuangzi's philosophy is intricately linked to his epistemology, forming a harmonious and complementary relationship within his overarching philosophical system. Zhuangzi's epistemology places emphasis on the interplay between subjective consciousness and the objective world, asserting that human comprehension is hindered by subjective biases and preconceived notions, thereby impeding a complete apprehension of the essence of objective phe-

nomena. Zhuangzi argues against the excessive pursuit of utility and practicality, cautioning against an exclusive focus on superficial aspects while disregarding the intrinsic value inherent in all things. This predilection for utility and utilitarian thinking gives rise to deviations and misconceptions in our understanding of reality.

In contrast, the concept of “The Usefulness of Uselessness” serves as a reminder to transcend utilitarian perspectives and approach phenomena with an open and receptive mindset. Zhuangzi employs this concept to elucidate the distinctive functions and roles that seemingly futile entities or actions play within the natural world, underscoring their value and significance within the broader ecological system. This notion aligns with Zhuangzi’s epistemology, as it highlights how subjective biases and utilitarian viewpoints restrict our ability to grasp the true essence and inherent worth of things.

Ultimately, through the concept of “The Usefulness of Uselessness,” Zhuangzi presents a realm that transcends utilitarian perspectives, encouraging a holistic approach that encompasses both the external manifestations and the internal nature and effects of phenomena. Zhuangzi contends that only by observing and understanding things with an open and detached mindset can individuals begin to approach the authentic essence of phenomena and attain genuine comprehension ^[13].

In conclusion, the concept of “The Usefulness of Uselessness” and Zhuangzi’s epistemology harmoniously intertwine, supporting and reinforcing one another. “The Usefulness of Uselessness” serves as a reminder to transcend utilitarianism, urging individuals to adopt an open-minded approach to observing and comprehending the intrinsic nature of things. This cognitive attitude, which transcends utilitarian perspectives, aligns with Zhuangzi’s epistemological stance on the interplay between subjective consciousness and the objective world. Collectively, these ideas form a crucial component of Zhuangzi’s philosophical system.

(4) The relationship between “The Usefulness of Uselessness” and ecological protection

The concept of “The Usefulness of Uselessness” has a significant relationship with ecological conservation, highlighting the critical functions and significance of seemingly useless elements within the ecosystem.

3 Conclusion

This study delves into the significance of Zhuangzi’s philosophy in the realm of ecological conservation. Through an examination of Zhuangzi’s ecological ethics, the study reveals the profound implications and guiding principles that his philosophical ideas offer for contemporary ecological conservation. Zhuangzi emphasizes the importance of harmonious co-existence between humans and nature, reminding individuals to respect the natural world, protect ecosystems, and strive for balance and symbiosis between humanity and nature. The philosophy emphasizes equal respect for all life forms, emphasizing the need to protect and show reverence towards diverse organisms in the natural world, thereby preserving biodiversity and maintaining ecological balance. Zhuangzi’s concept of Wu Wei guides individuals to align with the natural laws of development, discouraging excessive interference or alteration of bio-

logical systems while preserving the autonomy and spontaneity of nature. The philosophy also highlights the unity of knowledge and action, encouraging individuals to gain insights into the wisdom of nature through personal experiences and interactions with the natural world. Zhuangzi's philosophical ideas provide valuable perspectives for modern ecological conservation. However, it is vital to acknowledge the limitations of this study, which warrant further integration of contemporary science and technology to expand the application of Zhuangzi's philosophy. Moving forward, continued research and practical implementation of Zhuangzi's ecological, ethical viewpoints will facilitate their integration into contemporary ecological conservation practices and the exploration of scientifically sound and feasible strategies for ecological preservation. Through ongoing comprehensive research and practical implementation, individuals can effectively draw upon Zhuangzi's philosophical ideas, making significant contributions to the protection and sustainable development of the ecological environment.

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