



## Genuine Pretending (in Daoism)

Genuine pretending is an expression used by Paul D'Ambrosio and Hans-Georg Moeller to characterize the existential philosophy of the Daoist work *Zhuangzi*, or its take on identity. Moeller and D'Ambrosio use the notion of "genuine pretending" to argue against modern interpretations of the *Zhuangzi* as a philosophy of "authenticity." Humans identify themselves and others by the social roles they occupy. On the one hand, such roles are constitutive of what one "is," for instance in the family (e.g. a "son") or in political context (e.g. a "ruler"). In this sense, these roles are "genuine." On the other hand, these roles are also, in contemporary vocabulary, "social constructs." They are temporary, contingent and incongruent, or, using Daoist vocabulary, they are subject to the "transformation of things" (*wu hua* 物化). In this sense, they are played or "pretended."

The "Butterfly Dream" story in the *Zhuangzi* paradigmatically illustrates the fluidity of identity. Every night, humans involuntarily slip away from the identity they spend the day maintaining. Dream experiences, however detached from one's "normal" sense of self, are nevertheless physiological and psychological real. For instance, sexual arousal during a dream actually takes place. The same paradoxical structure of identity exists both in dreams and when awake. On the one hand, it is contingent and fluid, constituted by many incongruent factors and a merely temporary constellation. It is a make-believe. However, it is an absolutely essential make-believe without which no individual can exist and no society can emerge. Identity is, paradoxically, simultaneously genuine and pretended, like child play that grows into a much more serious and complex life form.

The notion of genuine pretending" counters a Confucian role ethics which proposes that identity is achieved through "sincere" (see "[The Difference between Authentic and Genuine](#)") commitment to social roles, for instance by being a dutiful son or a benevolent ruler. The *Zhuangzi* argues that over-commitment to such roles typically results in conceit in the case of privileged roles (such as ruler) or in despair in the case of subordinated roles (such as wife). Ultimately, an insight into the fact that identity is genuinely pretended is supposed to have a medicinal effect and allow for social and individual "ease" (*you* 遊).

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### Reference

Moeller, Hans-Georg and Paul J. D'Ambrosio. 2017. *Genuine Pretending: On the Philosophy of the Zhuangzi*. New York: Columbia University Press.