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Self-Cultivation or Self-Deprecation? Aristotle vs. Taoism

By Anne Rigas

The idea of self-cultivation, or the process by which you develop your character and abilities, is a basic concept of human achievement. However, philosophers disagree on what role self-cultivation and skill play in the creation of a meaningful life. For example, Aristotle and Taoist philosophers offer very different approaches to skill and self-cultivation: whereas Aristotle views them as essential, Taoists such as Chuang Tzu speak of skill as being unnecessary and counter-productive.

In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle emphasizes the importance of individuals' maximizing their potential through habituation and constant activity. By birth, you may or may not have potential to do something, and therefore you must train yourself to work incessantly toward your *telos*, or goal. He states "Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do the virtues arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit" (Book II, Ch. 1). Aristotle develops a very practical application of skill, viewing practice and consistency as means to obtain virtue.

In contrast, Chuang Tzu describes a much different approach regarding the necessity of skill. He states that constant obsession toward developing skill and finding happiness will actually impede our well-being. Moreover, when you are only focused on one narrow goal, it becomes impossible for you to acknowledge happiness or success, let alone enjoy it. For the Taoists, self-cultivation does not require practice or the honing of our talents. Rather, by learning to go along with the Tao, or the natural Way of things, we will find happiness much sooner by simply being our natural selves. As Chuang Tzu states "Contentment and well-being at once become possible the moment you cease to act with them in view, and if you practice non-doing (*wu-wei*), you will have both happiness and well-being" (Chuang Tzu, *Perfect Joy*, p. 101). For Taoists, the concept of skill would not be diminished through labels, since they are unnecessary. Moreover, skill in the Taoist sense would be defined not as a goal to achieve, but more so as the practice of flowing with nature, not against it, in an undemanding way.

The Taoist idea of *wu-wei*, or effortless action, goes completely against Aristotle's perception on how to achieve happiness and how to become a virtuous individual. Aristotle's entire ethics is based upon activity and continuous practice whereas Taoists believe there is no necessity for such obsession toward improvement. The two contrasting perspectives create a parallel between Eastern and Western concepts of how best to live. In American society today, a great deal of emphasis is placed upon hard work, preparation and the development of skill through constant practice. These ideals coincide with Aristotle's philosophy regarding self-cultivation for a meaningful life. However, in Eastern cultures, a greater emphasis is placed upon being who we are naturally, not attempting to alter or vigorously develop oneself. Rather, we become closer to a more fulfilled life when we extract ourselves from the necessity to develop our virtues with force and habituation.