

# A Brief Analysis of Zhuangzi's *Qi Wu Lun* and the Concept of Ecological Ethical Equality

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## Abstract

In today's world, where environmental issues are growing increasingly severe, the concept of ecological ethical equality has become a central focus of public concern. This notion emphasizes that all living beings occupy equal positions in nature, and that human beings should respect and safeguard the harmony and stability of the ecological system. Long before modern discussions of ecology emerged, the ancient Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi proposed profound ecological ethical ideas in his essay *Qi Wu Lun* (On the Equality of Things). From the philosophical perspective of the unity of all things, Zhuangzi explored key concepts such as the equality of all beings, the fusion of self and the external world, and the relativism of right and wrong. These thoughts were revolutionary in their time and continue to offer valuable philosophical support to contemporary ecological ethics. A detailed examination of *Qi Wu Lun* and its ecological ethical vision enables us to better appreciate the wisdom of ancient thinkers and provides meaningful insights for the development of modern ecological ethics and practical environmental protection. This paper aims to explore the intrinsic connection between Zhuangzi's *Qi Wu Lun* and ecological ethical equality, thereby contributing to the construction of a harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature.

## Keywords

Zhuangzi, *Qi Wu Lun*, ecological ethics.

## 1. An Introduction to *Qi Wu Lun*

As a core chapter in Zhuangzi's *Inner Chapters*, *Qi Wu Lun* embodies profound and original philosophical insights. Through fables, dialogues, and dialectical reasoning, it vividly presents a worldview and philosophy of life rooted in the idea that all things are essentially equal and unified. In Zhuangzi's writing, the world is no longer a place of chaos and rigid hierarchy but rather one of inner harmony and coherence. He calls upon readers to observe the world from the lofty perspective of the *Dao*, to perceive the diversity of things as variations of a unified essence<sup>[1-3]</sup>.

According to Zhuangzi, although things may appear vastly different on the surface, they are fundamentally interconnected. Whether towering mountains or tiny ants, all beings hold equal value and meaning when viewed through the lens of the *Dao*. This deep insight into the equality of all things challenges traditional hierarchical thinking and offers a refreshing perspective through which we can reexamine our relationship with the natural world.

## 2. Core Ideas of *Qi Wu Lun*

### 2.1. The Equality of All Beings

Zhuangzi advocated a transcendental view of the world, asserting that all beings are unified under the grand framework of the *Dao*, with no inherent distinctions of high or low, noble or base. The *Dao* functions like the most mysterious yet impartial law of the universe—the

ultimate origin from which all beings emerge. Whether it be a bird flying freely in the sky or an ant burrowing underground, all are born from the *Dao*.

Zhuangzi emphasized that we should discard worldly prejudices and narrow viewpoints and examine the universe from the perspective of the *Dao*. Every life form, every existence, is a genuine manifestation of the *Dao*, each bearing a unique mission bestowed by it<sup>[4-5]</sup>. Although their appearances and behaviors may differ greatly, all beings share equal rights and value in existence. Together, they contribute to the vibrancy, diversity, and harmony of the world, weaving a collective tapestry of life.

## 2.2. The Fusion of Self and the External World

Zhuangzi beautifully illustrates the merging of self and the external world through the famous fable “Zhuang Zhou Dreams of Being a Butterfly.” In this story, he uses vivid and poetic imagery to describe a surreal state in which the boundaries between self and other dissolve. In the dream, Zhuang Zhou transforms into a butterfly, fluttering through the skies with lightness and joy—or perhaps it is the butterfly dreaming of Zhuang Zhou, momentarily grounded in the human world.

This story is more than a whimsical fantasy—it encapsulates the essence of Zhuangzi’s philosophy. He believed that if one can quiet the mind and let go of external distractions and internal clutter, one may truly connect with nature and all living things. In this state of fusion, the individual spirit is no longer confined by worldly limitations and attains a transcendent freedom, free from time and space. It is in such freedom that one can truly experience the most authentic and unadorned beauty of the universe.

## 2.3. Relativism of Right and Wrong: Embracing Diverse Perspectives

From Zhuangzi’s viewpoint, concepts such as right and wrong or good and evil are not absolute, but relative. They vary depending on one’s standpoint and circumstances. In the complex realm of human experience, each person interprets the world through their own experiences, knowledge, and conditions. What one sees as virtuous may appear to another as harmful.

Zhuangzi encourages a generous and open-hearted acceptance of differing perspectives. Engaging in rigid debates over right and wrong seldom leads to universally correct conclusions and often results in endless conflict and distress. A true sage understands the need to respect individual differences, to appreciate others’ viewpoints and choices, and to avoid imposing their own beliefs on others. By adopting a mindset of peace and tolerance, one can navigate the plurality of the world’s values with inner calm and freedom<sup>[6-7]</sup>. In doing so, one achieves a kind of wisdom that transcends worldly disputes, allowing one to roam the world with equanimity and grace.

## 3. Concrete Manifestations of Zhuangzi’s Concept of Ecological Ethical Equality

### 3.1. Holistic View of the Natural Ecosystem

Zhuangzi emphasized the harmonious unity between humans and nature. In his view, human beings are by no means the masters who transcend nature, but rather an inconspicuous part of the vast natural system. Just like a magnificent and intricate painting, every being in nature occupies its rightful place and contributes to the ever-operating, cyclic structure of the cosmic ecosystem. Every blade of grass, every delicate flower, every flying bird, and every swimming fish possesses its own unique value and significance. They are no different from humans—each is a spirited entity nurtured by nature, equally endowed with the right to live and to thrive.

Zhuangzi calls for an attitude of reverence: human beings should respect the right of all natural entities to exist and flourish. We must not recklessly damage their habitats or exploit their

resources. Only when we truly coexist in harmony with nature, adapting to its rhythms and abiding by its laws, can we find our rightful place in the world. In doing so, the foundation of human civilization will grow deeper and more resilient under the nurturing care of the natural world.

### 3.2. Embracing the Richness and Diversity of Life

During the Warring States period, a time marked by intellectual flourishing and social turmoil, Zhuangzi observed the world with a broad and insightful perspective. At a time when people were fixated on hierarchies and distinctions, he recognized that all beings possess their own unique characteristics—like stars scattered across the night sky, with no ranking of superior or inferior. Every plant, animal, insect, and bird has its own way of existing and living, expressing the mystery of life in its own fashion.

Zhuangzi firmly advocated for respecting the richness and diversity of life, treating this diversity as a precious gift bestowed by nature. He opposed anthropocentrism—the tendency of humans to impose their own values and standards on other forms of life. In Zhuangzi's view, humanity is merely one member of the ecological community and has no authority to judge or reshape the modes of existence of other beings. Instead, we must adopt a humble and reverent mindset, embracing and appreciating the diversity of life. Only then can each life form grow freely and flourish naturally within the embrace of nature, together creating a world that is harmonious, diverse, and full of vitality<sup>[8-9]</sup>.

### 3.3. Following the Laws of Nature

Amid the political unrest and collapse of traditional rituals during the Warring States period, various schools of thought emerged, each proposing different solutions to human suffering. Zhuangzi upheld the wisdom of aligning with the laws of nature, urging humans to learn from and emulate the order of the cosmos. In a time when society was characterized by impatience, recklessness, and the pursuit of quick success, Zhuangzi had already recognized the infinite wisdom and rhythm embedded in nature—its growth and decay occur in accordance with its own pace.

As part of this natural world, humans must not disrupt its order or interfere forcibly. When we act in accordance with the laws of nature, it is like sailing downstream, assisted by the natural current. But when we act against them, it is like rowing against the tide—difficult, exhausting, and bound to provoke consequences. Zhuangzi warns us against arrogance and overconfidence. Instead, we must abandon the desire to dominate nature and listen humbly to its guidance. By doing so, we may find peace and balance within nature's embrace, fostering a state of symbiosis and mutual prosperity between humans and the natural world. In this way, life can radiate with its truest brilliance by flowing along with the natural order.

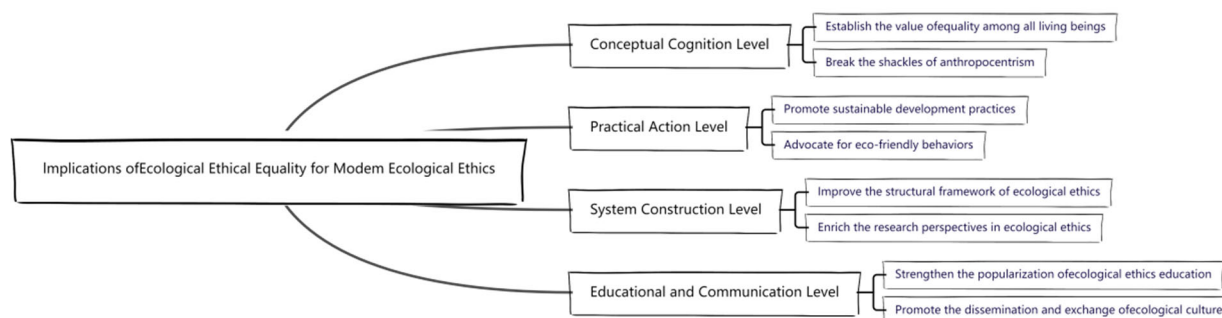
## 4. Contemporary Significance of Zhuangzi's Concept of Ecological Ethical Equality

### 4.1. Enlightenment for Modern Ecological Ethics

Ecocentric ethics asserts that all entities within an ecosystem possess intrinsic value and advocates for an egalitarian attitude of respect toward nature and ecological balance. Remarkably, over two thousand years ago, Zhuangzi had already articulated the notion of "equality of all things," asserting that from the perspective of the *Dao*, all beings are fundamentally equal, without hierarchical distinctions. Humanity, therefore, should not place itself at the center and recklessly harm nature.

This ancient yet profound wisdom offers essential intellectual resources for the development of modern ecological ethics. It reminds us that in our pursuit of economic development and

social advancement, we must reevaluate the relationship between humans and nature and abandon the narrow anthropocentric worldview. Zhuangzi's thought serves as a wellspring of philosophical vitality, revitalizing contemporary ecological ethics and promoting the construction of a more scientific, rational, and sustainable ethical framework—one that guides humanity toward a harmonious coexistence with the natural world.



**Figure 1.** Implications of Ecological Ethical Equality for Modern Ecological Ethics

## 4.2. Guiding Significance for Environmental Protection Practices

In an age marked by rapid technological advancement and increasing human activity, the severity of environmental issues has become increasingly apparent. Long ago, Zhuangzi already foresaw the importance of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature. His philosophical insights call on us to decisively abandon the anthropocentric bias that views nature merely as a tool for fulfilling human desires—leading to unchecked exploitation and destruction<sup>[10-12]</sup>.

Instead, Zhuangzi teaches us to treat all elements of nature with equality and inclusiveness, recognizing that every species, every patch of land, and every drop of water holds its own intrinsic value and significance. Only when we approach nature with reverence and act in accordance with its laws can we truly achieve a state of harmony and mutual flourishing. Zhuangzi's thought shines like a beacon, illuminating the path toward a sustainable future in environmental protection, and inspiring us to develop balanced, enduring strategies for living in unity with the Earth.

## 5. Practical Pathways for Zhuangzi's Concept of Ecological Ethical Equality

### 5.1. Individual-Level Practices

In today's era, environmental protection has become a critical issue shared by all of humanity. As fundamental units of society, individuals should cultivate a strong sense of reverence for and alignment with nature. For instance, Hebei Normal University emphasizes green and sustainable practices, encouraging students and faculty to turn off lights, print on both sides of paper, and actively participate in waste sorting and cycling activities. In today's era, environmental protection has become a critical issue shared by all of humanity. As fundamental units of society, individuals should cultivate a strong sense of reverence for and alignment with nature. A compelling example can be found at Hebei Normal University, which actively promotes a green and low-carbon campus culture. The university has implemented a comprehensive sustainability initiative that includes encouraging students and faculty to turn off unused lights and electronic devices, adopt double-sided printing to reduce paper consumption, and participate in campus-wide waste sorting programs. Additionally, the university has established designated recycling stations, organized "Green Campus Week" events to raise awareness, and promoted the use of bicycles through bike-sharing systems and

car-free campus zones. These measures not only reflect the institution's commitment to environmental responsibility but also foster a sense of ecological ethics among its students.

Respecting and following nature is not a distant or abstract ideal—it is embodied in the small, mindful acts of daily life. We can begin by cultivating resource-saving habits: turning off lights and taps to conserve energy and water; using both sides of paper to reduce tree cutting; carrying reusable shopping bags to avoid single-use plastics; and practicing proper waste sorting to facilitate recycling. Choosing environmentally friendly modes of transportation—such as walking, cycling, or using public transit—can also help reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

These seemingly minor actions, when practiced consistently, can accumulate into powerful collective momentum. Starting with ourselves, we can each contribute to the larger goal of environmental preservation and work together to protect our beautiful and fragile planet.

## 5.2. Societal-Level Practices

In the broader battle for environmental protection, society, government, and businesses must all shoulder their irreplaceable responsibilities. As illustrated in Table 1, society should fully leverage the power of education and awareness campaigns through diverse channels—such as school curricula, community initiatives, and media communication—to disseminate environmental knowledge. Only when every individual understands the importance of environmental protection and actively incorporates it into their daily behavior can a positive social atmosphere of collective action take shape.

Governments and enterprises must also take concrete steps. The government should play a leading role by establishing sound, scientifically based, and strictly enforceable environmental regulations and policies, while increasing oversight to ensure proper implementation. Businesses, as key economic actors, must not prioritize profit over environmental responsibility. They should actively undertake social responsibility, increase investment in sustainability, adopt advanced green technologies, and reduce pollution emissions.

Only through the joint efforts of all sectors can we achieve the dual goals of economic growth and environmental sustainability—and create a cleaner, more livable environment.

**Table 1.** Responsibilities of Stakeholders in Environmental Protection

Subject	Environmental responsibility
Society	Give full play to the effectiveness of publicity and education, and spread common knowledge about environmental protection through school education, community initiatives, media communication and other diverse channels
	Raise public awareness of environmental protection, and form a good atmosphere for the whole society to participate in environmental protection
Government	Play a leading role in formulating scientific, appropriate, strict and efficient environmental protection regulations and policies
	Strengthen supervision and ensure the effective implementation of regulations and policies
Enterprise	Take the initiative to undertake the social responsibility of environmental protection, and do not neglect environmental benefits
	Increase investment in environmental protection, adopt advanced environmental protection technologies and equipment, and reduce pollutant emissions

## 6. Conclusion

Zhuangzi's *Qi Wu Lun* contains profound ecological ethical insights rooted in his unique philosophical vision. It provides a new perspective for understanding the relationship between humanity and nature—highlighting the equality and harmony among all living beings and promoting a lifestyle that respects nature and cherishes life.

In our modern world, where environmental issues are becoming increasingly prominent, Zhuangzi's concept of ecological ethical equality serves as a valuable intellectual resource. It continually reminds us that while pursuing economic growth, we must also pay attention to ecological preservation and recognize the inherent value of every living being. We should continue to explore and inherit Zhuangzi's ecological wisdom, integrate it into the development of modern ecological ethics, and contribute to the realization of a harmonious coexistence between humans and the natural world.

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