



What to do about evil rulers? Perspectives from Sextus and Zhuangzi

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University of Zurich, Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies, Room RAA E-29, Rämistrasse 59, 8001 Zürich

Public Lecture by Dr. Lea Cantor (Postdoctoral Fellow, Cambridge)

This talk considers the import of evil rule as a way of testing the coherence of two sceptical philosophies in ancient China and Greece, respectively: those of the Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi and the Pyrrhonian sceptic Sextus Empiricus. I begin by arguing that both Zhuangzi and Sextus display radically sceptical attitudes, which in both cases involve shirking positive commitments. However, Zhuangzi makes room for political dissent. His sceptic's response to evil rule would appear to accommodate anti-conformist and subversive attitudes. Sextus' radical scepticism, by contrast, would seem to lead to a form of political conformity, even quietism, in the face of tyranny, since

the explicit recommendation in such cases is that one follow conventions. This talk investigates which of these two approaches better coheres with radical scepticism. In doing so, it also brings out the different practical challenges which these philosophers face in virtue of their scepticism. In the case of Zhuangzi, if the sceptic is unwilling to commit unreservedly to any view about how things are, including in relation to issues of value, what could justify him going against the grain? But equally, in the case of Sextus, what could justify him abiding by the status quo? Each of these philosophers might seem to fail to 'live' their scepticism, albeit for markedly different reasons.