

## Review of "The Moral Fool: A case for amorality" Hans-Georg Moeller. 2009. Columbia U. Press

By the time that this review is published I will have passed my 64<sup>th</sup> birthday. I have spent more than half of my adult life attempting to understand and live my life according to daojia – philosophical Daoism. "The Moral Fool" appears to be the book I have been awaiting for more than three decades.

Hans-Georg Moeller has taken a decidedly daojia stance on the question and the concerns of morality. For a Daoist sage, morality is at best not needed and at worst highly dangerous. Moeller explores these ideas in depth and with wonderful ability. My aim is to become more of a fool than I already am.

Typically, from a daojia position, Moeller does not define the moral fool. Let me describe, in Moeller's words, the moral fool:

- "is not a fundamentalist" (p.5)
- "simply does not understand why ethics are necessarily good" (p. 5)
- "this does not mean that he is entirely without ethical judgements" (p.5)
- "...is someone who does not really see any basis for coming up with moral principles" (p.14)
- "he does not understand on what grounds the absolute distinction between good and evil can be founded" (p.15)
- "he does not have great human aspirations and, consequently, does not fail in a grandiose way" (p.15)
- "he is not really interested in the glory of failure – he is not interested in glory, at all" (p.15)
- "The moral fool is unwilling to look at the world on the basis of ethical distinctions since he does not accept their validity"

Having described the characteristics of the moral fool, Moeller then asks the question, "Is it good to be good?". He then assesses the problems of assigning moral value to actions and positions. Following this he examines the negative ethics of Hans Saner:

- "1. a radical renunciation of morality as a result of, for instance, a disgust with ethics and its failures,
2. a normative ethics that assumes that the good as such cannot be determined and that is therefore can only be explained negatively—analogous to the attempts of negative theology to define God,
3. a skeptical approach toward ethics that assumes that no general ethical guidelines or principles can be established since morality is always concrete and embedded in particular situations, and
4. an ethics that does not believe in the primacy of action but rather in the primacy of refraining from interventions—and that thus advocates an ethics of 'letting-be'".

This is followed by a discussion of Daojia morality à la the Laozi and the Zhuangzi which Moeller suggests is closest to Saner's first proposition.

Part 2 of "The Moral Fool" examines what Moeller entitles 'The Pathology of Ethics' in areas such as Anger, Aesthetics and Progress. In each case he juxtaposes the characteristics of the Moral Fool to that of the normal Western social paradigm – both liberal and conservative.

Part 3 of the book is entitled 'Ethics in Contemporary Society' and Moeller again contrasts the processes of the Moral Fool with contemporary ideas in "morality and law, civil rights, the death penalty, war and mass media. Each of these chapters looks, in depth,

at the characteristics of modern moral arguments and the responses of a moral fool. In many instances, I was forced into deep introspection of my own views. This introspection led to fundamental evaluation and re-interpretation of my own positions.

In his conclusion, 'Applied Amoralism' Moeller states that as a result of mass media and especially virtual or viral media, "morality is...a type of communication rather than something that is inherent in individuals or actions...". "There is no single or generally accepted moral paradigm."

The election of Barack Obama, the global financial crisis and its aftermath and the vitriolic confrontations about health reform in the U.S. confirm these ideas. The simplicity of fundamental principles has replaced reflective consideration of complex problems. As Moeller states, "Morality is a form of communicative decomplexification."

Moeller's work, for me, suggests concerted re-evaluation and perhaps re-formulation of The Platform Principles of ecosophy, with a view to removing the inherent morality imbued within them. The old arguments of rights and values which inform Western societies are often twisted into grotesque configurations. Witness, one year later, the right of Wall Street firms to grant massive bonuses based on the supposed value of the individuals to whom they are awarded.

The only short-coming, in my opinion, of "The Moral Fool" is that Moeller does not show us how to become moral fools. Perhaps that will be the subject of his next book. However, I, serendipitously, know how to become a moral fool.

In their book, "Dao De Jing", Ames and Hall (2003, Ballantine Books) comment upon and list what they refer to as the Wu-forms and what I have come to call the Wu-processes. For Ames and Hall the wu-form "...is the the 'substance' and 'fruit' - the passionate

experience of life itself – rather than a catechism of bloodless ethical principles, that is the real site of knowing." The wu-forms are:

Wu-ming – to be non-interfering in going about your business.

Wu-wei – non-coercive action.

Wu-xin – unmediated thinking and feeling.

Wu-yu – objectless desire.

Wu-zheng – striving without contentiousness.

Wu-zhi – unprincipled knowing.

Those who learn to embody the process skills implied by the wu-forms are moral fools. This, of course, means changing behavioural habits. The social habits of confrontation (attitude, in general parlance), interference with others, coercion by law or advertising, thinking mediated by others (advertising, religion, etc.), desire and greed (unlimited purchasing) and reliance on so-called fundamental truth (Christian, Muslim, Hindu, etc.) lead to moral and ethical confrontation daily. Such habits are, apparently, mal-adaptive since in their more extreme forms they justify and demand killing and slavery, among other ideas.

The wu-forms, when embodied as ways of being, become adaptive habits. As habits, they are known from the gut and modulate the behaviour of the moral fool.

If I could, I would make Hans-Georg Moeller's "The Moral Fool" mandatory reading for every person who logs on to [The Trumpeter](#).