

Finding a Way Together: Interpersonal Ethics in the *Zhuāngzǐ*

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1. Introduction

The various threads of discourse preserved in the *Zhuāngzǐ* present a radical challenge to prevailing ways of thinking about ethics, whether in the texts' own day or our own. The dominant stance in the *Zhuāngzǐ* is to reject orthodox moral norms or values on the grounds that they are ineffective guides to *dào* 道 (the way). In their place, Zhuangist writings focus directly on the concepts of *dào* and *dé* 德 (power, agency), along with interrelated conceptions of the well-lived life.

In previous work, I have explored one prominent such conception, by which the fulfilling or admirable life lies in applying our inherent capacity for adaptive, resilient agency to adroitly “wander” or “roam” along the variety of paths presented to us by changing circumstances.¹ This vision of the good life, I suggest, represents a eudaimonistic strand of thought in Zhuangist discourse.

In this essay, I inquire into the attitudes and conduct toward other agents that go hand in hand with the admirable individual life, as depicted in the *Zhuāngzǐ*. How do agents adept in a Zhuangist approach to *dào* handle interpersonal relations? I suggest that on a broadly Zhuangist understanding, interpersonal ethics is simply a special case of competence or adroitness in applying *dé* (power, agency) and following *dào* (ways). The general ideal of exemplary activity is to employ our *dé* to find a fitting, free-flowing *dào* by which to navigate through contingent, changing circumstances. Interpersonal ethics is an application of this ideal to cases in which other agents and our relations with them are prominent features of our circumstances. The ethics of interacting with others is thus not a distinct subject area in Zhuangist discourse but one application of more general views about *dào*, *dé*, and exemplary activity. Instead of wandering the way on our

¹ See Fraser (2011) and (2014b).

own, interactions with others present us with situations in which we must find our way together.

An important consequence of the Zhuangist approach is that discussions of our conduct toward others are not framed in terms of doing what is morally right or permissible. Instead, judgments as to whether some course of action is morally right or wrong are supplanted by judgments about the quality of our activity as a performance of *dào*—whether it is adept or clumsy, free-flowing or obstructed, in accordance with the situation or at odds with it. This signal feature of Zhuangist ethical discourse makes it challenging to situate it with respect to more familiar ethical views. Although I will suggest the Zhuangist approach overlaps in certain respects with recent moral particularism, I argue that most likely it is distinct from, and amounts to a rejection of, nearly all familiar normative ethical theories, including consequentialism, deontology, virtue ethics, and contractualism.

If this interpretation is justified, then Zhuangist ethical discourse deserves careful philosophical attention, as it offers a radical alternative to prevailing ways of understanding and evaluating our actions and attitudes toward others—one that, Zhuangist writers would insist, better reflects the human condition and the realities of concrete practice. Moreover, as we will see, a Zhuangist approach may provide deep insights into the sources of normativity.

This study surveys a range of selected *Zhuāngzǐ* passages bearing on interpersonal ethics. The working hypothesis is that these passages are contributions to a broad discourse addressing how agents concerned to live in accordance with *dào* and *dé* might suitably conduct themselves in their relations with others.² These passages are representative of Zhuangist discourse insofar as they are a reasonably broad-based selection. I make no claim that they present the coherent, unified standpoint of the *Zhuāngzǐ* as a whole, since the anthology is not organized in such a way as to present such a standpoint. Rather, they constitute an extensive sampling of Zhuangist reflections on ethics, many of which, I argue, share a rough, general orientation and certain interrelated themes. Insofar as these passages do seem to overlap in the themes they take up and attitudes they express, we can usefully refer to them as expressions of one version of a loosely coherent “Zhuangist” ethical stance.

2. Morality as an Impediment to the Way

Most discussions of interpersonal ethics in classical Chinese thought examine general norms of conduct for interacting with other persons, along with virtues associated with these norms. The two most prominent terms of evaluation in such discussions are *rén* 仁

² For the purposes of this discussion, I omit consideration of the so-called “primitivist” writings—books 8–10—and the miscellaneous material in books 28–33, some of which may be from the Han dynasty. I also draw only sparingly on the Huang-Lao and other syncretic writings of books 11–16.

(roughly, benevolence or goodwill) and *yì* 義 (righteousness, duty, or moral norms). These are generally regarded as the highest values, in that evaluation of character or actions as benevolent or righteous is the strongest possible justification for them, defeating any considerations against them, while an action's or trait's violating benevolence or righteousness is conclusive grounds to condemn and avoid it. In both Ruist and Mohist writings, benevolence and righteousness are central to conceptions of the good or proper life and of the exemplary person.

To help highlight the contrast between such mainstream views and the *Zhuāngzǐ*, let me draw a working distinction between “ethics” and “morality.”³ “Ethics” I will take here to refer to a field of inquiry in which we address general questions about how best to live, both as individual persons and in our relations to others. In the context of early Chinese thought, questions about how to live are typically framed as questions about *dào* (way), such as what *dào* we should follow. “Morality” I will take to refer to a certain kind of answer to these questions, namely that we should live by acting on, and being the kind of person who acts on, norms such as benevolence and righteousness—general norms that trump all others, are universally applicable, and produce actions that are considered right in some general or categorical sense, rather than merely provisionally appropriate for a particular context.

A salient feature of discussions of how to live in *Zhuāngzǐ* is that they are generally not framed in terms of moral concepts, in this sense of “morality.” They do not take benevolence and righteousness to be a helpful or defensible answer to the question of how to live. Nor do they claim that ways of life they present in a positive light are benevolent (*rén*) or righteous (*yì*). Indeed, *Zhuāngzǐ* passages that do mention benevolence and righteousness usually criticize them as a misguided basis for guiding action, an obstacle to finding an appropriate *dào*.

These points can be illustrated by a pair of examples.⁴ In a conversation with Yì'érzǐ in book 6, “The Great Ancestral Master” (6/82–89),⁵ the Daoist worthy Xǔ Yóu dismisses the proposal that we must dedicate ourselves to benevolence and righteousness while clearly articulating right and wrong. Xǔ compares pursuing benevolence and righteousness to undergoing judicial mutilation: doing so maims our ability to travel along “aimless and wild, unbound and uninhibited, turning and shifting paths.” In Xǔ's view, the *dào* has no determinate direction, destination, or boundaries, and so fixed norms or clear statements of right and wrong only obscure it and impair our ability to find it. To wander along it adeptly, we rely on uncodifiable capacities more like those by which we appreciate beauty.

³ This distinction is indebted to Williams (1985: 174–175), although I am drawing it differently from how he does.

⁴ For an extended treatment of these themes, see Fraser (2021b).

⁵ Citations to the *Zhuāngzǐ* give chapter and line numbers in Zhuangzi (1956). All translations are my own.

A second example is a dialogue in which Lǎo Dān rejects Confucius's norms of benevolence and righteousness on the grounds that they are obscure and one-sided, generate misdirected effort and needless commotion, and only disrupt people's regular, natural patterns of activity (13/45–53). Rather than striving to conform to benevolence and righteousness, we need only “proceed by applying *dé* and move by following *dào*”—that is, employ our inherent capacity for adaptive agency to find ways to proceed in accordance with concrete circumstances.

As these passages indicate, views on interpersonal conduct in the *Zhuāngzǐ* are generally not expressed in terms of what is benevolent, righteous, or other orthodox moral notions. Indeed, as the second example implies, Zhuangist evaluations of conduct or character are unlikely to be recognizably moral, in the typical use of the word.⁶ Instead, they are framed in terms of what the texts consider competent *dào*-following or expressions of our nature-given *dé* (power, agency).⁷ The point is not that Zhuangist writings offer an unusual or unconventional account of morality. It is that they wholly reject the assumption that questions about what *dào* to follow or how to live are appropriately answered by employing moral notions such as benevolence, righteous, or right and wrong. Morality is not a fitting *dào* and indeed is an impediment to finding the most suitable *dào*.

3. Zhuangist Discourse on Interacting with Others

How, then, are we to interact with others? This section surveys a selection of *Zhuāngzǐ* writings that discuss or depict preferred ways of dealing with others.

3.1 General Formulations

Some *Zhuāngzǐ* passages present general statements bearing directly on our conduct with others. In one passage, for example, Lǎo Dān explains to Confucius that like everything that issues from the “ultimate *dào*”—the inexhaustible source of the vast, unfathomable process through which all things in nature emerge, flourish, and die away—human relations follow certain patterns (*lǐ* 理), by which we engage with each other according to various statuses or relationships. “The sage encounters these without going against them and passes beyond them without clinging to them. Responding to them with attunement is *dé* (power, agency); responding by matching with them is *dào*” (22/38–39). These remarks reflect several recurring themes in Zhuangist discourse on dealing with others. One is that interpersonal relations are regarded as details within a broad outlook on the human condition—an outlook in which our lives and relations to

⁶ Chong makes a similar interpretive point when he suggests that Zhuangist thought is concerned with “personal” integrity, which is not necessarily the same thing as “moral” integrity (2016: 130).

⁷ Lee (2014: 2) and Hansen (2014: sect. 4.3) both rightly stress that the central Zhuangist normative concept is *dào*, rather than paradigmatic moral notions such as benevolence or righteousness.

each other amount to small parts of a vast, complex cycle of generation, development, and decay. Another is that interaction with others is something the sage neither struggles with nor dwells on. The sage handles human relations smoothly, neither neglecting nor becoming preoccupied with them. A third is that the pertinent normative concepts are not specifically moral, but *dào* and *dé*, concepts referring generally to our course of conduct and how we apply our powers of agency. *Dé* lies in responding to patterns by attuning or modulating oneself; *dào* lies in matching up with the patterns rather than clashing with them.

The “Autumn Waters” dialogue explicitly addresses the issue of what conduct to undertake or avoid, expounding on what it calls “the method of the great norm,” which is also depicted as grounded in the patterns (*li*) of things (17/41–47). The text holds that the practical conditions we encounter are constantly changing, such that value distinctions frequently alternate or reverse in different contexts. Adept performance of *dào* thus requires flexible, adaptive responses. “Don’t restrict your intent, or you obstruct *dào*...don’t proceed by a single [standard], or you’ll be at variance with *dào*.” We are to “embrace the myriad things” and proceed without limits, boundaries, biases, favoritism, or any fixed direction. Rather than undertake one course of action or another, we are to accord with how things “transform of themselves.”

3.2 Anecdotes and Examples

A wide range of *Zhuāngzǐ* passages offer anecdotes and examples that illustrate Zhuangist views on relations and interactions with others.

Pluralism. A baseline assumption presented in a number of passages is that a *de facto* plurality of ways of life are pursued by different agents according to their different abilities and needs. The very first passage of the anthology—the story of the giant Peng bird who is mocked by the small-minded cicada and dove—implies that those who smugly draw on their personal norms to criticize others are ignorant and narrow-minded, since different ways may be appropriate for different agents (1/8–10). A passage in “Discourse on Evening Things Out” questions whether we can identify anything that all agents agree is right, since creatures of different species—stand-ins for agents with different capacities, values, and lifestyles—appropriately follow different norms in their choice of dwelling, diet, and mate (2/64–73). An implication of such passages is that different ways of life may be appropriate for different agents, in different circumstances, and accordingly we lack justification for imposing a single set of values and norms on all.⁸

⁸ Hansen (1992), Wong (2003: 409), and Chong (2016: 132) all call attention to the pluralist nature of Zhuangist ethical discourse. Huang (2010b) aptly emphasizes the importance in Zhuangist ethics of respecting differences. Fraser (2009) discusses Zhuangist grounds for acknowledging the value of other ways of life besides our own.

Avoiding arrogance. Several passages present disapproving portrayals of arrogance and prejudice arising from hasty, orthodox judgments that neglect particular agents' actual circumstances. One implication is that, just as different ways of life may have equal status in being suitable for different agents, in different contexts, different agents too have equal status in all being parts of the totality of natural creatures. In one anecdote, a carpenter dismisses a giant tree as worthless, remarking that it has grown so large only because its timber is useless. Appearing to him in a dream, the tree rejoins that the very features the carpenter arrogantly deems useless by his values are to the tree deeply useful—they have allowed it to escape being cut down, as timber trees are. Moreover, the tree adds, the carpenter and the tree share the same status as two things among the myriad in nature. One thing can have no grounds for dismissing the value of another simply because it is different (4/64–75).

In another anecdote, Zǐchán, a high official, contemptuously demands that Shēntú Jiā, an ex-convict judicial amputee, defer to his superior rank by remaining behind when he exits their teacher's home (5/13–24). Shēntú responds that within their teacher's gate, such conventional status differences are irrelevant; the concern is with one's inward state, not outward form. The implication is that the Zhuangist adept does not discriminate against others on the basis of irrelevant details of their social status, outward appearance, or personal history.

Inevitable relations. Circumstances may impose unavoidable expectations and responsibilities on us, which we have no choice but to deal with. This point is illustrated by a conversation in which Confucius offers advice to Zǐgāo, a diplomat overwhelmed with stress over a high-stakes mission (4/34–53). The world presents us with certain “inevitable” requirements, Confucius remarks. Having been born into a particular family, we have elderly parents that we must care for. Residing in a particular territory, we are inescapably subject to political obligations. Our life circumstances entail that we cannot simply live as we please; relationships with others place us in situations that force us to respond to their needs and expectations. We can do so adeptly (by helping our parents flourish in their old age, for example, or by building stable diplomatic relations between our state and a rival) or clumsily (by abandoning our parents to starve or antagonizing both our ruler and the rival state). Either way, the path forward—the *dào*—as we encounter it in such situations presents us with no choice but to deal with our circumstances. The height of *dé*, according to the text, is to respond to unavoidable social pressures with equanimity.

Ideal relations. Several passages depict ideal relations between agents as a matter of “forgetting” (*wàng* 忘) each other. A prominent example is a group of friends who share a Zhuangist approach to life, with “nothing contrary in their hearts,” who describe their preferred relationship as “living by forgetting each other” (6/62).⁹ “Forgetting” in

⁹ See too the three passages that metaphorically compare ideal social life to fish who “forget each other in rivers and lakes” (6/23, 6/73, 14/60).

Zhuangist discourse typically refers to freedom from disruptive, anxious attention to extraneous matters, as when we “forget about” well-fitting clothing or an athlete performs well by forgetting about the prizes and focusing on her performance.¹⁰ The implication is that in ideal relations, the two sides interact immediately, smoothly, and harmoniously, without fretting about how to conduct themselves toward one another. They are so deftly responsive to each other that their interactions require no deliberate undertaking or anxious attention, as when fish swim together as a school or dance partners spontaneously feel and respond to each other’s movements.

Avoiding harm. Several passages indicate that the adept agent avoids harm to others. “The sage deals with things without injuring them. One who does not injure things, things in turn cannot injure. Only one who injures nothing is able to welcome and send off others” (22/80–81). Other passages suggest that, given the opportunity to influence the conduct of powerful figures, agents should seek to limit harm if they can, as when Yán Huí seeks to improve the conduct of a cruel ruler (4/1–3) or Yán Hé attempts to tutor a vicious crown prince (4/54–56).

A crucial aspect of avoiding harm is understanding the constitution and needs of those with whom we interact, which may reflect the plurality of ways of life appropriate for different agents. In the parable of Hùndùn—a moniker referring to primal, unformed chaos—Hùndùn’s grateful guests, the rulers of the north and south oceans, seek to repay his kindness by boring seven holes in his head to make him resemble others in having openings through which to see, hear, eat, and smell. The result is that on the seventh day, Hùndùn perishes (7/33–35). Had his friends better understood him, they would have left him alone, since his nature was to be formless, without openings.

An especially salient implication of the Hùndùn story is that, contrary to the Golden Rule, the appropriate way to interact with others may not be to take our own preferences or needs as a model for how to treat them.¹¹ Hùndùn’s guests assume they are doing him a kindness by modifying his features to be like their own and everyone else’s, but they are mistaken: what suits them does not suit him. By acting with good intentions yet failing to respond to his actual constitution, they inadvertently harm him.¹²

This point is illustrated vividly in the story of the seabird that unexpectedly landed near the capital of the inland state of Lǔ.¹³ Delighted by the bird’s appearance—an auspicious omen—the Lord of Lǔ honored it with a ritual feast and

¹⁰ I explore the implications of “forgetting” in Fraser (2014a) and (2019). As Kohn suggests, “forgetting” is akin to the attitude expressed in English as “never mind” (2015: 180).

¹¹ Huang Yong has insightfully emphasized this point in several publications. See Huang (2010a), (2010b), and (2018).

¹² Chong puts the point well: “We should not impose what we think constitutes ‘the good life’ onto others, no matter how well-intended” (2016: 132). As Wong remarks, on the Zhuangist approach, “there is a grain, then, unique to each human being to which one must become attuned to deal with him or her” (2008: sect. 4.2).

¹³ There are two versions of the story, 18/29–39 and 19/64–76. The discussion focuses on the first, longer version.

musical performance, but the bird only looked confused and upset, refused to eat or drink, and soon died. Despite his intention to honor the bird, the lord only harmed it, because he “nurtured a bird with what nurtures oneself” (18/35). The appropriate approach would have instead been to “nurture a bird with what nurtures birds,” leaving the avian visitor to fly about as it pleased, perch in the forest, float on lakes, and eat whatever it wished (18/35). Our treatment of others must fit their needs; we cannot simply assume that what suits us will suit them. The story observes that since different creatures enjoy different things, have different preferences, and thrive in different circumstances, “the former sages did not regard their abilities as identical or their affairs as the same. Names stop at reality; what’s right is determined by what fits. This is called attaining the patterns (*tiáo* 條) and preserving welfare” (18/39). The failure to accommodate the bird properly is a special case of the more general advice that to conform to the patterns of things and preserve well-being, we must recognize that different agents may have diverse abilities and require varied treatment. We should set aside predetermined labels and titles (*míng* 名) associated with standard norms of conduct (*yì* 義), and instead attend to the reality of the situation (*shí* 實) and what suits or fits it (*shì* 適), adapting our actions to the facts (such as a bird’s normal diet), rather than blindly following codified norms (such as the standard menu for a ritual feast honoring a guest). The crux is that when interacting with others, we should seek to “attain the patterns,” responding to the facts by tailoring our actions to the situation.¹⁴

“*Proceeding on both sides.*” Other passages suggest the most fitting course of action may sometimes be to find compromises between our path and others’. A pivotal *Zhuāngzǐ* passage addressing interpersonal relations is the story of the monkey keeper, a deceptively simple example in book 2, “Discourse on Evening Things Out,” that draws on a rich background theory about the nature of value. The monkey keeper announced that his charges would receive three nuts in the morning and four in the evening. Preferring a larger breakfast, the monkeys were angry. So the keeper reversed the allocation: everyone would instead receive four in the morning and three in the evening. The monkeys were delighted. The keeper harmonized (*hé* 和) things by rearranging the allocation in a way that defused the monkeys’ anger at no loss to himself. The text calls this adaptive response to others’ attitudes “proceeding on both sides” or “walking two ways” (*liǎng xíng* 兩行) (2/40). The implication is that an adroit way to interact with others is to allow both sides to proceed jointly along a path that suits them. The two sides need not agree about the best or the right path. They need not hold that the shared path they settle on is

¹⁴ For this reason, I am not persuaded by Huang’s interpretation of the story as exemplifying “patient relativism,” the view that the proper standards for assessing actions as right or wrong are the values of the recipient of the action (Huang 2010a, 2010b, 2018). I suggest the story is better explained as illustrating the broader theme of guiding action by fitting the patterns of particular situations. These patterns include facts about both the patient of the action and the agent. A crucial aspect of the seabird story is that by treating the bird inappropriately, the Lord of Lǚ also failed to achieve his own end of celebrating the auspicious visitor.

universally justified, nor even justified in any context beyond their immediate circumstances. They need only find a way to go on that is acceptable to both sides and allows them to proceed harmoniously.

The monkey story appears in the context of an elaborate discussion of the relation between *dào* and judgments of what is *shì* 是 or *fēi* 非—right or wrong, “this” or not—which provides a theoretical basis for its approach to dealing with others. To better understand the import of the story, it is worth briefly sketching some of this background.¹⁵ The story is introduced to illustrate the foolishness of laboriously insisting that all things form a unity while failing to recognize that *dào* is originally an unformed, indefinite field of ways by which anything can be divided off from other things and deemed “so” or not. Given this understanding of *dào*, according to the text, once we set such deeming practices aside, all manner of things “reconnect as one,” forming an undivided, indeterminate totality (2/33–36). “To labor your wits deeming things a unity” is like insisting on three nuts in the morning, rather than seeing that the underlying totality—seven nuts—can be divided up in numerous ways while remaining “the same” in adding up to seven (2/38).

According to the discussion immediately preceding the monkey story, action-guiding distinctions between “this/right” and “not/wrong” or between “so” and “not-so” are determined by the practices we adopt, which “complete” one of a variety of ways of proceeding (2/33). Any practice we undertake produces both “completion” (*chéng* 成) and “deficiency” (*kuī* 虧, *huǐ* 毀)—it brings some values and distinctions into view while neglecting or obscuring others. Apart from our practices, nothing is inherently right or wrong, “so” or “not-so.” Hence if a path we have undertaken runs into difficulty, we are free to modify it. The adept grasp this point and so refrain from “imposing-*shì*” (*wéi shì* 為是), or deeming things this or that on the basis of fixed or rigid judgments applied without regard for particular, variable contexts. Instead, they “accommodate things in the ordinary” (2/36). This opaque phrase the text unpacks by identifying the “ordinary” (*yōng* 庸) with what is useful (*yòng* 用) or successful (*dé* 得) and connects or proceeds in a proficient, free-flowing manner (*tōng* 通) (2/36–37). To successfully accommodate things in some context, the text says, is to apply “according-*shì*” (*yīn shì* 因是)—provisionally, adaptively taking things as this/right (*shì*) or not “in accordance with” (*yīn* 因) particular circumstances (2/37).¹⁶

Further passages link “according-*shì*” to the view that “this/right” and “that/wrong” are not rigidly opposed, since what is “this” can also be “that” and vice versa (2/29–31). Applying this view, one can attain the “hinge of *dào*”—the key to

¹⁵ Recent discussions with Stephen Walker influenced my interpretation of several points in this section.

¹⁶ I follow Graham (1969/70) in taking *yīn shì* 因是 to be a set phrase because the two graphs occur together in the text four times referring apparently to the same idea. As Graham proposed, the phrase *yīn shì* seems to contrast with *wéi shì* 為是, which also appears four times, referring to insistently imposing some *shì* judgment on things.

following *dào* adeptly—by which we can respond to changing circumstances with unlimited flexibility, deeming anything either this/right or not for some purpose or other (2/31). The successful practice of *dào*, according to the text, lies in applying such provisional, “according-*shi*” judgments without knowing one is doing so—without knowing what the appropriate responses will be, since they are discovered in the course of action (2/37).¹⁷

A key to understanding the monkey story is that the change in nut distribution is presented as an example of “according-*shi*.” The approach to dealing with others depicted thus emerges from a more general account of adroit *dào*-following as an adaptive response to circumstances that facilitates ongoing ordinary practice. The *dào*-adept acts mainly to seek “ordinary coping” (*yōng* 庸), or useful, successful, free-flowing movement along a path presented by the situation, incorporating factors such as one’s social role and relations with others. The adept understands there is no definitive way to distinguish *shi-fēi* and thus there are no definitive norms of conduct or inherently correct value distinctions. However, conflict with others creates obstructions for both sides in proceeding along their ordinary, useful path. Since the adept are attached to no particular scheme of distinctions, they adjust their course of action according to the context to achieve harmony and allow both sides to proceed along their respective *dào*.

4. A Way with Others

The diverse writings just surveyed present not a single, specific ethical doctrine but a family of criss-crossing, interrelated attitudes and approaches to dealing with others. Here I want to call attention to certain broad themes that recur across several of them, which I suggest offer a plausible general explanation for the approaches presented in a number of others.

A motif that appears repeatedly is that the wise agent avoids imposing inappropriate standards, norms, or expectations on others when interacting with or making judgments about them. Instead, we are to be responsive to their concrete context, including their current status, their constitution and dispositions, and their norms and practices, which may be diverse, complex, changing, and different from our own.¹⁸

A helpful way to elucidate this general motif is by noting how it relates to a second theme, that appropriate activity is marked by how well it responds to the dynamic patterns of things. In pre-Han thought generally, “pattern” (*lǐ* 理, *tiáo* 條) refers to facts about how things are structured or organized, how they relate to each other, and how they develop, proceed, or transform. Patterns are understood to be dynamic, reflecting

¹⁷ At 2/37, I follow Wáng Shúmín in taking 因是已 to be equivalent to 因是也 and Wáng Yǐnzhī 王引之 in reading 已而不知其然 as equivalent to 此而不知其然 (Wáng 1988: 64). See too Chén (2007: 72).

¹⁸ Hansen (1992, 2014), Wong (2003, 2008), and Chong (2016) all note these points in various ways.

ongoing development, interaction, and transformation. Conforming to the patterns is a prerequisite for proper or successful action; misunderstanding or overlooking the patterns is likely to lead to error or failure. *Dào* as agents encounter it is in effect a field of potential paths of activity shaped by the patterns. Following *dào* well lies in finding and proceeding along a path that aligns with the patterns; following it badly is struggling against or conflicting with the patterns.

This conception of *dào* and patterns I suggest helpfully illuminates many aspects of Zhuangist discussions of our interactions with others. In effect, other agents and their activities are features of the patterns we encounter in various circumstances. Interacting with others harmoniously is one aspect of virtuoso *dào*-following, or responding to the patterns adroitly. Roughly this conception seems expressed in Lǎo Dān's description of *dé* 德 (virtue, agency-power) as “attuning” ourselves to the patterns of human relations and *dào* as “matching” with them (22/38–39) and in the “Autumn Waters” description of “knowing *dào*” as “attaining proficiency in the patterns” and thus understanding how to adapt our conduct to changing situations (17/48). According to the seabird story, by adapting our actions to fit the facts of the situation, we “attain the patterns and preserve welfare” (18/39). To tailor one's path to the context is to accord with the patterns; to harm others or impose irrelevant, ill-fitting standards on them is to clash with the patterns.

I propose, then, that a rough background view informing many of the more specific *Zhuāngzǐ* discussions of interaction with others is that interpersonal relations are to be handled in much the same way as any other field of activity. We seek to proceed deftly and proficiently, responding to the patterns at work in the particular context, navigating our way through them harmoniously, without conflict, obstruction, or disturbance. This vision of appropriate conduct is not presented as a specifically moral ideal but as one aspect of a general conception of virtuoso *dào*-following. On this view, the criteria of appropriate action in dealing with others are a cluster of notions set forth in passages such as the seabird and monkey stories. We act well when what we do fits (*shì* 適) the reality (*shí* 實) of the situation, which includes others' needs and propensities as well our own. We seek to accord with the situation (*yīn* 因), attain competence (*dá* 達) in its patterns (*lǐ* 理, *tiáo* 條), and by doing so achieve harmony (*hé* 和) while preserving welfare. An apt course of action will seem “ordinary” (*yōng* 庸) while being useful (*yòng* 用), successful (*dé* 得), and “free-flowing” or proficient (*tōng* 通). These notions amount largely to a conception of successful performance, bearing connotations of facility, competence, and proficiency.

If these descriptions indeed amount to a rough conception of success or competence, a natural question to ask is: what counts as success here? What makes some course of conduct with others fitting, harmonious, competent, or “free-flowing”? Just as Zhuangist conceptions of *dào* tend to be pluralistic and contextual, I suggest, conceptions of success or competence in finding and pursuing a *dào* with others are as well.

The core idea is that a successful, “free-flowing” path will be one that accommodates both sides’ ends as they develop during the course of their interaction. Whenever agents interact, each side comes into the situation following some given *dào*, incorporating their respective practices, norms, values, and ends. This prior *dào* is shaped by each agent’s abilities, needs, interests, habits, prior choices, and life circumstances. Normally it will include a commitment to “ordinary” values and ends such as preserving our own and our family’s lives and welfare. Our initial conception of success may be simply to continue following this *dào* smoothly. Like any *dào* we follow in practice, however, our prior *dào* may need to be modified as we proceed through concrete, changing circumstances. Our *dào* may lead to conflict with others, for example—the monkeys may be unhappy with the menu, the bird we intended to nurture may refuse to eat. Such conflict constitutes an obstacle to both sides in continuing on their path, preventing them from “flowing freely.” It indicates a failure to accord with the patterns we encounter, poor fit between our conduct and the context. Hence competent agents will employ *dé* to adjust their path and find a harmonious way for both sides to proceed—both sides, not only their own, because if one side’s path remains blocked, the conflict will only recur (the monkeys expand their protest) or one’s action may fail entirely (the bird dies). Resolving conflicts may involve revising or dropping some prior ends or norms in favor of others—adopting an overall daily quota of nuts instead of a particular distribution at meals, for example, or honoring a bird by placing it in a sanctuary, instead of subjecting it to a boisterous social event.

In both of these examples, the appropriate course lies in switching from one’s initial way of treating others to a different course that suits them better while preserving key aspects of one’s original *dào*—the monkeys still receive seven nuts a day, the Lord of Lǚ still honors the auspicious visitor. *Zhuāngzǐ* writings offer no fixed formula for finding such appropriate courses except to avoid rigidly imposing our way on others, instead adapting how we proceed to their positive or negative responses. Indeed, there could be no such fixed formula, since what counts as “fitting” or “free-flowing” will depend on the context. Moreover, in many cases there is unlikely to be any unique solution to conflict. Perhaps the monkey keeper could have offered four nuts at both meals; perhaps the Lord of Lǚ could have let the bird fly off and simply marked its visit with a commemorative plaque. Accordingly, in many cases, the aim will not be to find the “right” or most fitting *dào*—there may be no such thing—but to find a path that provisionally allows both sides to move on, addressing their values as best we can. The complexity of different agents’ *dào* and circumstances means that any such path must be undertaken provisionally, with humility. Our initial response to conflict might fail to fully address the relevant patterns, leaving grounds for further conflict, or the patterns themselves may change. A judicious agent will remain open to further adjustments in the path by which two sides interact. Perhaps in the end the monkeys should be set free to find their own nuts, for example.

This loose approach to finding a way with others is formal, not substantive, in that it concerns only how to go about handling interaction with other agents rather than stipulating substantive ends or criteria of appropriate conduct. It reflects a deeply modest, skeptical attitude concerning whether we can say much about interpersonal ethics that is general and substantive yet helpful in practice. Accordingly, it avoids systematic ethical theory. Moreover, it is not conceptually distinct from *dào*-following or exercising agency in general and so overlaps with many other ways of assessing conduct. Factors that contribute to a course of action being more or less fitting might conventionally be considered matters of etiquette, tact, prudence, aesthetics, customs, or morality. At the same time, however, the Zhuangist approach might at times violate norms in any of these areas, if doing so seems the most fitting way to “proceed on both sides.”

4.1 An Ethics of *Dào* and *Dé*

In light of the preceding discussion, I suggest that Zhuangist ethics can informatively be labeled an ethics of *dào* and *dé*. Its central concepts are not right and wrong, nor virtues and vices, but *dào* and *dé*—apt or appropriate paths of conduct and the potency or power of agency by which we follow such paths.¹⁹ The focus and terms of evaluation of a *dào-dé* ethics are distinct from those of ethical theories structured around principles, duties, obligations, rights, or virtues. The focus is on how one proceeds and the path one pursues—the manner of our agency (*dé*) and the course we follow (*dào*). The ideal is an ongoing, resilient, adroit flow of agency responsive to features of our circumstances. Appropriate treatment of other agents emerges from a concern with *dào* and *dé* but is not the primary focus.

This approach to ethics is rooted in and rendered plausible by the Zhuangist understanding of the structure of action and of *dào*. Zhuangist writers tend to conceive of action through the model of skills. Normatively commendable action for them is an adroit response to particular, concrete circumstances akin to the competent performance of an art or a skill. To them, it is plausible, even obvious, that competent conduct rests primarily on an implicit feel for and uncodifiable responsiveness to one’s situation, for it is a truism that skilled performances issue from such tacit abilities. This view of action dovetails with a prominent Zhuangist conception of *dào*. For many early Chinese thinkers, *dào* can be thought of as a set of norms governing the course and manner of our conduct—what we do and how we do it. Mohist and Ruist thinkers sought to identify *dào* with norms that are “constant” or “regular” (*cháng* 常)—that is, settled and consistent. By contrast, Daoist texts typically depict *dào* as continually shifting and transforming, following no fixed or predetermined boundaries, such that there is no “constant” *dào*. The question “What is the *dào*?” thus has no determinate general answer. All we can offer are vague generalizations, such as “proceed according to the facts of the situation” (4/43) or

¹⁹ Lee helpfully describes the Zhuangist approach as an “ethics of attunement” to *dào* (2014: 10).

“rely on natural patterns, slice through the main gaps, and be guided by the major seams, responding to what’s inherently so” (3/6–7).

This Zhuangist approach to ethics may be unique.²⁰ Clearly it is not a brand of consequentialism, although as we have seen it generally endorses avoiding harm. Nor does it focus on social roles or propriety, as Ruism does, although again, as we have seen, it may treat some roles as unavoidable and some norms of propriety as expedient. Since *dé* (agency) is one of its central concepts and it valorizes exemplary agents such as the sage, it has a prominent virtue-like dimension and, I have argued elsewhere, a eudaimonistic aspect.²¹ But *dé* is not normatively basic; it is understood through its relation to *dào*, which is conceptually more fundamental. *Dào* is not a virtue but a path, so an ethics of *dào* and *dé* is not accurately described as a virtue ethics.

Treatment of others is not grounded in respect for their dignity as rational, autonomous agents, as in Kantian ethics, but in acknowledgment of their presence as other creatures who are equally part of nature and whose paths cross our own. It is not driven by care or concern for others, but only by responsiveness to their situation, which in some cases might prompt us to act in their interest. The *dào-dé* approach implies that usually the harmonious or fitting path will be one that both sides can accept, but it does not explicitly appeal to justification to those affected by our actions, nor to a contractualist relation with them.

This approach is deeply contextual, as the fitting or harmonious path will be extensively shaped by particular circumstances. Formally, insofar as the key concepts of *dào*, *dé*, “patterns,” “freely flowing,” “fitting,” and so on are understood roughly consistently across different contexts, it need not be considered a form of relativism. However, the substantive actions associated with these concepts will vary for different agents and in different situations.

This contextualism means that the *dào-dé* approach may converge in some respects with recent moral particularism.²² Particularism is a family of views according to which moral judgments and statuses are based purely on features of particular cases, without appealing to general moral principles. Particularists argue that morally admirable agency does not lie in applying general principles to cases, that similar features in different cases may have variable relevance in judging what actions to take, and that a plurality of different features may be relevant in one case or another.²³ Such particularist claims overlap in various ways with ideas presented in Zhuangist discussions such as the “Discourse on Evening Things Out” and “Autumn Waters,” which consider how the plurality and heterogeneity of values at stake in diverse, changing

²⁰ Lee insightfully remarks on how the orientation of Zhuangist thought diverges from orthodox conceptions of ethics, leading some interpreters to deny the *Zhuāngzǐ* presents any ethical views and others to foist an alien conception of morality on Zhuangist writings (2014: 3, 17).

²¹ See Fraser (2014b).

²² Lee (2014: 47) also notes the similarities between Zhuangist ethics and particularism.

²³ Dancy (2001), especially sect. 3.

contexts make finding a suitable course of action a matter of applying situational discretion, not following general norms. However, unlike particularism, these discussions do not offer an analysis or explanation of the nature of moral judgment. Nor do they insist that general standards have no role at all (perhaps they may be applicable in some cases, or perhaps they might function as abstract examples of appropriate action). Moreover, since a Zhuangist ethics of *dào* and *dé* is not an approach to morality, *per se*, it is accordingly not a variety of moral particularism. Its central structural concepts—*dào* and *dé*—are significantly different from those of moral particularism, and the contextual responses of the Zhuangist adept may be grounded in factors quite different from the moral reasons and judgments that concern the particularist. Still, the relations between Zhuangist thought and particularism are intriguing and deserve further exploration.

4.2 Zhuangist Normativity

In the Zhuangist view as I have sketched it, what is the source of the normative push to treat others well? Why seek harmony or “proceeding on both sides” rather than simply forcing others to do things our way?

The answer, I suggest, lies in interaction between the concepts of *dào* and *dé*, the paths presented to us by our situation and the Zhuangist conception of adept agency and hence the well-lived life. The normativity implicated in interaction with others is a version of that implicated in *dào*-following generally. To perform *dào* well and excel as an agent is to find our way through a field of potential paths freely and smoothly, with harmony and ease, while avoiding hindrance or obstruction. For many *Zhuāngzǐ* passages, the good life lies in attaining virtuosity in *dào*-following, by which we wander or roam about freely, flexibly, and adeptly, taking up various paths that circumstances present without becoming fixated on any particular path.²⁴ This conception of the good life is one reason for the Zhuangist interest in skills, as skilled performances offer examples of fluid, adaptive responses to changing circumstances.

The underlying source of normativity in interpersonal relations, then, is that we achieve a higher level of excellence in performing *dào* when we act in ways that smoothly and harmoniously respond to the presence of other agents. The *dào* virtuoso avoids mistreating others because doing so is clumsy, awkward, and creates obstructions to *dào*. It is a failure to perform *dào* well and accordingly a defect in one's *dé*. On this view, the wrongness involved in mistreating others is a special case of doing something badly, in a way that is ineffectual, runs into obstacles, or creates difficulties by overlooking relevant factors. It is comparable to struggling to scale a cliff blocking our path instead of taking an easy detour around it or to forcing our way through a crowd instead of joining a stream of pedestrians to one side who are already moving in the same direction.

²⁴ I explore this view of the good life in Fraser (2011), (2014a), and (2014b).

To be sure, the normative force implicated by this notion of clumsy or incompetent *dào*-following is weak. Nothing compels us to take the more open or fitting path. Moreover, as we saw in section 4, the appropriate path or paths may be underdetermined by the circumstances. Several more or less feasible paths may be available, the most fitting or free-flowing ones being dependent partly on the dispositions, abilities, and discretion of the agents involved. Still, failing to take a path that accommodates others suitably is a mistake—it gets something wrong—since it involves ignoring relevant features of the circumstances that affect how well things go for everyone.

This approach to evaluating action may reflect deep features of the nature of normativity. On the Zhuangist approach, normativity arises from interaction between the course of our activity and the shape of our situation—the features or pressures it presents.²⁵ That any normative pressure on us exists at all is a product of our status as agents, situated in some context, engaged in some *dào*. Interaction between our *dào* and our circumstances, including the presence of others, makes some paths better and some worse, in the sense of being more or less likely to go well, by our lights and those of others with whom we interact. The features and relations that fix the varying efficacy of different paths are not determined purely by our activity, nor by the world (including other agents) apart from our activity, but by interaction between the two. Norms of interpersonal conduct ranging from friendship to etiquette to morality reflect patterns of human responses, expectations, needs, and capacities as we encounter them in proceeding along our *dào*. A key Zhuangist claim is that we perform best in following *dào* by attending and responding to these patterns directly, rather than working through the intermediary of codified general guidelines.

5. Objections and Replies

One possible objection to a Zhuangist *dào-dé* ethics is that it might allow immoral actions. The *dào-dé* approach seeks smooth, harmonious, efficacious interaction between agents, but without specifying in advance of particular cases what smoothness, harmony, or efficacy might be, beyond the different parties finding a way to jointly proceed along their path. Might this approach be open to abuse? For example, perhaps agents with greater physical or political power might achieve “harmony” with the less powerful by coercing them into submission, or perhaps they might promulgate an exploitative ideology that indoctrinates them into accepting subordinate status. The passage leading into the monkey story indicates that the adept accommodates things in what is “ordinary” and efficacious. But perhaps courses of action considered ordinary, customary, or

²⁵ Hansen has emphasized how the implications of “path” or “course” metaphors shape the Zhuangist understanding of normativity (2014: sect 4.3).

efficacious might be unfair or unjust, as when a society's widely accepted customs discriminate against some of its members.

As a first response to this criticism, it is worth pointing out that compelled "harmony" and forced cooperation are not actual harmony or cooperation. Since the basis for conflict remains, problems are likely to reemerge. That Zhuangist ideas can be twisted and misused as the criticism suggests is not a weakness of the *dào-dé* approach specifically, since the values of any ethics can be twisted and misused.

Still, a critic may press the worry that since the Zhuangist approach to resolving interpersonal conflict makes no claim to moral justification and thus to the special objectively or impartially correct status associated with morality, it risks producing morally objectionable outcomes. In that case, even though the *dào-dé* approach itself assigns no privileged role to moral justification, we might nevertheless have strong moral reasons to reject it.

In fact, however, I suggest that the Zhuangist approach can indeed yield a type of impartial justification for at least some courses of action. The concept of "proceeding on both sides" and anecdotes such as the monkeys and the seabird seem to endorse paths of action that all parties involved can jointly undertake, according to their own dispositions and values. The texts themselves do not invoke the concept or terminology of impartial justification. But they suggest that an appropriate course of action is one that is fitting, free-flowing, or successful from the standpoint of each of those involved. This status is tantamount to holding that such action is justifiable, or at least acceptable, to each side, by that side's own evolving values, a relation that constitutes a plausible conception of interpersonal impartiality. Courses of action that fulfill the ideal of "proceeding on both sides" or "attaining the patterns and preserving welfare" thus are unlikely to be morally objectionable.

A second important criticism is that, since it provides no concrete or substantive guidelines for action, the *dào-dé* approach may be empty or impracticable. Of course, to assume a practicable or justifiable approach to ethics must provide substantive guidelines is to beg the question against Zhuangist views. Various *Zhuāngzǐ* writings on *dào* and value contend that values are plural, heterogeneous, and contingent on changing circumstances.²⁶ Hence no concrete, substantive general guidelines may be available, only loose, formal guidelines, such as "proceed on both sides."

Beyond this point, however, arguably *Zhuāngzǐ* writings do provide a practicable approach to action, one modeled on the performance of skills. This approach involves seeking harmony, good fit, and free-flowing paths by reducing the influence of potentially biased preconceptions, attending to contextual details such as the paths of other agents, and developing our capacity for finding creative, effective responses to particular obstacles or deficiencies. The idea is to proceed much as we do in overcoming

²⁶ See Fraser (2009) and (2015).

challenges in the performance of skills, such as carving up oxen, building wheels, piloting a boat, or catching cicadas for lunch.²⁷

A key difference from the skill examples is that skills have inherent ends by which to evaluate performance. The wheelwright's skill is measured by how smoothly the wheels roll, the boat pilot's by how promptly and safely the boat reaches its destination, and so forth. By contrast, much of our interaction with others has no fixed end. So how do we evaluate how well some course of action fits or flows in a particular context? A plausible Zhuangist answer, again, is that the contexts themselves provide the grounds for such evaluations. In any given context, we find ourselves proceeding along some path, holding and responding to certain ends or values, such as our own welfare, that of our family, friends, and community, and various projects we or they may be involved in. We interact with other agents whose paths overlap ours and whose values we must accordingly take into account as well, if we are to proceed along our *dào* in a smooth, free-flowing way. All of these factors jointly provide the initial criteria by which to evaluate how well various courses of action fit the situation, are harmonious or free-flowing, preserve welfare, proceed on both sides, and so forth. In particular contexts, then, we can evaluate the fit or flow of our actions by asking questions such as whether the monkeys are happily cooperating and thriving and whether a ceremonial banquet is an apt way to honor an auspicious bird.

We may find that some of the factors relevant to such evaluations conflict with each other and so must be modified or set aside. Moreover, as we adapt to circumstances and proceed along our way, our situation, values and ends, and relations to others may change. The features by which to measure good fit for courses of action in particular contexts may change with them, and our path of action may need to shift accordingly. The status of flowing or fitting well will always be provisional, the path constantly open to refinement or reorientation in pursuit of better fit with the patterns we encounter. Virtuoso *dào*-following lies as much in how we respond to others and find our way together as in the specific path of conduct we undertake at one time or another.

6. Concluding Remarks

The *Zhuāngzǐ* presents an approach to the ethics of interacting with others that grows out of a broader concern with living a life in which we employ our naturally occurring *dé* to find and adeptly proceed along suitable *dào*. On this approach, the question of how to treat others is not fundamentally distinct from questions about how to undertake any course of activity. Interpersonal conduct is approached as a field of skill in which we seek to find a fitting, efficacious course, as shaped by the patterns inherent in our circumstances. Such a course will be one that enables all those involved to proceed along a path that suits them.

²⁷ I explore this practical, applied side of Zhuangist thought in Fraser (2014a) and (2021a).

The Zhuangist approach is non-moral, insofar as it is concerned not with what is morally right or wrong but with what “flows” or “connects through” (*tōng*), “fits” (*shì*), and yields “harmony” (*hé*) in some situation. Agents’ conduct and character are assessed not in terms of recognizably moral concepts but in terms more similar to how we assess the performance of skills—how responsive they are to particular situations and how competent or successful they are at proceeding along a sustainable joint course of activity, in this case one that seeks to accommodate the values and ends of all those involved.

A Zhuangist ethics of *dào* and *dé* amounts to an eliminativist approach to morality, at least as morality is understood in section 2. It sets aside moral concepts and the notion of moral justification in favor of alternative, ostensibly more fundamental concepts that purport to guide action more effectively while better accommodating the details of particular situations. This essay has attempted only to sketch the framework and core evaluative concepts of such an ethics. A thorough assessment of the Zhuangist approach will require further inquiry along several lines. One would be how this approach is equipped to resolve conflicts between agents, especially when one side does not endorse the Zhuangist understanding of *dào* or “proceeding on both sides.” A deeper understanding is also needed of the reverse sort of situation, the mutual, reciprocal nature of social *dào*-following in cases when various sides do seek to cooperate, described in one memorable passage as a matter of agents “forgetting each other in *dào*-arts” (6/73). Still other crucial questions concern to what extent the Zhuangist approach may be intertwined with a particular normative understanding of human psychology. If Zhuangist ethics presupposes an implausible or impracticable view of agency, the approach may founder. Conversely, to the extent that Zhuangist conceptions of the nature of agency and the motives of the flourishing agent are plausible and attractive, the grounds for the accompanying normative approach to interpersonal conduct may be strengthened.²⁸

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²⁸ The author acknowledges research support from the General Research Fund scheme of the Research Grants Council of Hong Kong.

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