

## Wandering the Way:

### A Eudaimonistic Approach to the *Zhuāngzǐ*<sup>1</sup>

Chris Fraser

University of Hong Kong

*Working Draft*<sup>2</sup>

One common conception of happiness is that it lies in a certain form of pleasurable experience. Another is a eudaimonistic conception of happiness as a state of well-being or flourishing. As a rule, the texts collected in the classical Daoist anthology *Zhuāngzǐ* 莊子 (4th–2nd century BCE) tend to disvalue happiness under the first conception, typically denoted by the word *lè* 樂. Numerous *Zhuāngzǐ* passages valorize a state of affective equanimity (*ān* 安) or harmony (*hé* 和) and treat emotions as unwanted disturbances, whether negative emotions such as sorrow (*āi* 哀) and anger (*nù* 怒) or positive ones such as joy (*xǐ* 喜) and happiness or pleasure (*lè*). Emotions are regarded as interfering with the exercise of *dé* 德, “virtuosity” or “power,” which for the *Zhuāngzǐ* is pivotal to the best sort of individual life. *Dé* is the closest analogue in Daoist texts to the notion of virtue, but rather than moral virtue, it refers to non-moral virtuosity, power, or charisma.<sup>3</sup>

Is such a life of *dé* and equanimity a “happy” one, in some sense? At least one Zhuangist

<sup>1</sup> This paper is a revised version of a talk presented at the conference on “Happiness East and West” held at the University of Hong Kong, December 10–11, 2009. I am grateful to the conference participants for much stimulating discussion, which resulted in several substantive revisions to the paper.

<sup>2</sup> [I emphasize that this is an incomplete draft prepared for a conference presentation. Among other points, numerous references to the secondary literature remain to be incorporated.]

<sup>3</sup> [To be completed.] Comment on anthological nature of the *Zhuāngzǐ* and methodological approach: not aiming to reconstruct view of any particular writer, but conjoining interpretations of distinct Zhuangist texts to develop a systematic position not presented explicitly or necessarily endorsed by any one part of the anthology. Not a reconstruction of a hypothetical unified position of the *Zhuāngzǐ*, but a development of Zhuangist thought grounded in interpretations of various passages.

writer explicitly claims that it is. A rich, fascinating dialogue between Confucius 孔子 and Lǎo Dān 老聃 in Book 21 (“Tián Zǐ Fāng” 田子方, 21/24–38)—one of several such dialogues scattered throughout the so-called “outer” books of the anthology—depicts affective equanimity as a crucial aspect of “letting the heart wander in the beginning of things” (遊心於物之初), an activity it characterizes as “ultimate beauty and ultimate happiness” (至美至樂).<sup>4</sup> The passage does not explicitly specify in what sense such “wandering” (遊) amounts to appreciating ultimate beauty and realizing ultimate happiness. But its implication is that through “wandering,” one fully appreciates the grandeur and mystery of natural processes and their unfathomable “ancestor” or “source,” the *Dào* 道 (way)—this is the thematic emphasis of the first half of the dialogue—while understanding and exercising what is most of value in human life—the emphasis of the second half.<sup>5</sup> The passage implies that such wandering is an expression of the *dé* of the “ultimate person” (至人), establishing a connection between wandering and *dé* that we also find elsewhere in the *Zhuāngzǐ*, as I will explain. Arguably, then, the passage presents a conception of happiness as a status or activity analogous in some respects to *eudaimonia*.

*Eudaimonia* in Greek thought is a general label for the ultimate end of life, an intrinsically good state or activity constitutive of the good life. Greek thinkers typically tie *eudaimonia* to moral virtue (*arete*), such that a unified understanding of what is morally right, integrated with the motivation to do it, is either sufficient for *eudaimonia* or an essential component of it. In these two respects, the Greek conception of *eudaimonia* is alien to the *Zhuāngzǐ*. The arguments in “Discourse on Evening Things Out” (齊物論) and

<sup>4</sup> [Insert citation information—references are to chapter/line in HY concordance.] All translations are my own.

“Autumn Waters” (秋水), among other important texts, suggest that Zhuangist thinkers would reject the idea that human life has any fixed purpose or end, and they would surely deny that morality plays a central role in the best sort of life. Still, throughout the *Zhuāngzǐ* we do find a concern with living well, typically expressed through normative descriptions of the ideal or good life. Numerous passages depict ideal human types, such as the sage (聖人), the “ultimate human” (至人), or the “authentic human” (真人); advocate preserving one’s “authenticity” (真); or portray and commend the exercise of *dé*. In this respect, apparently eudaimonistic ideals are prominent in the *Zhuāngzǐ*.

An obvious question to raise, then, is: If the Zhuangist view denies that human life has any specific ends or that human flourishing lies in any particular substantive activity, can it legitimately be called eudaimonistic? The answer, I suggest, is that for the *Zhuāngzǐ*, the good life, or the life of *dé*, is not devoted to any predetermined substantive ends, nor to activities with a specified substantive content. Instead, it is marked primarily by a distinctive *mode* or *style* of activity, accompanied by certain characteristic attitudes. In other words, Zhuangist ideals concern primarily *how* we do whatever we do, rather than *what* it is we do—the manner in which we live, rather than the content of our activity.<sup>6</sup> In the anthology’s own terminology, the mode of activity I am alluding to is typically referred to as *yóu* 遊 (also *yóu* 游), a word that connotes free, purposeless wandering or roaming, a pleasurable jaunt or sightseeing excursion, and play or recreation. (For convenience, I will translate *yóu* henceforth as “wandering.”)

This paper develops a Zhuangist account of the ideal or good life on which its distinctive

<sup>5</sup> The capitalized “*Dào*” refers to the so-called “Great *Dào*” (大道), the totality of objects, events, and processes that constitute the cosmos. The lowercase “*dào*” refers to one or more distinct ways or paths within the *Dào*.

<sup>6</sup> I say “primarily,” because in some contexts, Zhuangist normative views about the “how” partly determine the “what.” I’ll return to this point in the final section.

feature is the exercise of *dé* (virtuosity) in the general mode of activity the texts call wandering. Wandering, I suggest, is a characteristic expression or exercise of *dé*.

### **Zhuangist Eudaimonism**

By way of supporting the claim that we can legitimately talk about Zhuangist “eudaimonism,” in the sense of a Zhuangist conception of a flourishing life, in this section I want to examine four thematically interrelated passages that bear especially closely on the issue. I think the interpretation I propose coheres well with numerous other passages that allude to *dé* or to wandering and also with those that allude to preserving what is “genuine” (真) or “natural” (天) in us. But the four I focus on here provide especially rich detail that I suggest points to a normative conception of human flourishing or healthy functioning comparable to (though of course also importantly different from) Aristotelian *eudaimonia*.

The first of the four is the dialogue between Confucius and Lǎozǐ that I mentioned earlier (21/24–38). In explaining the “direction” or “method” (方) by which one can “wander in the beginning of things,” the text has Lǎozǐ state that “value lies in me and is not lost in change” (貴在於我而不失於變). The implication, I suggest, is that what is of highest value in human life is our capacity for wandering (遊) through the ceaseless transformations that constitute the workings of *Dào*, the source of things. For this passage, then, the best sort of life is one in which we exercise our capacity for wandering.

The passage’s explanation of such wandering stresses three points. First, it is characterized by “great constancy” (大常), insofar as it is an activity that continues undisturbed throughout changing circumstances. Second, this constancy is achieved by identifying with the world (天下), construed as the totality or “one” (一) that incorporates the myriad things. This identification is apparently not construed as a loss of the individual self, but an extension of it, such that the self is understood as a part of and through its relation to

the totality. Third, such constancy is marked by affective equanimity, here construed as an absence of strong positive or negative emotions. The agent ceases to be disturbed by change, such as bodily injury, life or death, gain or loss, fortune or misfortune. A person who follows the *Dào* is “free” or “released” (解) from psychological disturbances caused by affective responses to change.

This emphasis on equanimity and constancy of mind links the Confucius-Lǎozǐ dialogue to two stories in Book 5, “Signs of Full *Dé*” (德充符), which provide rich descriptions of *dé*. These stories fall among a series of passages that famously valorize figures whose physical form is mutilated or misshapen, but who nevertheless possess great *dé*. They challenge the widespread contemporaneous belief that a person’s *dé* would be manifested in the person’s physical form, through wholeness, health, beauty, and graceful bearing. They also undermine conventional conceptions of *dé* by choosing as exemplars several men whose feet have been amputated as criminal punishment. These figures underscore the Zhuangist view that *dé* enables one to escape contingency, insofar as the agent’s exercise of *dé* is independent of changing circumstances, including bodily injury and even impending death.

The first of these stories I want to consider is that of Āi Tái Tuō 哀駘它 (5/31–49), a horrendously ugly man whose mysterious charisma causes people to find him intensely attractive, though he possesses neither political power nor great wealth and never takes the lead, but only harmonizes with others. Āi’s ability to win people’s trust and affection without saying or doing anything in particular is attributed to his “capacity” or “stuff” (才) being “whole” (全), while his *dé* is preserved within and not manifested in his physical form. The text associates one’s “capacity” with “what employs the body” (使其形者), implying that it refers to inner faculties or capabilities that either constitute or enable agency. I suggest that the passage implies a normative conception of characteristic human “capacity” and that Āi

exemplifies its fullest exercise. Thus we can take the description of him as indicative of a Zhuangist conception of a flourishing life, one that properly realizes our capacities.

The text's account of one's "capacity being whole" emphasizes preserving affective harmony (和) and ease (豫) in the face of unknowable and uncontrollable change, or the "march of fate" (命之行). One is to allow no "openings" through which the vagaries of fortune can get in to disrupt one's spirit. Indeed, for this text, *dé* just is the cultivation of perfect inner equanimity or harmony (德者成和之修也), which is said to have an attractive effect on others. Such psychological harmony enables Āi to "encounter things and generate the opportune moment in his heart" (接而生時於心). An agent whose "capacity is whole" is no passive victim of fate, but finds ways to create opportunities from his circumstances.

The other story concerns an ex-convict amputee named Wáng Tái 王駘 who has as many followers as Confucius, despite promulgating no explicit teachings or practices (5/1–13). The text attributes Wáng's influence over others to his "constant heart" (常心), which is compared to still water in which people view their reflection and so are stilled themselves. It implies that, like the sage-kings, Wáng has an ability to "set life right" (正生) and thus set others' lives right. People follow him because he possesses a life-affirming mastery over things: he "makes heaven and earth his palace and the myriad things his treasury" (官天地府萬物) and "his heart has never tasted death" (心未嘗死). My interpretive proposal, then, is that this passage presents a conception of how to set life right and gain mastery over one's circumstances, and thus of how to live a flourishing life.

The text characterizes Wáng's "constant heart" as resulting from a combination of cognitive and affective attitudes. He understands and focuses on the respects in which the myriad things are "one" (一), or form a single spatial-temporal whole, and thus experiences no loss when things alternate or transform. As a result, he has no preferences and is

unperturbed by even the greatest of changes, such as death or cataclysm, all of which he accepts as if fixed by fate (命) and thus beyond our control.<sup>7</sup> He discerns and preserves what is non-dependent (無假) in himself, namely his “ancestor” (宗)—which I interpret here as the mysterious source of one’s capacity for agency.<sup>8</sup> He regards his body as only temporary lodging and what he perceives as mere signs, rather than unchanging facts or root causes. These attitudes enable him to “let his heart wander in the harmony of *dé*” (遊心乎德之和). One might think that Wáng’s acceptance of fate and indifference toward the body amount to passivity or defeatism. But the text instead depicts these attitudes as empowering. An agent who has achieved a “constant heart” is at home in the world as if it were his palace—unlike his body, which is only a temporary dwelling—and views the world as a vast storehouse of resources available to him. By identifying with what is non-dependent, Wáng actually liberates himself from fate. He can freely “choose the day to ascend” (擇日而登假) from his current circumstances to something new, leaving his followers behind.

The final passage I want to discuss illustrates what happens when an agent fails to exercise *dé* or keep his capacity whole and thus is unable to function well, to the point even of falling ill. In Book 4, “The World Among Humans” (人間世), Zǐgāo, Duke of Shè 葉公子高, is assigned a difficult, hazardous diplomatic mission and within a day finds himself feverish from stress. He doubts whether he is capable of carrying out the assignment or has the *dé* needed to do so without ruining his health (4/34–53). In response to his predicament, Confucius, the text’s spokesman, emphasizes that the world often presents us with circumstances that are “inevitable” (不得已) or “beyond our control” (不可奈何), specifically responsibilities arising from political and kinship relations. The “pinnacle of *dé*”

<sup>7</sup> Fate, or *mìng* 命, refers to facts regarded as “mandated” and beyond our control, such as hereditary traits.

(德之至) is to recognize and make peace with what we cannot control, as we do with fate (命), such that emotions like sorrow and happiness cease to disturb us. Only by achieving such equanimity can one exercise the tact and discretion needed to handle complex affairs effectively. Zīgāo should simply proceed according to the facts of the situation and “forget himself” (行事之情而忘其身). The ideal is to “let the heart wander (遊) by riding along with things” (且夫乘物以遊心) and to “nurture your center by consigning yourself to the inevitable” (託不得已以養中). Even in difficult, uncontrollable circumstances, one can find a way to wander along and to maintain inward health and harmony by accepting the inevitable and exploiting the direction in which things are already moving. I take the passage to imply that applying *dé* in order to achieve such a state of wandering is crucial to the effective exercise of agency and to maintaining psychophysical health. Insofar as good health and the ability to carry out projects are requirements for a flourishing life, the passage implies that *dé* and wandering are crucial to such a life.

My conclusion in this section, then, is that in these and thematically related *Zhuāngzǐ* passages, we find a conception of a healthy, flourishing human life in which we realize what is of greatest value in ourselves, fulfill our “capacity” (才), achieve mastery over our circumstances, and maintain psychophysical harmony while exercising agency effectively—particularly through an ability to find and exploit opportunities within the “inevitable” circumstances we are faced with. The central, unifying concept in this normative ideal is *dé*; the various features I have described are all regarded as aspects of it. And in three of the four passages, the exercise of *dé* is associated with an activity labeled “wandering” (though the details associated with wandering in each case vary somewhat).

This tie between wandering and the Zhuangist conception of *dé* and of a good life should

<sup>8</sup> Another plausible interpretation is that it refers to the workings of the *Dào* within us.



be unsurprising. Indeed, part of the aim of this section has been to articulate and provide detailed grounds for an interpretive hunch I expect is shared by many readers of the *Zhuāngzǐ*, namely that the notion of “free and easy wandering” introduced in the first book of the anthology is central to the normative vision of many Zhuangist writings. I now want to examine the conception of wandering presented in that book and how it ties together with the eudaimonistic ideals discussed so far.

### **Dimensions of Wandering**

The notion of wandering (*yóu*) is introduced in the first major section of the first book of the *Zhuāngzǐ* (HY 1/1–22). It also appears in the title of that book—“Free and Easy Wandering” (逍遙遊), although the title is probably not the work of whoever wrote the text. Wandering is mentioned explicitly only in the concluding passage of the section, as the highest of four modes of activity. However, a series of metaphors and analogies link it to the central theme of the preceding passages, “the difference between small and large” (小大之辯 [辨]), in particular how “small knowledge falls short of large knowledge” (小知不及大知). This section famously undermines familiar standards of size, duration, conduct, and knowledge by presenting a series of contrasts between unfathomably huge or long-lived creatures and tiny or short-lived ones, some of whom ignorantly and complacently scoff at the idea of any form of life “larger” than their own.<sup>9</sup> Wandering is associated with the activities of such fantastic creatures as the gigantic Pénɡ 鵬 bird, which migrates tens of thousands of miles from beyond the northern reaches of the world to beyond the southern, and whom small creatures such as the dove or quail, who merely flit from tree to tree, fail to understand. Thus wandering is associated with forms of life that transcend the boundaries of familiar mores and the complacent attitudes of those attached to them.

The passage that explicitly mentions wandering implies that it surpasses the way of life even of such “large” creatures as the Pénɡ. The human counterparts to the dove and quail are people with just enough competence and virtue to fill one office, impress one community, or convince one ruler to employ them. “Larger” than them is Sònɡzǐ 宋子, who rightly distinguishes between the quality of his own conduct and society’s opinion of him and is “unconcerned” (未數數然) with praise or blame. Still “larger” is Lièzǐ 列子, who is unconcerned about fortune and can ride “breezily” (泠然) about on the wind for a fortnight at a time—the human analogue of the Pénɡ bird. Yet even Lièzǐ and the Pénɡ have something on which their form of life is contingent (待), namely the wind. One could surpass them by “mounting the norms of heaven and earth” (乘天地之正), “riding the fluctuations of the six *qi*” (御六氣之辯[變]), and thus “wandering in the limitless” (遊無窮), for then one’s activity would no longer be contingent (待) on anything. That is, if we follow the cosmos itself as our guide—rather than the limited norms that we or our society happen to set—flow along with the natural processes of change, and thus wander through life without any fixed limits or boundaries, we cease to depend on anything in particular as a precondition for our activity. Instead, we constantly adapt to new circumstances as we encounter them, provisionally relying on whatever resources are available.

So wandering, as depicted in this passage, comprises at least five features. First, it transcends contingency (待), in two senses: it neither depends on any specific conditions nor is subject to the effects of chance. Second, it has no fixed, predetermined direction or norm, but consists in continual adaptation to change. Third, it is grounded partly in an understanding of the potential range of alternative forms of life, as illustrated by Sònɡzǐ’s and

<sup>9</sup> The fault of the “small” creatures is not that they are small, but that they are ignorant and close-minded, as they assume their norms apply to everyone.

Lièzǐ's grasp of the difference between mainstream, prevailing values or mores and their own. Fourth, it includes a readiness to transcend the limits or boundaries associated with such values and mores. Last, it is associated with a “breezily pleasant” (泠然善), carefree attitude.

I propose that this initial conception of wandering represents a distinctive, Zhuangist conception of human agency and freedom that underlies the eudaimonistic ideas surveyed in the preceding section. Let me now try to flesh out this conception.

A conception of freedom—or at least several aspects of freedom—is explicitly articulated in a pair of nearly identical passages in two other books of the *Zhuāngzǐ*, “The Master of Nurturing Life” (養生主) (3/17–19) and “The Great Ancestral Teacher” (大宗師) (6/52–53). Their gist is that things or events come when it is their moment (時), or time, and depart as they flow along (順) with natural processes. To be “at peace with the moment and dwell in the flow” (安時而處順) is to be “released from bonds” (縣[懸]解). Those who cannot free themselves in this way are “bound” (結) by things. One indication of such bonds is intense, disruptive emotions such as sorrow and happiness, which disturb our psychological harmony (和) or peace (安) and thus prevent us from “dwelling in the flow.” This is one reason the *Zhuāngzǐ* repudiates these emotions: they and the attachments to things that produce them interfere with our ability to adapt to change. By contrast, as we saw earlier, to accept what one cannot control without experiencing such emotions is “the pinnacle of *dě*” (4/42–43, 5/20). So to be free in this sense is also to exercise *dé*.<sup>10</sup>

This conception of freedom can be directly linked to the conception of wandering just identified. If we are not “bound” by things, then our activity is not contingent on them; to “dwell in the flow” corresponds to adapting and “riding along with” the fluctuations of

<sup>10</sup> I say “intense” emotions because the texts seem to endorse mild positive emotions, such as being “at peace with the moment” (安時).

natural processes. Wandering is thus a label for the sort of activity that results from the exercise of freedom as here conceived.

Like our everyday conception of “wandering around,” Zhuangist wandering has no specified end other than itself. This is another sense in which it is non-contingent: as an activity, it is self-sufficient, depending on no fixed conditions outside of itself. It contrasts with having a fixed path to follow or a predetermined end or destination to reach. Indeed, a constitutive feature of wandering is that the agent’s path be indeterminate, the agent being aware that a range of potential alternative paths, some yet to be discovered, always remain open. So wandering can be sustained without disruption through changes in circumstance; indeed, it is partly constituted by encountering and responding to change. Nor need obstacles interfere with it. In fact, absent a fixed path or end, nothing really qualifies as an obstacle, but only as another sight to see. Consider a traveler who sets off just to wander around a foreign city. Since she has no specified destination, she cannot fail to arrive at her goal. Nor need she ever consider herself “lost,” since whatever route she happens to be on can be a worthwhile path to explore.

Zhuangist freedom, then, is not the absence of constraints on our activity. It is the ability to continually adapt to and steer our way through whatever potentially constraining circumstances we encounter, along a path we find for ourselves. We might question to what extent freedom so construed is genuinely “free.” The Zhuangist position obviously acknowledges that often we are in fact *not* free in the sense of fully controlling our destiny. Nor are we really free in the sense of being able to pursue whatever ends we choose. (As a middle-aged Caucasian male of average height, I can’t realistically pursue the end of playing for the Chinese women’s Olympic basketball team, for instance.) The Zhuangist conception recasts freedom as an ability to discover the variety of paths that are genuinely open to us—a cognitive process that may require considerable imagination and creativity—and to embark

on a suitable one.<sup>11</sup> Rather than freedom to control what happens to us or to do anything we please, it is the freedom to calmly apply a form of practical intelligence or wisdom—the capacity that the *Zhuāngzǐ* refers to as *míng* 明—to navigate our way through the field of potential paths and obstacles that the world presents us.<sup>12</sup> Such freedom is non-contingent, in that even in the limiting case, when the constraints on us are nearly total—while being tortured on the rack, say—we can still be engaged in intelligent navigation, alert to alternative possibilities, though the only course actually open to us may be to identify and “ride along with” the inevitable.

More generally, in less pessimistic scenarios, wandering frees us from fixed ends and enables us to explore the world and various forms of life. A second series of passages in “Free and Easy Wandering” underscores its association with forms of life that depart from or defy common human norms or values. One tells of a “spirit man,” utterly unconcerned with human affairs, who “sips the wind and drinks the dew, mounts the clouds and vapour, rides a flying dragon, and wanders beyond the four seas” (1/26–34), another of the recluse Xǔ Yóu 許由, who declines an offer to rule the world—one most people would leap at—on the grounds that he “has no use for it” and is unmoved by mere “name,” or title and reputation (1/22–26). Two other brief anecdotes (1/34–35) depict the experience of traveling—that is, wandering—to a foreign land and finding that familiar values no longer apply. On visiting the “four masters” of the far north, the emperor Yáo 堯 becomes so disoriented from received

<sup>11</sup> The dialogue between the penumbra and shadow (2/92–94) raises doubts about whether we can ever tell what our actions ultimately depend on. But this point is compatible with wandering, in a way parallel to compatibilism about free will and determinism. Freedom in the sense of wandering does not require that our actions depend on nothing.

<sup>12</sup> The “Discourse on Evening Things Out” (齊物論) treats *míng* (understanding) as the capacity to use “responsive” or “adaptive” discrimination (因是) to “reach what one seeks to obtain” (適得) in particular contexts. I have discussed the concept of *míng* in several previous publications. See Fraser, “*Zhuangzi*, *Xunzi*, and the Paradoxical Nature of Education,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 33.4 (2006): 529–42; “Psychological Emptiness in the *Zhuangzi*,” *Asian Philosophy* 18.2 (2008): 123–47; and “Skepticism and Value in the *Zhuangzi*,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 49.4 (2009): 439–57.

notions of value and achievement that he “loses” his empire; a man from the central state of Sòng 宋 peddling ceremonial caps travels to the southern state of Yuè 越 but finds no buyers, as people there follow different customs and have no use for his wares.<sup>13</sup>

A final pair of passages, two exchanges between Zhuāngzǐ and Huìzǐ 惠子, invert this implied connection between wandering and finding commonly valued things useless (1/35–47). They instead hint at a link between wandering and a cognitive flexibility or open-minded creativity that finds uses for things deemed useless by ordinary standards.<sup>14</sup> In one, Zhuāngzǐ mocks Huìzǐ for concluding that some giant gourds were useless because they were unsuitable for making jugs or dippers, asking why he didn’t make a raft out of them and go “floating on rivers and lakes.” In the other, Huìzǐ compares Zhuāngzǐ’s statements to a large, twisted tree useless for carpentry. Zhuāngzǐ replies that such a tree makes an ideal spot for lounging around or enjoying a “free and easy” nap—indeed, precisely because it is useless by ordinary standards, no harm will come to it from loggers. The overall implication is that wandering reveals both respects in which ordinarily useful things may be considered useless and in which ordinarily useless things may be useful. It thus leads us to find more utility, or value, in the world than we otherwise might have—and hence to avoid frustration while more fully appreciating and enjoying our circumstances. At the same time, the references to floating on rivers and lakes and lounging in the shade of a tree exemplify the ludic dimension of wandering, reminding us that the word *yóu* (wander) also connotes “play.”

<sup>13</sup> I should emphasize that these connections between the notion of wandering, Xǔ Yóu’s having no use for the world, Yáo’s losing his empire, and the peddler’s discovering his wares useless are implied and metaphorical, not explicit. They are grounded in the juxtaposition of the stories in the text and are not stated directly in any of the passages. Moreover, they could well be the product of an editor’s arrangement of the stories, not the plan of the stories’ original author(s).

<sup>14</sup> Again, the link between wandering and creativity or cognitive flexibility is implied, not explicit, and may well be the result of editorial juxtaposition, as it is not presented directly in the stories. Since they employ Zhuāngzǐ as a literary character, these passages are likely not among the earliest strata of *Zhuāngzǐ* material and may be by a different author than the other material in “Free and Easy Wandering” (which itself could be the work of several hands). In effect, I am interpreting the chapter

Indeed, to a great extent, the ideal of wandering just is a vision of life as an extended process of play, infused with a resilient *joie de vivre*.

My hypothesis, then, is that for the Zhuangist tradition our capacity to wander—to discover, shift between, explore, and play along various paths through the world—is the fullest expression of human agency. In the context of classical Chinese thought, agency is exercised through the activity of following a *dào*, a way or form of life, which is constituted by the interaction of our activity with our factual circumstances. A distinctive characteristic of humans is our capacity to discover, appreciate, and explore a plurality of distinct *dào* within the totality of facts and processes that constitute the undifferentiated natural *Dào* of the cosmos. Wandering is a label for the sort of activity in which we successfully employ this capacity. It amounts, in effect, to a second-order *dào* by which we explore the various first-order *dào* open to us. *Dé* is in effect our proficiency in resiliently and skillfully wandering in harmony with the *Dào*, such that we find our journey an enjoyable one.

Let me now review briefly how the conception of wandering I've been developing hooks up with the four passages surveyed in the first section.

All four cohere with the discussion in this section in stressing affective equanimity. They all underscore the idea that wandering is a constant, adaptive activity that continues uninterrupted through changing circumstances and thus is not contingent on any particular external conditions. They further suggest that this sort of activity preserves something crucial about us, what is “valuable” (*Lǎozǐ*), our “constant heart” (*Wáng Tái*), our “capacity” (*Āi Tái Tuō*), or our “center” (*Zǐgāo*).

All four also align with this section in calling attention to our place within a complex, changing order that is beyond our control and whose consequences we can only regard as

as a series of passages assembled by one or more editors to illustrate different dimensions of wandering as they conceived it.

fated. One places greater emphasis on the natural order (Lǎozǐ), one on the social (Zǐgāo). A theme of two of the passages (Lǎozǐ, Wáng) is that the Zhuangist good life involves identification with the “one,” or the totality of the cosmos. The other passages do not make quite the same point. But “Free and Easy Wandering” and the Zǐgāo passage advocate a related idea, that one should “ride along with things” or “consign oneself to the inevitable,” thus in a weaker sense identifying with the process of change.

The three passages that consider practical tasks or interaction with others indicate that agents who achieve the ideals they depict will be empowered to generate opportunities through their encounters with things (Āi), to employ the world as an inexhaustible fund of resources (Wáng), and to deftly respond to states of affairs so as to carry out complex projects effectively (Zǐgāo). These descriptions all correspond to the idea that wandering lies in effective, adaptive responses to circumstances through which the agent opens up new opportunities or finds new “uses” for things.

Though these passages do not link wandering to playfulness, three of them do tie it to either enjoyment or ease. The Lǎozǐ story associates it with “ultimate happiness,” the Zǐgāo one with a feeling of ease or peace in the face of the inevitable, and the Āi Tái Tuō one with maintaining “enjoyment” (兌[悅]) and constantly “making spring with things” (與物為春).

To sum up, then, let me propose a composite account of wandering that is not found explicitly in any one passage of the *Zhuāngzǐ* but draws together the various themes developed so far. “Wandering” comprises several key elements. One is cognitive appreciation of the *Dào* (way), or the order and patterns of the cosmos. This includes recognition of the incomprehensible vastness and duration of the cosmos, the continual transformation of everything in it, the contingency and causal dependence of each thing on others, and accordingly the contingency and heterogeneity of any path or project we undertake. Another element is affective equanimity regarding the contingent, transitory circumstances of our



lives. Such equanimity is partly the product of a third element, cognitive and affective identification with the whole of nature and the process of change. These three elements each contribute to a fourth, the ability to adapt fluidly and efficaciously to changing conditions, such that we can spontaneously find efficacious paths to follow in our activity. All four in turn support a fifth, a spirit of playfulness, fun, and zest for life—a sense that exploring the diverse paths the *Dào* presents us is an enjoyable, intriguing project. Wandering is thus marked by cognitively aware, affectively calm, adaptive, and generally enjoyable activity.

### **Wandering and Skill**

Wandering also seems closely related to the Zhuangist interest in skill. Specifically, I suggest that skilled performances are concrete, focused instances of the general mode of activity that constitutes wandering. Wandering in turn can be thought of as a generalization of features characteristic of the performance of skills—in effect, an extrapolation of these features to cover the whole of life.

Consider again Confucius’s advice to Zǐgāo: “proceed according to the facts of the matter and forget yourself,” “let your heart wander by riding along with things,” and “nurture your center by consigning yourself to the inevitable.” I think these points will resonate with anyone who has experience in competitive sports, performing arts, or other fields in which we must perform well under pressure. Faced with a stressful, difficult task, Zǐgāo is told, in effect, to loosen up, stop worrying about himself or the outcome, concentrate on the task at hand, adjust to the situation as it develops, and maintain the focus and equilibrium he needs to tactfully steer a moderate course that neither rushes things nor loses sight of his goal. All of this, I suggest, amounts to commonsense wisdom concerning the optimal performance of skills.

The *Zhuāngzǐ* is of course renowned for its fascination with skills as illustrations of how to “Fulfill Life” (達生)—the title of book 19, largely a collection of stories about skills—or

to “nurture life” (養生), the explicit theme of the Cook Dīng 庖丁 story, the most widely known of the skill passages. Several of the discussions of skill converge in various respects with the proposed account of wandering. Both call on agents to free themselves from affective or cognitive fixations on things so as to calmly concentrate on responding flexibly and appropriately to changing circumstances. Both emphasize the need to guide action by the actual conditions encountered, rather than by our biases or preconceptions. Both are concerned with how best to steer our way around potential pitfalls or obstacles, sometimes by shifting our direction or approach entirely.<sup>15</sup>

Cook Dīng’s discussion of his craft calls for close examination, because a notion of wandering figures in it explicitly and because it presents important psychological details about how wandering may best proceed (3/2–12). Cook Dīng is a fantastically skilled butcher whose movements while cutting up oxen are as graceful as a ritual dance and so efficient that he has gone nineteen years without dulling his blade. In response to his employer’s praise for his skill, he replies that what he’s keen on is *dào*, which “goes beyond skill.” He then sketches his approach to his craft, prompting his employer to exclaim that from his words one can learn how to “nurture life.” Dīng explains that an ox’s body has a fixed, inherent (固然) natural structure or pattern (*tiān lǐ* 天理). The secret to his skill is that he follows this natural structure, carving along the seams and through the cavities and gaps while avoiding obstacles such as ligaments, tendons, and bones. Within the interstices in the structure, he says, there is plenty of space for his blade to wander (*yóu*). The metaphorical implication is that we can wander through life by similarly finding our way through the “gaps” in the inherent structure of our circumstances.

The structure, with its seams and interstices, is only half the story, however. The reason

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, the stories of the ferryman 津人, the woodcarver Qing 梓慶, and the carpenter Chui 工倕 in “Fulfilling Life.”

his knife can slip through the gaps, according to Dīng, is that the blade's edge “has no thickness” (無厚).<sup>16</sup> This description too probably has metaphorical implications concerning how to steer our way through the openings in our circumstances. Dīng describes himself, after years of practice, as encountering the ox with his “spirit” (以神遇) rather than viewing it with his eyes.<sup>17</sup> As he puts it, “sensory knowledge stops and spirit-desire proceeds” (官知止而神欲行). I suggest that the text here is alluding to the “blank” psychological state from which skilled performances typically issue, in which the agent somewhat paradoxically concentrates intensely on the task at hand without actually focusing attention on or thinking about anything in particular. Phenomenologically, actions undertaken from such a state may seem to occur “by themselves,” without prior conscious thought or intention, as if proceeding directly from the “spirit.” (The spirit here probably contrasts with the heart, the organ that in early Chinese thought is typically regarded as responsible for cognition and for guiding action.) And indeed this is roughly how Dīng describes his approach to handling the tough spots in his work. On seeing the difficulty, he says, he takes special care; his gaze settles and his action slows. He moves the knife subtly and finds that the ox “falls to pieces, already cut up” (譟然已解)—almost as if the cutting occurred of itself—leaving him feeling pleased and fulfilled. The process by which Dīng works through such obstacles—how he finds a way to go on when his path through the ox's structure is temporarily stymied—is of particular interest in understanding wandering. For it is the key to how he moves beyond routine application of his existing skill to find new routes by which to continue his “journey” through

<sup>16</sup> This phrase (無厚) can also be interpreted as “dimensionless.” In some contexts in early Chinese dialectics, it appears to refer to a geometrical point.

<sup>17</sup> This is the highest of three levels of development he describes. As an apprentice just learning his craft, with oxen constantly on his mind, “Everything I saw was an ox.” After three years, as a journeyman butcher, he saw oxen as if already sliced into parts: “I never saw a whole ox.” Now, as a master, he no longer looks at the ox at all (不以目視).

the ox.<sup>18</sup>

I suggest that the “blank” state Dīng alludes to probably corresponds to, or at least significantly overlaps with, a state that other *Zhuāngzǐ* passages with conceptual links to wandering and skill label *xū* 虛, or “empty,” “open,” and “insubstantial” (see, for instance, 4/1–34 and 7/31–33).<sup>19</sup> The *xū* or empty state is characterized as one in which the agent “fasts” (齋), or empties out, the heart—again, the organ usually thought to guide action—so that he is committed to no fixed course, has no thought of ambition or gain, relies on no predetermined boundaries or distinctions, and in effect “forgets” himself. This state is thought to yield an unbiased receptivity to things, such that the agent is continually ready to respond to them “like a mirror” (若鏡). The resulting actions are supposedly of preternatural efficacy. No doubt parts of the *Zhuāngzǐ* exaggerate the potency of such a state and the extent to which the actions it yields are guided directly by the world, rather than by the agent’s intentions, abilities, and dispositions. But something approximating such mirror-like action is commonplace in sports, among other fields, and I think the descriptions in the Cook Dīng story converge in many respects with familiar experiences.

My proposal, then, is that the features of Cook Dīng’s activity epitomize the ideal of wandering. From Dīng’s calm, focused, “empty” state issue responsive, efficacious actions that gracefully follow the grain of the world, glide through the gaps between obstacles, and leave him feeling satisfied, even exhilarated. Dīng exemplifies, both concretely and metaphorically, what for the Zhuangist tradition is the fullest exercise of human agency and the core of a flourishing life. The crux of such a life is the sort of focused, virtuoso performance he describes—the mode of activity a tennis champion experiences while returning a serve, a professor while responding to questions during a lecture, a surgeon while

<sup>18</sup> [Cite Robins, “‘It Goes Beyond Skill’.”]

<sup>19</sup> For a discussion of *xū*, see Fraser, “Psychological Emptiness.”

performing an operation, a chef while preparing a complex dish, and so on. A good life is one in which we both engage in such performances regularly and approach life as a whole in the spirit of such a performance. Some Zhuangist writers perhaps thought the best life would be one in which we maintain the mode of activity Dīng describes almost constantly.

### Why Wander?

*Zhuāngzǐ* passages suggest several grounds for the view of the good life I have been presenting.

The most fundamental grounds are that it is an appropriate response, and perhaps the only appropriate response, to the facts of the human condition as the Zhuangist tradition construes them. Wandering is the attitude that follows naturally from recognizing “the inevitable” (不得已) and “comprehending fate” (通乎命).<sup>20</sup> We are part of a world of constant flux and transformation, driven by forces we can neither control nor fully comprehend, in which our aims can easily be frustrated and all of our achievements will prove transient. The “Great *Dào*” (大道) of the cosmos provides no fixed, determinate path for us to follow. We cannot escape a life of wandering through the world; our identity is inherently tied to our place in the totality of things and in the process of change. Our only choice is whether we will wander knowingly and adeptly, while enjoying the journey, or ignorantly and clumsily, and thus perhaps finding it painful.

At the same time, wandering is a constructive response to the Zhuangist critique of value.<sup>21</sup> For the *Zhuāngzǐ*, reflection on value reveals it to be plural, heterogeneous, perspectival, and contingent.<sup>22</sup> We lack sufficient grounds to justify any claim to know what is “finally” or “ultimately” (*guǒ* 果) of value and thus can justify an unchanging *dào* to

<sup>20</sup> This phrase refers to *Zhuāngzǐ*’s explanation of why he ceased grieving his wife’s death: to continue wailing and weeping would show he failed to comprehend fate (18/?).

<sup>21</sup> See “Discourse on Evening Things Out” and “Autumn Waters.”

follow. At the same time, we have good grounds for thinking there are a plurality of contextually justifiable paths available to us. Wandering represents an approach to life that acknowledges this critique of value and throws open the possibility of shifting among different, contextually warranted paths. Arguably, this is a way of more fully appreciating the potential value the world presents to us. Wandering can thus be thought of as the most appropriate approach to exploring and appreciating the “Great *Dào*,” the all-embracing totality of paths in the world.

A further justification is that, as an appropriate response to the inevitable, wandering promotes psychophysical well-being. The Cook Dīng story is intended to illustrate how to “nurture life” (養生). The story of Zǐgāo illustrates how a failure to wander freely can produce unbearable stress, interfering with our ability to function normally. A passage from “Signs of Full Virtue” suggests that insisting on our preferences, rather than responsively adjusting ourselves to what is self-so, may injure our health (5/55–60).<sup>22</sup> By contrast, wandering supposedly enables us to “nurture our center” (養中). An agent who acts from the sort of responsive openness or emptiness characteristic of wandering can purportedly “overcome things without injury” (7/31–33).

A complementary point is that wandering is thought to facilitate practical success. Passages such as the Zǐgāo story, the dialogue between Confucius and Yán Huí on “fasting the heart” [reference], and the Cook Dīng story all imply that the ability to “forget” oneself and act from “emptiness,” shifting from path to path in response to the changing “facts of the matter,” is crucial to success in practical tasks.

Finally, as we have seen, some passages imply that wandering constitutes the fullest

<sup>22</sup> For support for this and the other claims in this paragraph, see Fraser, “Skepticism and Value in the *Zhuāngzǐ*.”

<sup>23</sup> The text describes a certain ideal human type as “not injuring one’s body internally by means of likes and dislikes, constantly going by what is self-so without adding to life.”

exercise of human *dé* or capacities (才). Wandering may have been thought to engage most fully our capacities for cognitive understanding, aesthetic and affective appreciation of value, and intelligent, responsive agency. The Cook Dīng story and the exchanges between Zhuāngzǐ and Huìzǐ in “Free and Easy Wandering” imply that a life of wandering is likely to be satisfying, enjoyable, and fun.

### **The Content of the Zhuangist Good Life**

The conception of wandering as I have articulated it so far is thin on substantive content. It is primarily formal, concerning *how* one acts more than *what* one does.<sup>24</sup> Different agents could achieve lives of free and easy wandering in a variety of contexts, in which they might justifiably follow different paths and pursue a range of different ends. Wandering is substantive only insofar as this “how” entails that our activity possess certain features—such as that we act calmly, creatively, in accord with the “grain” of our circumstances, and so forth. One might argue that on this important point, the analogy between wandering and skill fails; unlike wandering, skills have specified ends. In this concluding section, I will explain why I think this disanalogy is not a problem. The gist of the explanation is that the *Dào* provides the substantive content of wandering. For we don’t simply wander; we wander the Way.

Some *Zhuāngzǐ* passages do take certain very general ends for granted, treating them as starting points most of us are likely to find “inevitable.” One such end is our life and health (保身全生, 3/2); a fundamental justification of wandering is that it “nurtures life.” Another is the welfare of our parents or family (養親, 3/2, 4/40–41). A third is political duties (事君, 4/40–41). On the whole, however, there is an attempt to keep the account of the good life substantively thin, taking for granted only what is likely to be shared by any thicker

<sup>24</sup> As I suggested earlier, wandering is in effect a second-order *dào* concerning the way in which we approach the various first-order *dào* open to us.

conception—such as life and health—while also stressing that even these goods are only typical of the good life, not necessary for it. A salient example of this point comes from one of the anthology’s many death stories. Ziyú 子輿, a man dying from a crippling, disfiguring disease, clearly exemplifies the spirit of wandering, as he adapts to the inevitable, observes with wonder—even relish—the transformations his disease wreaks on his body, and speculates on the various ways he might seek to capitalize on whatever fate befalls him (6/45ff.). As this story suggests, the heart of the Zhuangist ideal seems to lie specifically in the resilient, intelligent, flexible, and creative exercise of agency, rather than in any substantive content.

The substantive thinness of this ideal is an advantage, not a shortcoming, I think. It allows the Zhuangist to avoid the difficulties associated with attempting to conclusively justify any specific substantive conception of the good life. A serious problem facing any substantively thick account of human flourishing is to justify it as something more than an *ad hoc* or parochial set of features some particular thinker or culture happens to consider central to well-being, flourishing, or proper functioning. Some of the voices in the Zhuangist tradition—particularly those of the “Discourse on Evening Things Out” and the “Autumn Waters” dialogue—are acutely aware of this normative problem. Both would insist that since the *Dào* of nature incorporates a plurality of perspectives and is constantly in flux, any substantive account of flourishing or proper functioning could at best be justified only for certain limited contexts.<sup>25</sup>

Still, although wandering is primarily a formal ideal, it is not substantively unconstrained. Wandering lies in employing our *dé* to engage with the *Dào*, the structure and patterns of the world. We “ride along with the norms of heaven and earth” and the

<sup>25</sup> For reasons I discuss in detail elsewhere, the Zhuangist stance is that there could be no universally justified account of the concrete content of the good life. See Fraser, “Skepticism and Value.”



fluctuations of the various forces that impinge on us. The *Dào* thus provides substantive content in particular contexts.<sup>26</sup> We always already find ourselves somewhere along the Way, in circumstances in which some courses of action will be justified by Zhuangist criteria for harmonious, efficacious *dào*-following and others will not.<sup>27</sup> Such criteria, as introduced in the “Discourse on Evening Things Out,” include guiding action by what is “ordinary” (*yōng* 庸), “useful” (*yòng* 用) or “successful” (*tōng* 通, *dé* 得), and produces “harmony” (*hé* 和). [insert line references] Signs that we have failed to conform to these criteria appropriately are at the same time signs that we have ceased to wander effectively: we experience persistent frustration, failure, or conflict in our path. Any of these is a cue for us to apply practical understanding (*míng*) to adjust or alter our route so as to realign ourselves with the “natural patterns” (*tiān lǐ*) and resume wandering along more freely and easily.

<sup>26</sup> This constitutive relation between wandering and *Dào* helps to explain why Zhuangist thought probably cannot accurately be characterized as a virtue ethic. One way of using the label “virtue ethics” is to refer to a type of normative theory that takes virtue concepts as primary, by contrast with deontological or consequentialist approaches. Another is to refer to a brand of eudaimonistic theory on which moral virtue is regarded as the key to *eudaimonia* or to a good life. (A virtue ethic in this second sense is potentially compatible with either a deontological or a consequentialist normative theory.) For the *Zhuāngzǐ*, *dé* is not normatively basic, but is understood through its relation to *Dào*, a source of normativity conceptually independent of it. So Zhuangist thought is not a virtue ethic in the first sense. But neither is it a virtue ethic in the second sense, as its concept of *dé* does not correspond to moral virtue, and numerous *Zhuāngzǐ* passages reject the idea that moral virtues are central to the well-lived life.

<sup>27</sup> [To be completed.] Discuss the Daoist Nazi problem. Not a problem because the Nazi murderer is not finding “gaps” and open paths, but harming others who are as much a part of the *Dào* as he is. Hence he fails to “wander the Way” proficiently.