

Landscape, Travel, and a Daoist View of the ‘Cosmic Question’

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Introduction

The motifs of ‘landscape’ and ‘travel’ are prominent in classical Daoist thought, as they provide rich metaphors through which Daoist texts present views of the human condition, the nature of agency and our identity as individual agents, and the sources of normative guidance. The metaphor of the ‘landscape’, I will suggest, helps to articulate the concept of dao 道 (way), the field of structures, relations, forces, and influences that presents possibilities for and guides action. In the Zhuangzi, the complementary metaphor of ‘travel’ epitomizes an ideal mode of agency and a core component of the well-lived life. Agency is in effect a capacity for ‘traveling’ through the ‘landscape’. The finest mode of agency—and the crux of the well-lived life—is ‘roaming’ or ‘wandering’ (you 遊), a concept that directly invokes the experience of travel. Indeed, for the Zhuangzi, I will contend, our self or identity is constituted by our travel through the landscape. Metaphorically, what we most fundamentally are is ‘travelers’ moving through a ‘landscape’, our identity being shaped by our ‘travels’. The metaphors of landscape and travel thus help to highlight the conception of self that emerges in the Zhuangzi, namely of an indeterminate, unfixed, and not fully knowable nexus of spontaneous activity that is constituted and sustained through interaction between the agent’s de 德 (virtuosity) and the dao (ways) the agent encounters and takes up.

Awareness of such metaphors can help us better understand and apply Daoist views. As a concrete example of this point, in this essay I employ them to develop a Zhuangist conception of the self and its place in the cosmos that yields a distinctive, plausible response to what Thomas Nagel calls the ‘cosmic question’: What is our relation as human beings to

the universe as a whole? In the Zhuangist view, our identity as human agents is inseparable from our relation to the universe, because this relation—that of travelers roaming through a landscape—constitutes what we are. From a Daoist standpoint, the cognitive and affective concerns that prompt Nagel’s ‘cosmic question’ could be satisfied by grasping how our identity is bound up in our relation to the world and hence identifying with the natural ‘landscape’ that generates and sustains us as ‘travelers’.

Dao and the Landscape

The central concept of early Chinese philosophy, ‘dao’, explicitly refers to a path, thus already implying a conceptual link to the notion of the landscape. Some of the fundamental metaphors used in the Daodejing to develop the text’s conception of dao also allude to the landscape. Particularly informative is the following passage, from Section 32:

To give an analogy for the presence of dao in the world, it is like the relation of streams and valleys to rivers and seas.

As I read it, the passage implies that the world presents agents with structures and processes that guide action much as valleys and streams channel water toward rivers and seas. Such action-guiding structures and processes are the manifestation or embodiment of dao in the world. This analogy between how dao is embedded in the world and the flow from streams and valleys into rivers and seas is one of a series of metaphors and analogies in the Daodejing involving water, valleys, and the downward flow of water from high ground to low. Their general import is to valorize ‘negative’, submissive, or subordinate features as more efficacious than ‘positive’, aggressive, or superior ones, because the former purportedly better align with the intrinsic propensities of things.¹ The metaphors implicitly posit the existence of a directional or channel structure, according to which the world is shaped such

that some parts are ‘lower’ than others and so things tend to flow toward them, without intentional action or contention. In these passages, I suggest, the text implies the plausible idea that the world as we encounter it presents ‘channels’ and ‘obstacles’ that form action-guiding structures. This idea can be taken both literally, as referring to actual physical structures such as valleys and mountains, and metaphorically, as referring to the demands and opportunities that other persons, social relations, and political institutions place on us. The overall implication is that Dao—the totality of paths we might traverse—is present in the world as the sum of the various action-guiding features embedded in the (physical and metaphorical) landscape.

Such ‘channel’ and ‘structure’ metaphors complement what is probably the most prominent treatment of dao-following in the Zhuangzi, the story of Cook Ding, the astonishingly adept butcher who slices up oxen as deftly and elegantly as if performing a ritual dance. Observing Ding’s work, his lord (and employer) expresses wonder at the heights of his skill. Ding famously replies that what he is keen about is dao, which advances beyond mere skill (3/2–12).² Expanding on this claim, he sketches the principles behind his work: he heeds the ‘natural patterns’, cuts along the major clefts, and guides his movements by the main cavities, responding to what is ‘inherently so’ in the ox’s frame. The animal’s joints have gaps between them, he explains, in which there is more than enough space (di 地, literally ‘land’) for his blade to ‘wander about’ (you). Dao-following thus lies in navigating through a complex structure presenting both obstructions and channels through which one can move freely. As the text makes clear, Ding’s descriptions apply to pursuing dao not simply in his craft but in life as a whole; his lord exclaims that from Ding’s statements, he has learned how to ‘nurture life’.

Dao is fundamentally a path or course metaphor. I suggest, however, that in Daodejing 32, dao refers not to a single, unique path, but to the totality of paths or courses,

for the analogy it presents is between the presence of dao in the world and the relation of any and all streams and valleys to the rivers and seas they flow into.³ This suggestion prompts a further interpretive proposal: in the Zhuangzi, especially in Book 2, the ‘Discourse on Equalizing Things’, I suggest that the operative conception of dao expands from the idea of a single, discrete path running through a landscape to that of a field or terrain presenting a range of potential paths. I base this suggestion on several points expressed in the text. One is that fundamentally, dao connects everything into a whole (2/35). It is unbounded; no borders exist within it or between it and anything else (2/55). It is present everywhere, absent nowhere (2/25). Moreover, the action-guiding shi-fei 是非 (this/not-this) distinctions that demarcate paths to follow can be distinguished in indeterminately many ways, nothing in nature fixing them one way rather than another (2/27–31). Hence the text speaks of a dao-hub (dao shu 道樞, 2/30–31) from which agents can provisionally set out on different dao, which are formed as they ‘walk’ along them (2/33). The implication, I propose, is that Dao is imminent in the landscape as a range of potential courses formed by interaction between our activity and features of our surroundings. To follow dao—to undertake some course of activity—is to travel through the landscape along one path or another.

Dao, De, and Travel

Early Daoist texts pair dao conceptually with de (virtuosity, agency). De and dao stand in a reciprocal relation; de is the virtuosity, power, or proficiency within agents by which they identify, interpret, and proceed along dao (Hansen, 1996). A complementary, traditional understanding of this relation is that our de is in effect the workings of the dao of nature within us, the ‘power’ that nature bestows on us by which we act. According to one of the Confucius-Lao Dan dialogues in the Zhuangzi, de is ‘responding to things by attuning oneself’, while dao is ‘responding to things by matching with them’ (22/38–39).⁴ The

implication is that de is a capacity for responding adaptively to circumstances, while dao is the path shaped by circumstances as we find them—what we employ our de to ‘match’. The two concepts jointly imply a view of agency as lying in applying de to respond to the dao presented by our situation.

A third notion conceptually intertwined with dao and de in early Chinese texts is xing 行, which refers to the activity or conduct that results from the agent’s applying de to follow dao. The notion of xing fills out the ‘path’ or ‘course’ metaphor associated with dao and directly expresses a travel motif, as the core meaning of xing is simply ‘to walk’. Action is conceptualized as walking or traveling along a path, the theoretical emphasis being not on discrete acts but on the overall course of activity. The conceptual relations between de, dao, and xing entail that by virtue of their de, agents are understood to be intrinsically involved in ‘walking’ along some dao. In early Chinese thought, the self is regarded as inherently an actor or a participant in the world, not a detached spectator.⁵ To be an agent is thus to be engaged in an ongoing course of activity along some path or other. Whether or not to ‘walk dao’ is not up to us; what is up to us is which dao to walk. Even if we refrain from self-directed activity, we still travel along some dao, namely whatever path results from our being driven along by the things around us. Indeed, for the Zhuangzi, our circumstances always force some rough course or direction on us, through what the text refers to as ‘inevitable’ (bu de yi 不得已) conditions. Coping with such conditions effectively is one mark of exemplary de.

The conceptual relations between dao, de, and xing confirm the appropriateness of the water and channel metaphors the Daodejing associates with the notion of dao. By their inherent de, agents ineluctably travel along (xing) various dao as water unavoidably flows downward through channels. The implied conception of agency focuses not on initiating or refraining from discrete acts, but on employing our de to respond to the dao we encounter—

to identify, embark on, and navigate courses through the ‘landscape’ of our circumstances. Agency is similar to the course of water in that we are inevitably caught up in a directional flow of activity. The limit to the analogy is that unlike a stream of water, we are able to steer our way along.

Wandering Through the Landscape

In the Zhuangzi, the ideal mode of such de-driven activity is conceptualized as you, ‘wandering’ or ‘roaming’ (Fraser, 2011; Fraser, forthcoming). Here again the Zhuangzi employs a metaphor alluding to travel: the virtuoso exercise of agency is regarded as a process of traveling or rambling about a landscape without any fixed destination—and thus without any fixed dao. We can contrast the Zhuangist notion of you with the ‘standard’ conception of conduct as xing (‘walking’). Whereas xing refers to proceeding along some particular dao or path—and other Classical Chinese verbs of motion, such as shi 適 and zhi 之, refer to traveling to a specific place—you refers to meandering about without any specific terminus. Elsewhere, I have proposed that you forms the core of a distinctively Zhuangist eudaimonistic ideal (Fraser, 2011; Fraser, forthcoming). Numerous depictions of virtuoso or exemplary figures in Zhuangist writings describe them as ‘wandering’, and a crucial discussion of how to deal with challenges in life emphasizes ‘letting the heart wander by riding along with things’ while ‘nurturing your center by consigning yourself to the inevitable’ (4/52–53). The metaphor of traveling about a landscape without a fixed destination, creatively adapting to the ‘inevitable’ circumstances we encounter, is central to the Zhuangist vision of a well-lived life.

‘Wandering’ here seems to denote our distinctive capacity as agents to discover, appreciate, and explore various dao within the totality of facts and processes that make up the undifferentiated Dao of the natural world. One key passage characterizes it as traveling

‘limitlessly’ throughout the world without depending on anything in particular, by ‘mounting the norms of heaven and earth, [and] riding the fluctuations of the six qi’ (1/21)—that is, riding along with the patterns of nature and the alternations of natural forces, without assuming any fixed limits or preconditions. It is in effect a second-order dao by which to explore various first-order dao—a way by which to explore the various concrete paths opened up by the interaction between our capacities and motivation and our circumstances. De can be regarded as proficiency or virtuosity in wandering resiliently and skillfully.

The wandering ideal is of course highly metaphorical. For most agents, in most situations, literally setting off on a carefree jaunt is impractical or impossible. The crux of the Zhuangist vision is that in practice we may face formidable constraints, such that the paths actually open to us are severely limited, and we cannot simply do as we please or pursue whatever preconceived ends we might have. Moreover, nature fixes no single, authoritative dao for us to follow. The Zhuangist response to this predicament is to approach our circumstances in the spirit of ‘wandering’, maintaining a resilient, flexible attitude without definitively committing to any one path or allowing ourselves to become frustrated by obstacles. We are to remain always prepared, like Cook Ding, to find gaps or channels in our circumstances through which to travel forward.

The Zhuangist Conception of the Self

The Zhuangzi presents no systematic theory of the self, person, or self-identity. With few exceptions, the nature of the self is not thematized as an explicit topic of inquiry. Still, the text yields many implications about Zhuangist views of the self. Several passages in ‘Equalizing Things’ imply that the ‘genuine’ or ‘authentic’ (zhen 真) self, if one even exists, is mysterious and unidentifiable. One passage lists typical human affects and attitudes, such as joy, anger, sorrow, and pleasure, and remarks that although without these, there is no ‘I’

and no choosing—and thus no agency—we know not whence they arise nor in whose employ they come. It is as if there is a genuine ‘overseer’ within us—a genuine locus of agency, in control of what we do and on whose behalf our various attitudes work—yet we find no signs of it nor catch any glimpse of its form (2/13–15). One implication of the text’s stance is that our motivating attitudes and our activities ultimately rest on unknown causes.⁶ Another is that nothing seems obviously in control, nor is there an obvious hierarchy between parts of the self. In contrast to many other early Chinese sources, which straightforwardly assert that the heart is the ruler of the other organs, ‘Equalizing Things’ implies that none of our parts clearly governs the others, and indeed perhaps they govern themselves jointly or take turns governing (2/16–17). The text hazards no definitive pronouncements about these issues: there might be a genuine ‘ruler’ within us, it acknowledges, but we are unable to confirm whether there is or not. The aim is not to reach a definitive conclusion about the nature of the self, but to highlight how little we know about the deep structure of the person and what, if anything, controls our various parts.

Other *Zhuangzi* passages emphasize that our self-identity, including our values and the roles with which we identify, is fluid and subject to sudden, potentially surprising transformations. Consider the well-known story of Zhuang Zhou’s butterfly dream. Initially, in the dream, Zhou’s identity as a butterfly seems beyond question. Yet he awakens to discover he is now a different creature, the human Zhou. Reflecting on this transformation, he questions his present identity, wondering whether instead of being Zhou, who dreamed he was a butterfly, he might actually be a butterfly now dreaming it is Zhou. The implication is not merely that our identity is uncertain. It is that ‘things transform’ (2/96). Our very identity is subject to unexpected, startling transformations analogous to how things change when we wake from a dream.⁷

The transformations that produce and shape the self are regarded as part of the all-

embracing process of the ‘Great Dao’, the course of the natural world. Stories such as Zhuangzi’s reflections on his wife’s death (18/15–19) or Master Lai’s reaction to his own imminent demise (6/56–60) depict human life as part of an overall process of ‘creation and transformation’ driven by natural forces. Master Yu, contemplating his disfiguring disease and impending death (6/47–53), speculates how the ‘creator of things’ might transform him into any number of different forms, each with distinct dispositions and abilities. Huzi speaks of the self as emerging from a mysterious ‘ancestor’, the product of complex natural processes by which ‘impulses’ issue from ‘abysses’ deep within (7/15–31). The psychological states and processes that drive our activity are also constituents of the ‘Great Dao’ and share its uncanny, mysterious features. ‘Equalizing Things’ illustrates this point by metaphorically linking the ‘piping of heaven’ (2/8–9)—the mysterious force that drives the activity of the myriad living things—to the various motivating attitudes that spring up in us, which are like ‘music issuing from hollows’ when the wind blows through a forest (2/13).

Since the self is created and shaped by ongoing natural processes, the content of the self—the values, abilities, and capacities that enable and guide our activity—and the paths open to us are constantly evolving, partly as a result of our past activity, partly as a result of changes in our circumstances. Cook Ding, for instance, describes how his approach to his work, including even what he perceives when he looks at oxen, has changed over his career (3/2–12). The whitewater swimmer who navigates dangerous rapids (19/49–54) reports that growing up in the water changed his xing 性 (nature, inherent dispositions), leaving him as at ease in the river as on land. Following dao also involves continually extending and modifying one’s existing abilities to cope with novel circumstances. Ding explains how even at his level of expertise, he encounters difficulties that can be overcome only by a creative, spontaneous extension of his skill. This spontaneous capacity for advancing beyond what we have done before may constitute the crux of agency.

Although Zhuangist writings make few or no claims about the substantive content of a hypothetical ‘core’ or ‘genuine’ self, they present conceptions of our inherent ‘capacity’ (cai 才), our de (virtuosity), and ‘nature’ (tian 天) or ‘authenticity’ (zhen 真) that imply a distinctive view of the well-lived life. Rather than a first-order account of the content of the good life, this view focuses on the second-order ideal of wandering—the calm, adaptive, and creative exercise of agency in response to circumstances. An implication is that for many Zhuangist writers what we might call the self is in effect the aggregate of this capacity for agency plus the contingent features, arising from our specific background and present circumstances, that constitute the substantive values, motives, cognitive habits, abilities, and skills on which we act. The latter dimensions of the self are necessary to enable agency, yet ideally they remain open and fluid, to allow for spontaneous responses to novel or changing situations. According to many Zhuangzi passages, the virtuoso activity central to the well-lived life may require bringing our capacity for spontaneity into play by ‘forgetting’ (wang 忘) or ‘emptying’ (xu 虛) ourselves of ‘personal’ (si 私) prejudices and preconceptions so as to more efficaciously ‘respond to’ (ying 應) or ‘fit’ (shi 適) our concrete circumstances.⁸

When engaged in the mode of activity characteristic of the well-lived life, our capacity for responsive, creative agency is at the forefront, while other aspects of the self are cleared out—a phenomenon again illustrated by Cook Ding, when he describes himself as encountering oxen with his ‘spirit’, while perceptual knowing ceases and he no longer looks with his eyes. The self achieves its highest realization precisely when we ‘forget’ or ‘empty’ ourselves and allow the lay of our situation to guide our activity.

Landscape, Travel, and Our Identity

Given the Zhuangist understanding of the self, we have no fixed self or identity that determines our values or dao and hence no fixed dao to follow. Instead, we can only wander

by ‘riding along’ with our circumstances. The values and motives that guide our activity are contingent features of these circumstances, much as features of the physical landscape are. They are something we encounter and can never fully control. They are typically determined through interaction with our circumstances, rather than independently or in advance. Indeed, in some cases, we can regard them as merging with the landscape to form the conditions we encounter and respond to in our dao-following. (Sensations of hunger or pain, for instance, are features of our circumstances that we respond to much as we respond to the weather or obstacles to our movement.) The abilities we employ in responding to our circumstances—including our skills and the cognitive-evaluative distinctions we apply—are developed through wandering as well, since they are always partly a product of our previous course through the landscape.

Tying these various observations about Zhuangist views of the self together with the theme of landscape and travel, we can say that for the Zhuangzi, our identity is constituted in multiple respects by our relation to the landscape, broadly construed as a conception of the world as incorporating structural features that present agents with various potential courses of action. Human agents are above all ‘travelers’, who flourish by wandering across the landscape. Our distinctive capacity for agency is employed by engaging with the landscape, which provides the setting through which we wander. Our location in the landscape and the travels we have taken mold the content of our character, self, or identity—our abilities, motives, and values. These factors determine who we are and how we will go on, and indeed we have no identity apart from our past travels, the dispositions and motives we have developed through them, and our relation to present circumstances. Extending this cluster of metaphors, we can even say that as agents we too are part of the landscape—part of the ‘Great Dao’, the totality of natural structures and courses. The source of our de lies in the same mysterious process of ‘creation and transformation’ that produces and shapes the

landscape, and the content of the self can be regarded as part of the landscape, insofar as our own states also shape the paths open to us.

Given the influence of the landscape on our identity, what distinction, if any, remains between traveler and landscape? To what extent do we remain agents, who determine their own actions, rather than mere features of the landscape caught up in a stream of ‘geological’ events? On one level, the very notion of agency, especially when conceptualized as employing de in wandering, already contains the answer to these questions. Agents qua agents are not subsumed by the landscape but respond to it, undertaking spontaneous, self-directed activity without being wholly integrated into non-intentional natural processes, as inanimate objects are.⁹ Our de is precisely the capacity for such agency—one *Zhuangzi* passage associates de and our ‘capacities’ with ‘what employs the body’ (5/39–40). Although our identity is conditioned by previous interaction with the landscape and the paths open to us are delimited by our situation, our activity still rests on our own de. The modality through which the landscape influences our actions is by presenting courses to follow, not mechanistic or lawlike causation.¹⁰ On another level, however, zooming out from the standpoint of the agent to that of the Dao of nature as a whole, I suspect some voices in the *Zhuangzi* would remain agnostic about the extent to which our exercise of agency is distinct from the natural processes that produce the landscape. For as the shadow asks the penumbra (2/92–94), how can we know what ultimately determines our actions?

The ‘Cosmic Question’

In his recent essay ‘Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament’, Thomas Nagel discusses various ways in which secular philosophy might satisfy what he calls the ‘religious temperament’, a disposition to find an understanding of the world that connects us to the whole of reality and thus makes sense ‘not merely of our lives, but of everything’

(Nagel, 2010, p. 4). As he sees it, this disposition seeks a conception of the universe by which ‘an understanding of the totality of which we are a part can...become part of the self-understanding by which we live’ (p. 9). Such a conception would furnish an answer to what Nagel calls the ‘cosmic question’ (p. 6): ‘How can one bring into one’s individual life a full recognition of one’s relation to the universe as a whole?’ The issue is not a matter merely of intellectual curiosity, of understanding our place in the universe. The aim is to find a way to live in harmony with the universe, a worldview in which our connection to it is part of our understanding of what we are and what we do. Thus the link to the ‘religious temperament’, which Nagel sees as characterized by the aspiration to participate, through one’s own life, in the life of the cosmos as a whole (p. 6). Religious doctrines might satisfy this aim by depicting our lives as parts or expressions of the spiritual agency or principle that grounds the existence of the universe. Nagel asks whether we can find a secular answer to this aspiration.

One secular response he identifies is simply the ‘hardheaded atheist’ stance of denying the legitimacy of the question. Perhaps our self-understanding requires nothing more than a purely scientific, factual explanation of how creatures such as ourselves came to exist. Nagel suggests that this is an evasion, however, not a genuine response, as in his view the cosmic question retains its grip despite our acceptance of a scientific worldview (p. 9). A second response is a humanistic, ‘inside-out’ account of the greater whole to which we as individuals relate. We can give sense to our lives through our place in human communities, cultures, and historical traditions, which are a locus of value or meaning. The problem with this approach, for Nagel, is that it does not really address the ‘cosmic question’. It makes no attempt to offer ‘a way of incorporating our conception of the universe as a whole into our lives’ (pp. 11–12). For Nagel, only a third approach holds much promise, an ‘outside-in’ route starting from the viewpoint of nature or the cosmos. One such route might be to depict our existence as a product of fundamental forces of nature, as Nietzsche does through his

evolutionary-genealogical appeal to the ‘will to power’. But contemporary evolutionary naturalism rejects Nietzsche’s power ontology, replacing it with a nonteleological reductive naturalism, according to which emergence of human life is little more than a lucky accident (p. 15). Nagel is left speculating that only a radical alternative might answer the cosmic question: a Platonic, teleological conception of the natural order as nonaccidentally evolving so as to generate self-aware, intelligent creatures such as ourselves. On this view, each of us is a part of the ‘extended expansion of organization and consciousness’ inherent in the natural order (p. 17). Nagel is far from confident that this quasi-Platonic worldview can be rendered compelling, however, and acknowledges that his entire discussion might simply lead us to conclude that human life is absurd (p. 17).

My own view is that our contemporary scientific understanding of the world makes it difficult to see how the sort of teleological account Nagel considers could be defensible. The very idea of nature being arranged so as to inevitably produce creatures like us seems just the kind of self-comforting fiction that Nietzsche would have mocked as risibly anthropocentric and a Zhuangist would ridicule as ‘small’ and one-sided. Many Daoist writings do, however, share Nagel’s concern with the ‘cosmic question’—or some variant thereof—and I suggest the Zhuangist conception of the self and its relation to the natural order offers a direct response to it. Like Nagel’s third set of responses, the Zhuangist stance is an ‘outside-in’ perspective, which situates human life within the overall scheme of nature. Yet it is distinct from the approaches he considers. The Zhuangist approach begins from the thought that our relation to nature as a whole—the landscape—is constitutive of our identity as agents—that is, as travelers. Our lives and abilities are fundamentally part of nature, and our de is manifested in wandering through it. The content of this de is shaped by our interaction with our natural and social setting—our ‘local’ region of the cosmos. As a secular response to the ‘cosmic question’, then, Zhuangist thought can offer the following self-conception: what we

most fundamentally are wanderers of the way, or travelers in a landscape. We can make sense of our lives and situate ourselves within the larger totality of nature on the plausible grounds that our relation to the totality is precisely what constitutes us as the individual agents we are and provides the content of and field for all our activity.

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Notes

¹ See, for instance, Daodejing sections 8, 28, 32, 41, 66, and 78.

² References to the Zhuangzi cite chapter and line numbers in the Harvard-Yenching concordance (Zhuangzi 1956).

³ ‘Dao’ in Classical Chinese is not marked as singular or plural, of course, and like most Chinese nouns can be used as either a count or a mass noun. I will use the lowercase ‘dao’ to refer to individual paths among the plurality of actual and potential dao and the uppercase ‘Dao’ to refer to the ‘Great Dao’ of nature constituted by the totality of dao.

⁴ An alternative reading of the gloss on dao, reading 遇 for 偶, is ‘responding to things as one encounters them’.

⁵ This is not to suggest that agents never engage in contemplation, as Master Qi obviously does in the opening paragraph of the ‘Discourse on Equalizing Things’, when he ‘loses himself’ in meditation while listening to the ‘piping of heaven’ (2/1–9). The point is that agents are regarded as inherently caught up in a stream of activity, even if that activity includes ‘quiet sitting’. Meditation itself may be regarded as a mode of flowing along with the course of nature, as Yan Hui implies about ‘sitting and forgetting’ (6/92–93).

⁶ The exchange between the penumbra and shadow hints that there is no epistemic position from which we could know with confidence what our actions ultimately depend on (2/92–94).

⁷ Other passages with similar implications include the story of Lady Li, who wept when married off to the king of a foreign country (2/79–84), Master Yu’s response to his fatal, disfiguring illness (6/47–53), and Mengsun Cai’s attitude toward the self (6/75–82).

⁸ In undertaking precarious diplomatic and political projects, for instance, Yan Hui is instructed to ‘fast the heart’ to become ‘empty’ or ‘vacant’ (4/1–24) and Master Gao is encouraged to ‘forget’ himself (4/34–53) so that both can spontaneously and efficiently adapt to whatever opportunities present themselves. Elsewhere, Yan Hui is praised for learning to ‘sit and forget’, leaving even his body and cognition behind and merging with the ‘Great Flow’ (6/89–93), while Master Qi’s ability to hear ‘the pipes of heaven’ is ascribed to his ‘losing himself’ in meditation (2/1–9). Many of the skill stories associate virtuoso performances with psychological states described as ‘empty’ or ‘forgetting’ (Fraser 2008). The ‘emptying’ at issue is presumably only partial or targets extraneous factors, because in the skill stories the core ends motivating the agent’s activity remain intact, such as carving up oxen, reforming an irresponsible warlord, or swimming through rapids without losing one’s life. On ‘finding the fit’ as a Zhuangist ideal, see Fox (1996).

⁹ At least one strand of Zhuangist thought does seem to advocate a conception of de on which agency completely dissolves into non-human natural processes. See, for instance, 15/10–14.

¹⁰ As these remarks imply, I conjecture that Zhuangist thinkers might accept a version of compatibilism about free will.