

**Wandering the Way:
A Eudaimonistic Approach to the *Zhuāngzǐ***

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Introduction

Much recent comparative philosophy has treated comparisons and contrasts between classical Greek or Hellenistic ethics and early Confucianism.¹ At the same time, interpretations of Confucianism as a form of virtue ethics have become common.² Critics of such interpretations have contended persuasively that early Confucianism cannot be adequately characterized as a virtue ethic, since virtue-related concepts and issues constitute at most only part of its normative framework.³ Still, it seems undeniable that early Confucianism at least incorporates eudaimonistic elements, insofar as a conception of human flourishing seems to play a significant normative role in texts such as *Mencius* and *Xúnzǐ*, even if virtue or flourishing is not basic or definitive in their overall normative theory.⁴

Less attention has been devoted to virtue-ethics or eudaimonistic readings of Daoist

¹ Two representative examples are Sim (2007) and Yu (2007).

² For representative recent work, see Van Norden (2007), Wong (2008), and Angle and Slote (forthcoming).

³ For instance, Hansen (1996, 175) argues that the major early Chinese virtue-like concept, *dé* 德, which he interprets as “virtuosity,” is conceptually subordinate to the more basic normative concept of *dào* 道 (way). *Dé*, he suggests, is “a hypothetical structure of dispositions essential to the proper performance of any *dào*. It is the ability to recognize, interpret, and perform a *dào*” (174). Ames and Rosemont (2011) contend that early Confucianism is best described as a “role ethics,” in which persons are understood relationally as constituted by their social roles, which are the basis for normative standards. In their view, Confucianism focuses not on the character traits of the discrete, morally excellent individual, but on a role-specific virtuosity that can be understood only by reference to relations with others, particularly family members.

⁴ See *Mencius* 6A:14–15 (see Lau 1970), which implies a contrast between a “lesser” and a “greater,” and thus more flourishing, mode of life. See too *Xúnzǐ* (1966, 8/56–61), which presents a hierarchy of levels of ethical excellence, from the commoner to the diligent officer to the committed gentleman to the sage, with the implication that the higher levels exemplify greater degrees of human flourishing.

texts.⁵ This paper explores whether Zhuangist thought, which famously defies conventional values and mores and stretches or resists conventional ethical categorization, can be defensibly interpreted as presenting a eudaimonistic ideal, in the sense of a normative conception of a flourishing, happy, or well-lived human life.⁶ I argue that it can, although Zhuangist eudaimonism centers not around moral virtue but the exercise of *dé* 德, roughly a form of non-moral power, potency, or virtuosity. As I interpret it, *dé* is the potency within an agent that enables her to flourish as a person, follow *dào*, act effectively, and influence others. To underscore the links between the capacities inherent in *dé* and adept, resilient activity, I gloss it as both “potency” and “virtuosity.” Portions of the *Zhuāngzǐ*, I argue, present a conception of personal flourishing characterized by the employment of *dé* in a distinctive mode of activity that, borrowing a term from the texts themselves, we can conveniently label *yóu* 遊, “wandering” or “roaming.” The details of this view of human

⁵ Two virtue-ethics approaches to the *Zhuāngzǐ* are those of Fox (2002) and Huang (2010b). Fox interprets the text as presenting a virtue ethics focusing on “development of one’s character” rather than “adherence to an ethical formula” (2002: 80). Advocating character development does not automatically make an ethical orientation a form of virtue ethics, however. Fox’s treatment seems to overlook Zhuangist normative criteria for appropriate action that are conceptually independent of agents’ character—some of which, such as “fit” (*shì* 適) he himself has helped to identify (Fox 1996). Huang attributes a virtue-ethics orientation to the *Zhuāngzǐ* on the grounds that the central normative idea in Zhuangist ethics is “to respect the unique natural tendencies of different things” (2010b, 1061). Since doing so enhances the wellness of moral patients, and enhancing wellness is a feature of virtues, he argues, “the rule to respect differences in *Zhuāngzǐ* is derived from the virtue of respecting differences” and thus Zhuangist ethics is a type of virtue ethics (2010b, 1061). It is difficult to see how this conclusion follows, however, partly because the texts do not explicitly mention any notion corresponding to a virtue of respecting differences, but more importantly because the “difference stories” on which Huang bases his account of Zhuangist ethics seem concerned not with evaluating agents’ character but with evaluating courses of action as “fitting” or not. For instance, an explicit theme of the story about treating a rare bird in a manner appropriate for a bird, not a human, is that “the right is grounded in the fitting” (義設於適 18/39, Watson 1968: 194–195). I suggest that for the *Zhuāngzǐ* the fundamental grounds for respecting differences are that doing so is usually the most “fitting” *dào* by which to proceed in particular circumstances. Since the content of *dé* 德 (virtuosity) is determined partly by its relation to *dào*, one aspect of *dé* is a propensity for finding and pursuing such fitting courses of action.

Kupperman (1999) sees the Zhuangist normative vision as lying at least partly in what he calls “education of the emotions” such that the agent becomes more spontaneous, a process of “self-transformation” that is arguably also a form of character development. Intriguingly, he denies that this character change is moral in nature or that the *Zhuāngzǐ* sees moral improvement as leading to a better life (1999, 82–83). Indeed, he implies that moral virtue may interfere with an agent’s achieving the Zhuangist good life. He thus seems to adopt an approach similar to that taken here, identifying eudaimonistic features in the *Zhuāngzǐ* but denying these are specifically moral in nature or constitute elements of a virtue ethic.

⁶ References to the text of the *Zhuāngzǐ* cite chapter and line numbers in the Harvard-Yenching concordance (Zhuāngzǐ 1956), which can conveniently be located online in the *Zhuāngzǐ* text at the Chinese Text Project

flourishing make it unlikely that Zhuangist ethics can justifiably be interpreted as a form of virtue ethics, the most widely recognized species of eudaimonistic ethics.⁷ Nevertheless, I contend, the anthology does present a eudaimonistic ideal, a conclusion that will dovetail with many readers' conviction that the *Zhuāngzǐ* presents a distinctive normative vision of how to live well.

By “Zhuangist” thought here, I refer to major themes in the first seven *piān* (“books” or “rolls”) of the Warring States anthology *Zhuāngzǐ*—the so-called “inner” *piān*—along with *Piān* 17–22, which are commonly regarded as having close doctrinal affinities with the inner *piān*.⁸ On the grounds of recent philological research, I assume that these *piān*, including the seven “inner” ones, are probably the work of a plurality of writers and editors and that they likely present a variety of interrelated doctrinal stances.⁹ My aim is not to reconstruct *the* unique ethical position of the *Zhuāngzǐ* as a whole—for there is no such position—but to suggest how various voices within one major stream of thought in the *Zhuāngzǐ* might point

(<http://ctext.org/zhuangzi>). All translations are my own, but for reference I include citations to the Watson translation (Watson 1968) for extended passages, indicated by a “W” and a page number.

⁷ I distinguish “eudaimonism,” a general term for ethical views that propound a conception of the happy, flourishing, or well-lived life, from virtue ethics, some forms of which constitute a variety of eudaimonism. In one common use, the phrase “virtue ethics” refers to a type of normative ethical theory that takes virtue concepts as primary, by contrast with deontological or consequentialist theories. On such a theory, the basic or primary object of ethical evaluation is agents' character, the chief terms of evaluation refer to virtues, and the main criteria of evaluation are the traits of the virtuous agent (cf. Griffin 1996: 113). Another use of “virtue ethics” refers to a type of eudaimonistic theory in which moral virtue is regarded as constitutive of *eudaimonia* or a well-lived life. This category of eudaimonistic virtue ethics includes most ancient Western ethical theories (Annas 1995: 329). Neither of these uses of “virtue ethics,” I contend, corresponds to the Zhuangist normative stance explored here. For the *Zhuāngzǐ*, *dé* is not normatively basic, but is understood through its relation to *dào*, a source of normativity conceptually distinct from it (see the discussion in Section 6 below). So Zhuangist thought is not a virtue ethic in the first sense. Neither is it a virtue ethic in the second sense, as its conception of *dé* does not correspond to moral virtue—for traits such as adaptability, equanimity, resilience, and creativity are not moral virtues—and indeed numerous *Zhuāngzǐ* passages reject the idea that moral virtues are central to the well-lived life (e.g., 6/82–86, W89). Thus I argue that the *Zhuāngzǐ* presents a eudaimonistic ideal, centered on *dé*, that is not aptly characterized as a “virtue ethic” and that constitutes only part of the overall Zhuangist normative stance, the more fundamental part being an account of *dào* and adept *dào*-performance. Huang (2010b, 1050) argues that Zhuangist thought cannot be a eudaimonistic virtue ethics because such a position requires “a moral conception of human nature, which is absent in the *Zhuāngzǐ*.” I agree that the *Zhuāngzǐ* does not present a moral conception of human nature, but I argue in Section 2 that it does present an account of character traits constitutive of human flourishing.

⁸ Both Graham (1981) and Liu (1994), for instance, see these *piān* as closely related to the so-called “inner” chapters, which are widely regarded as paradigmatic of Zhuangist thought.

⁹ On the composite nature of Warring States texts, see Boltz (2005). On the possible authorial disunity of the *Zhuāngzǐ* “inner” books, see Zhāng (1983), Fraser (1997), Klein (2010), McCraw (2010), and Brooks (2011).

toward a roughly overlapping eudaimonistic vision.¹⁰

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.¹¹ Greek thinkers typically tie *eudaimonia* to moral virtue (*arête*), such that a unified understanding of what is morally right, integrated with the motivation and disposition to act on that understanding, 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” (*Qíwùlùn* 齊物論, *Piān* 2 of the *Zhuāngzǐ*) and “Autumn Waters” (*Qiūshuǐ* 秋水, *Piān* 17), for instance, suggest that Zhuangist writers 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.¹² These texts contend that values and ends are heavily context-dependent, plural and heterogeneous, and subject to change. As a normative stance, they recommend maintaining flexibility in one’s choice of ends and refraining from committing unconditionally to any one path or end.¹³ Still, throughout the *Zhuāngzǐ* we do find an obvious 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 (*shèng rén* 聖人), the “ultimate person” (*zhì rén* 至人), or the “authentic person” (*zhēn rén*

¹⁰ The composite, anthological nature of the *Zhuāngzǐ* and the deep, probably irresolvable uncertainties concerning the details of its authorship, chronology, and purpose call for an unusual interpretive approach. This article will not aim to reconstruct the philosophical views of any one particular writer, since we are unable to identify any suitably large body of *Zhuāngzǐ* material as the work of a specific author or authors. Instead, the article will conjoin interpretations of distinct Zhuangist writings to develop a systematic, loosely unified position not presented explicitly in or necessarily endorsed by any one part of the anthology. The outcome is not intended as a reconstruction of a hypothetical unified position of the *Zhuāngzǐ* or its writers and editors, since no such position may exist and the text’s purpose may not have been to present such a position. Instead, it is a development of Zhuangist thought grounded in interpretations of various passages.

¹¹ I base this and other claims about *eudaimonia* on Annas (1995), which provides a magisterial overview of Greek eudaimonism.

¹² The *piān* of the *Zhuāngzǐ* that are my focus here tend to dismiss moral values such as *rén* 仁 (goodwill) and *yì* 義 (duty, right), so it seems they would reject the idea that anything identifiable as moral excellence would be central to the good life. Other sections of the anthology, such as some of what Graham (1981) calls “Primitivist” writings (*piān* 8–10), may hold that human life indeed has a fixed end, which they tie to a conception of people’s “constant nature” (*cháng xìng* 常性).

真人), advocate preserving one's "authenticity" (*zhēn* 真), or portray and commend the exercise of *dé*. In this respect, eudaimonistic ideals seem prominent in the anthology.

An obvious question, then, is this: 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 will argue, is that for the *Zhuāngzǐ*, the well-lived 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 eudaimonistic 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.¹⁴ In the anthology's own terminology, the mode of activity I am alluding to is associated with the notion of *yóu* 遊 ("wandering," sometimes also written 游), a word that connotes rambling or roaming without any fixed direction, a pleasurable jaunt or sightseeing excursion, and play or recreation. Hence I propose "wandering" as an appropriate label for it.

The aim of this paper is thus to develop an interpretation of a Zhuangist account of the ideal or good life on which its distinctive feature is the employment of *dé* in the general mode of activity denoted by "wandering." Wandering, I suggest, is a characteristic expression or exercise of *dé*. For brevity, I will not attempt here to critically evaluate the Zhuangist ideal of wandering, but only to identify and articulate it and to explain its proponents' grounds for it. In what follows, I first offer selected textual evidence for the claim that the *Zhuāngzǐ* does present a reasonably clear eudaimonistic ideal. I then attempt to flesh out the Zhuangist conception of wandering in detail and explore the connections between wandering and the Zhuangist interest in skill or dexterity. Next, I survey several potential justifications for the

¹³ My grounds for these generalizations are presented in Fraser (2009a).

Zhuangist eudaimonistic stance before concluding with some reflections on how the wandering ideal affects the content of the Zhuangist good life.

Zhuangist Eudaimonism

By way of supporting the claim that we can legitimately speak of Zhuangist “eudaimonism,” in the sense of a Zhuangist conception of a flourishing life, this section examines four thematically interrelated passages that bear especially closely on the issue. I suggest that the interpretation of Zhuangist eudaimonism proposed here coheres well with numerous other passages that allude to *dé* or to wandering (*yóu*) and also with passages that allude to preserving what is “genuine” (*zhēn* 真) or “natural” (*tiān* 天) in us. But the four texts I focus on here provide especially rich detail that points to a normative conception of human flourishing or healthy functioning comparable in some respects to *eudaimonia*.

A traditional construal of the Greek concept of *eudaimonia* is “happiness”; the life of *eudaimonia* is regarded as a happy life. As scholars of Greek thought are quick to explain, the relevant conception of happiness is not that of a pleasurable or positive subjective experience, as in the everyday notion of feeling happy. *Eudaimonia* does share with our everyday notion of happiness the connotation of satisfaction with and a positive attitude toward our status. But fundamentally it is a normatively specified—albeit thinly so—state of well-being or flourishing.¹⁵ A life of *eudaimonia* is “happy” in a sense roughly like that in which we speak of a “happy” coincidence or a “happy” formulation of an idea.

Zhuangist writings generally tend to disvalue happiness construed as a pleasurable feeling, typically denoted by the word “*lè* 樂.” Numerous *Zhuāngzǐ* passages instead valorize

¹⁴ I say “primarily,” because in some contexts, Zhuangist normative views about the “how” partly determine the “what.” I will return to this point in the final section.

¹⁵ See Annas (1995: 43–46) for a helpful discussion of the relation between *eudaimonia* and the modern conception of happiness.

a state of affective equanimity (*ān* 安) or harmony (*hé* 和) and treat intense 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*). Such emotions are regarded as interfering with the exercise of *dé* (virtuosity, potency).¹⁶ Still, might a life of *dé* and equanimity be in some sense a happy one? At least one Zhuangist voice explicitly claims it is. A rich, fascinating dialogue between Confucius and Lǎo Dān in *Piān* 21 depicts affective equanimity as a crucial aspect of “letting the heart wander in the beginning of things,” an activity it also characterizes as “ultimate beauty and ultimate happiness (*lè*)” (21/24–38, W224–227). The passage does not explicitly specify how such “wandering” (*yóu*) amounts to appreciating ultimate beauty and realizing ultimate happiness. But the implication is that through “letting the heart wander,” one fully appreciates the grandeur and mystery of natural processes and their unfathomable “ancestor” or “source” (*zōng* 宗)—this is the thematic emphasis of the first half of the dialogue—while understanding and exercising what is of greatest value in human life—the emphasis of the second half.¹⁷ The passage implies that such wandering is an expression of the *dé* of the “ultimate person,” establishing a connection between wandering and *dé* also found elsewhere in the *Zhuāngzǐ*, as we will see. Arguably, then, the passage presents a conception of happiness as a status or activity analogous in some respects to *eudaimonia*.

“The beginning of things,” as Lǎo Dān describes it, seems to refer to the mysterious, formless “ancestor” that drives and regulates the production of natural phenomena, the source from which life arises and to which death returns things. In the course of explaining the “direction” or “method” by which one can “wander in the beginning of things,” Lǎo Dān

¹⁶ For detailed discussions of the relation of emotions to Zhuangist normative ideals, see Olberding (2007) and Fraser (2011).

describes how, by identifying with the cosmos as a whole, we can come to see gain and loss, even life and death, as minor, trivial changes that leave us emotionally unperturbed, just as the flow of water down a stream leaves the creatures living in it undisturbed.

Grass-eating beasts do not fret over a change of pasture; water-born creatures do not fret over a change of waters. They proceed through small-scale alternations without losing their large-scale constancy, and joy, anger, grief, and happiness do not enter their chests. Now as to the world, it is that in which the myriad things are one. If you attain that in which they are one and assimilate to it, your four limbs and hundred parts will be as dust and dirt, and death and life, ending and beginning will be as day and night, nothing being able to disturb you—least of all the distinctions of gain and loss or good and bad fortune! (21/31–33)

Summing up, he explains that “value lies in me and is not lost in change” (21/34). The implication, I suggest, is that what is of highest value in human life is our capacity for a distinctive mode of activity, which we retain and can continue to exercise despite any changes that befall us. The activity in question is wandering through the endless process of alternation, transformation, and reversal generated by the mysterious source of things (21/27–29). For this passage, then, the finest life—the life of “ultimate beauty and ultimate happiness” (21/30)—is one in which we engage our capacity for such wandering.

Lǎo Dān’s explanation of wandering stresses three points. First, it is characterized by “large-scale constancy” (*dà cháng* 大常), or constancy on a macro, general level, insofar as it is an activity that continues undisturbed despite changing particular circumstances. Second, this constancy is achieved by identifying with the world, construed as the totality or “one” that incorporates the myriad things. This identification is apparently not regarded as a loss of the individual self, as the passage still recognizes a “me” that is a locus of value and engages in wandering. Rather, it seems that identifying with the world yields an expanded conception of the self, which 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

¹⁷ I will use the capitalized “*Dào*” to refer 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

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 “liberated” or “released” (*jiě* 解) from psychological disturbances caused by affective responses to change (21/35).

This emphasis on equanimity and constancy of mind links the Confucius-Lǎo Dān dialogue to two stories in *Piān* 5, “Signs of Full *Dé*,” which provide rich descriptions of *dé*.¹⁸ 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*. The stories challenge the widespread contemporaneous belief that a person’s *dé* would be manifested in his physical form, through wholeness, health, beauty, and graceful bearing. They also undermine conventional conceptions of *dé* by presenting 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 examine is that of Āi Tái Tuō (5/31–49, W72–74), a horrendously ugly man whose mysterious charisma causes people to find him intensely attractive and trustworthy, though he possesses neither political power, great wealth, nor special expertise and never takes the lead, but only harmonizes with others. Āi’s ability to win trust and affection without saying or doing anything in particular is attributed to his “capacity” or “stuff” (*cái* 才) being “whole,” while his *dé* is preserved within him and not manifested in his physical form (5/42–43). The text associates one’s “capacity” with “what employs the body” (5/39–40), implying that it refers to inner faculties or capabilities that either constitute or enable agency. I suggest that the passage implies a normative conception

within the *Dào*.

¹⁸ See too the discussion of these stories in Fraser (2011: 100–101).

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 fully or properly realizes our capacities.

What is it for one’s “capacity” to be “whole”?

Death and life, survival and loss, failure and success, poverty and wealth, worthiness and unworthiness, slander and praise, hunger and thirst, cold and heat—these are the alternations of affairs, the march of fate. Day and night they replace each other before us and knowledge cannot espy their beginnings. So they are insufficient to disturb one’s harmony and cannot enter the soul-repository. Let harmony and ease prevail throughout them, without losing enjoyment; day and night let there be no fissures, with all things making it be springtime;¹⁹ this is to be someone who in encountering things generates the opportune moment in his heart. (5/43–46)

The text’s account of one’s “capacity being whole” emphasizes preserving affective harmony (*hé* 和) and ease in the face of unknowable and uncontrollable change, or the “march of fate” (*mìng* 命). One is to allow no “fissures” through which the vagaries of fortune can enter the “soul-repository” (the chest or heart) to disrupt one’s psychological equilibrium. Indeed, the next few lines of the passage (not quoted above) describe *dé* as the practice of perfect inner equanimity or harmony (*hé*), which is said to have an attractive effect on others (5/47). Such psychological harmony enables Āi to “make springtime with things”—to turn any situation into a season of blossoming and growth—and to “generate the opportune moment in his heart” no matter what circumstances he encounters. An agent whose “capacity is whole” is thus no passive victim of fate, but finds ways to create opportunities from his situation.

The other story concerns an ex-convict amputee named Wáng Tái who has as many followers as Confucius, despite promulgating no explicit teachings or practices (5/1–13, W68–69). Confucius describes Wáng’s distinctive way of “employing his heart” as follows:

Death and life are indeed great affairs, yet he does not allow himself to alter with them. Though heaven collapse and earth subside, he would not be lost with them.

¹⁹ The meaning of these two lines is obscure, and commentators propose a variety of readings (see Wáng 1988: 194–195). My interpretation treats these as a pair of parallel serial verb constructions, each with a causative pivot construction as the first phrase. I follow Lǐ Yí 李頤 in reading 兌 as 悅 (*ibid.*, 194).

Discerning about the unborrowed,²⁰ he does not shift with things. Treating the transformations of things as fate, he preserves his ancestral source. . . . Looking at them from their differences, there are liver and gall, and [the states of] Chǔ and Yuè. Looking at them from their similarities, the myriad things are all one. A person such as this, without even knowing what suits his ears and eyes, he lets his heart wander in the harmony of *dé*. As to things, he looks at the respects in which they are one and does not see those in which they have suffered a loss. He looks at losing his foot as losing a clump of earth. (5/5–8)

Confucius goes on to attribute Wáng’s influence over others to his “constant heart” (*cháng xīn* 常心), which he compares to still water in which people view their reflection and so are stilled themselves. He implies that, like the sage-kings, Wáng has an ability to “set life right” and thus set others’ lives right. People follow him because he possesses a constructive, life-affirming command over his situation: he “makes heaven and earth his palace and the myriad things his treasury” and “his heart has never tasted death.” My interpretive proposal, then, is that this passage presents a conception of how to set life right and make the most of 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 grasps and focuses on the respects in which the myriad things are “one,” or form a single spatial-temporal whole, and thus experiences no loss when they 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 (*mìng*) and thus beyond our control.²¹ He discerns and preserves what is “unborrowed” or “non-contingent” in himself, namely his “ancestor” or “source” (*zōng*)—which I interpret here as referring to the mysterious source of one’s identity, including one’s capacity for

²⁰ The “unborrowed” (*wú jiǎ* 無假) can also be interpreted as the “non-contingent” or the “non-dependent.” I follow Chén (1999, 156) in taking this phrase to refer to a status of not “borrowing” and thus not relying or being contingent on things. It thus resonates with the characterization of wandering in Book 1 as not dependent (*dài* 待) on anything (1/21). *Jiǎ* 假 is used similarly elsewhere in the *Zhuāngzǐ* (6/69, 14/51, 18/21). A parallel phrase in the *Huáinánzǐ* reads 瑕 for 假 but commentators generally interpret this as a loan graph for the same word (Wáng 1988, 173).

²¹ Fate, or *mìng* 命, refers to facts regarded as “mandated” and beyond our control, such as hereditary traits.

agency.²² Focusing on this source, he maintains psychological constancy throughout change and transformation—including transformations to himself and to things around him. He regards his body as only a 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*.” One might worry that Wáng’s acceptance of fate and indifference toward his 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 not contingent or dependent on other things, Wáng is depicted as liberating himself from fate. He can freely “choose the day to ascend” 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 to keep his capacity whole and thus is unable to function well, even to the point of falling ill. In *Piān* 4, “The World Among Humans,” Master Gāo, Duke of Shè, 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, W59–61). In response to his predicament, Confucius, the text’s spokesman, emphasizes that the world often presents us with circumstances that are “inevitable” (*bùdéyǐ* 不得已) or that we “cannot do anything about,” specifically responsibilities arising from political and kinship relations. The “pinnacle of *dé*” is to recognize and make peace with what we cannot control, as we do with fate

²² Another plausible interpretation—which likely converges with the above suggestion—is that the “ancestral source” refers to the processes of nature that produce and transform everything in the world, including human agents and our activity. In this respect, the “ancestor” of which Wáng speaks coincides with the “ancestor” to which Lǎo Dān refers in the dialogue discussed above. The course of these processes is probably what some

(*mìng*), such that emotions such as sorrow and happiness cease to disturb us.

As to serving your own heart, without sorrow or joy alternating before you, to know what you can't do anything about and be at ease with it as with fate, this is the pinnacle of *dé*. As a minister or son, there are bound to be matters that are inevitable. Act on the facts of the matter and forget yourself. What leisure will you have for delighting in life and hating death? (4/41–44)

Only by achieving such equanimity can one exercise the tact and discretion needed to handle complex affairs effectively. Master Gāo should simply proceed according to the facts of the situation and “forget himself.” The ideal is to “let your heart wander (*yóu*) by riding along with things” and to “nurture your center by consigning yourself to the inevitable” (4/52–53). 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 psycho-physiological health (Fraser 2011: 98–100). 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.

To sum up, these and thematically related *Zhuāngzǐ* passages present a conception of a healthy, flourishing human life in which we realize what is of greatest value in ourselves, fulfill our “capacities” (*cái*), achieve a form of mastery in dealing with our circumstances, and maintain a “constant” psycho-physiological harmony while exercising agency effectively—specifically through an ability to find and exploit opportunities within the “inevitable” circumstances we face. The central, unifying concept in this normative ideal is *dé*; the various features I have described are all regarded as aspects of it. In three of the four passages, the employment of *dé* is associated with an activity referred to as “letting the heart wander” (*yóu xīn* 遊心). The details in each case vary, but the wandering alluded to is

Zhuāngzǐ passages denote by the word “*Dào*.” So in some contexts, it is plausible that the “ancestor” is in effect

mainly metaphorical. It refers primarily not to physically meandering about but to the free play of the heart, without any fixed direction, while maintaining psycho-physiological equilibrium or harmony and a readiness to respond flexibly to change.²³

The ties between wandering and the Zhuangist conception of *dé* and the well-lived life should 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 concept of “roaming” or “wandering” without limits presented in the first *piān* of the anthology is pivotal to the normative vision of many Zhuangist writings. I now turn to examine the conception of wandering presented in that *piān* and how it coheres 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 *piān* of the *Zhuāngzǐ* (1/1–22, W29–32), which begins with the story of a vast fish that transforms into the giant Péng bird and presents a series of contrasts between “small” and “large” creatures, concluding with contrasts between four types of human activity. It appears too in the title of that *piān*—“Meanderingly Wandering” (逍遙遊)—although the title is probably the work of a later editor, not whoever wrote the short texts that constitute the *piān*. Wandering is mentioned explicitly only in the concluding paragraph of the first section, as the highest of the four modes of activity. However, a series of metaphors and analogies link it to the central theme of the preceding paragraphs, “the difference between small and large,” and in particular how “small knowledge falls short of large knowledge” (1/10). The section as

the workings of the “Great *Dào*” within us.

²³ The textual links between *dé* and wandering are limited and partly indirect. But the passages examined above clearly imply that, for instance, *dé* is crucial to attaining the “wandering heart” by which Master Gao can best deal with his circumstances and that the exemplary *dé* of a figure such as Wáng Tái produces such a wandering heart. (I thank an anonymous referee for prompting me to clarify these points.)

a whole 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.²⁴ (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.) Wandering is associated with the activities of such fantastic creatures as the gigantic Péng, which migrates tens of thousands of miles from beyond the northern reaches of the world to beyond the southern, an activity that small creatures such as the dove or quail, which merely flit from tree to tree, fail to understand. Thus it is linked conceptually to forms of life that transcend the boundaries of familiar mores and the smug attitudes of those who cannot see beyond them.²⁵

The passage that explicitly mentions wandering implies that it represents an ideal mode of activity, as it occupies the top of a hierarchy of four types of activity and corresponding attitudes (1/17–21). 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 Sòngzǐ, who rightly distinguishes between the quality of his own conduct and society’s opinion of him and is unconcerned with praise or blame. Still “larger” is Lièzǐ, who is unconcerned about fortune and can ride breezily about on the wind for a fortnight at a time—the human analogue of the Péng bird. Yet even Lièzǐ and the Péng have something on which their form of life depends or is contingent (*yǒu dài* 有待), namely the wind. According to the text (1/21–22), one could surpass them by “mounting the norms of heaven and earth,” “riding the fluctuations of the six *qi*,” and thus “wandering in the limitless,” for “then how would one be dependent (*dài* 待) on anything?”

²⁴ For an insightful discussion of these themes, see Sturgeon (forthcoming).

A plausible interpretation of these remarks is that if we follow the cosmos itself as our guide—rather than the limited norms that we or our society happens to set—and flow along with natural processes of change, thus wandering 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 happen to be available.

As depicted in this passage, the activity of wandering comprises at least five features. First, it transcends “contingency” (*dài*), or reliance on conditions external to the agent, in two senses: it neither depends on any specific conditions nor is subject to the effects of chance. We can wander no matter what particular circumstances we are presented with, and should chance occurrences radically change our circumstances, we can continue to wander. Second, wandering has no fixed, predetermined direction or norm. Rather, it consists in continual adaptation to change—riding the fluctuations of various natural forces and roaming in what has no fixed limits. Third, it is grounded partly in an understanding of the potential range of alternative forms of life, as illustrated by Sòngzǐ’s and 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,” carefree attitude, such as those of Sòngzǐ and Lièzǐ but, the text implies, even more open and accepting of change.

I propose that this initial depiction 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 several aspects of freedom—is explicitly articulated in a pair of nearly identical passages in two other *piān* of the *Zhuāngzǐ*, “The Master of Nurturing

²⁵ Coutinho (2004) rightly stresses the motif of wandering beyond familiar boundaries in his interpretation of

Life” (3/17–19, W53) and “The Great Ancestral Teacher” (6/52–53, W84). The key idea in these passages is that things or events come when it is their moment (*shí* 時) and depart as they flow along with (*shùn* 順) natural processes. To be “at peace with the moment (*shí*) and dwell in the flow (*shùn*)” is to be “released from bonds” (*xuán jiě* 懸解) and thus in some sense free. Those who cannot free themselves in this way are “bound” (*jié* 結) by things. One indication of such bonds is intense, disruptive emotions such as sorrow and happiness, which disturb our psychological harmony (*hé*) or peace (*ān*) and thus prevent us from “dwelling in the flow.”²⁶ This is one reason the *Zhuāngzǐ* repudiates these emotions: they and the attachments to things that produce them interfere with our ability to freely adapt to change.²⁷ By contrast, as we saw earlier, to accept what one cannot control without experiencing such emotions is “the pinnacle of *dé*” (4/42–43, 5/20). So to be free in the sense of “dwelling in the flow” is just to exercise our inherent *dé* to the fullest.

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 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 one of the respects in which it is non-contingent: as an activity, it is self-sufficient, depending on no fixed conditions outside of itself.²⁸ It contrasts

the *Zhuāngzǐ*.

²⁶ I mention “intense” emotions here because the texts seem to endorse mild positive emotions, such as being “at peace with the moment.” The latter emotions are typical signs of the sense of ease, security, confidence, and peace that Ivanhoe (2010) helpfully characterizes as “metaphysical comfort.” He suggests these psychological goods are constituents of the untutored spontaneity valorized in early Daoist texts. Such spontaneity seems to me identical to the adaptive, creative responses to particular situations I associate with wandering below.

²⁷ For an extensive discussion of this and related issues, including the psycho-physiological theory of emotion that underlies the Zhuangist position, see Fraser (2011).

²⁸ For further exploration of the grounds for and significance of this claim, see Fraser (2011: 107–108).

with having a fixed path to follow or a predetermined end or destination to reach. Indeed, probably 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. This indeterminacy means that 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 field for wandering or another sight to see. Consider the analogy of a traveler who sets off simply 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 take 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 typically we are in fact *not* free in the sense of fully controlling our destiny or being able to act without constraints. 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.) The Zhuangist conception recasts freedom largely as an ability to discover the variety of paths that are genuinely open to us—a cognitive process that may require considerable imagination, creativity, and emotional stability—and to embark on a suitable one.²⁹ Rather than freedom to control what happens to us or to do anything we please, it is

²⁹ The dialogue between the penumbra and shadow (2/92–94, W49) 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 how compatibilism about free will is compatible with determinism. Freedom in the sense of wandering does not

the freedom to calmly and effectively apply a form of practical intelligence or wisdom—probably the capacity that *Piān 2*, the “Discourse on Evening Things Out,” refers to as *míng* 明 (clarity, understanding) (2/31)—to navigate our way through the field of potential paths and obstacles that the world presents us.³⁰ 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 with the inevitable and “ride along” with it (4/52–53).

More generally, in less pessimistic scenarios, wandering frees us from fixed ends and enables us to explore the natural and social world and various forms of life open to us. A second series of passages in “Meanderingly Wandering” underscores the association between wandering and forms of life that depart from or defy received human norms or values (1/23–36, W32–34). One tells of a “spirit man” of marvelous *dé*, 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 depicts the recluse Xǔ Yóu, 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 (1/23–26). 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 sage-king Yáo becomes so disoriented from received notions of value and achievement that he “loses,” or forgets, his empire. A man from the central state of Sòng peddling ceremonial caps travels to the southern state of Yuè but finds

require that our actions depend on nothing, but only that they depend on no one fixed thing in particular.

³⁰ The “Discourse on Evening Things Out” treats *míng* (understanding) as the capacity to use “responsive” or “adaptive” distinctions (*yīn shì* 因是) to “reach what one seeks to obtain” (*shì dé* 適得, 2/37) in particular contexts. I base this suggestion on the conceptual links between *yīn shì*, “deeming distinctions” (*wéi shì* 為是), and *míng* as presented in (2/27–47). For further discussion of *míng*, see Fraser (2006), (2008), and (2009a).

no buyers, as people there follow different customs and have no use for his wares.³¹ The stories collectively emphasize the plurality and variety of ways of life that may obtain and undermine the idea of there being any single fixed *dào* or path that is authoritative for human life. The implication is that absent such a *dào*, what is open to us is to appreciate and wander among the various paths the world presents.

A final pair of passages in “Meanderingly Wandering,” two exchanges between Zhuāngzǐ and Huìzǐ, inverts the implied connection between wandering and finding commonly valued things useless (1/35–47, W34–35). 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.³² The inclusion of these stories in a *piān* on the wandering theme implies that wandering involves a cognitive appreciation of and openness toward alternative paths an agent might take, including paths that reverse commonsense, seemingly obvious valuations.³³ In one story, 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 instead 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 meandering or lounging about and enjoying a nap—precisely because it is useless by ordinary standards, no harm will come to it

³¹ 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 or authors.

³² 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 “Meanderingly Wandering” (which itself could be the work of several hands). In effect, I am interpreting the chapter as a series of passages assembled by one or more editors to illustrate different dimensions of wandering as they conceived it.

³³ Wong (2005) constructively explores how such openness may reveal new aspects of the world or new sources of value. Fraser (2009a) discusses how this theme meshes with Zhuangist skeptical attitudes. A consequence of these discussions is that wandering may typically involve a conditional, skeptical commitment

from loggers. The overall implication is that wandering reveals respects both 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. More generally, these stories lead us to view the application of conventional values such as utility as dependent on a range of changeable or optional conditions. What counts as useful may shift with circumstances, and things considered useful in some conditions might lose their importance entirely in others; indeed, the value of utility itself might lose its importance. The references to floating on rivers and lakes and lounging in the shade of a tree also exemplify the ludic dimension of wandering, reminding us that the word *yóu* (wander) connotes not only roaming without a fixed destination but “play.” To a large extent, the ideal of wandering just is a vision of life as an extended process of play, infused with a resilient *joie de vivre*.³⁴

My hypothesis is that for the Zhuangist tradition represented in these writings, the exercise of 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 manifested 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.³⁵ A distinctive characteristic of human agents is our capacity to discover,

to some particular path, which leaves the agent open to also appreciating potential alternatives. Sturgeon (forthcoming) examines how such appreciation ties in to the Zhuangist conception of “greater” knowledge.

³⁴ This comment echoes the seminal discussion in Crandell (1983), who presents an insightful analysis of the role of play in the normative stance of the *Zhuāngzǐ* “inner” *piān* and the connections between play and the ideal of wandering. “Wandering” (*yóu*), Crandell suggests, is a Zhuangist term for the subject’s engagement in play (1983: 115). It refers to “nondirectedness,” understood as the manner in which the subject or agent’s path should be traversed, and connotes “absence of attachment to any one particular perspective” (114).

³⁵ I have proposed elsewhere (Fraser 2009b) that action in classical Chinese thought is conceptualized as having a discrimination-and-response structure akin to that of skills. Agency lies in our capacity for discriminating and undertaking fitting paths to follow in our circumstances. A helpful illustration is Cook Dīng’s description of how he slices up oxen: the natural structure of the animal presents various obstructions, which he avoids, and openings, through which he moves the knife by means of responsive, adaptive skills (3/2–12).

appreciate, and explore a plurality of distinct particular *dào* within the totality of facts and processes that constitute the undifferentiated natural *Dào* of the cosmos. “Wandering” (*yóu*), I propose, is an appropriate 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—a meta-*dào* of how to recognize, select among, and undertake potential paths presented by the interaction between our subjective capacities and motivation and our objective circumstances. *Dé* is in effect the inherent potency, proficiency, or virtuosity by which agents wander resiliently, skillfully, and harmoniously through the *Dào*, such that they find their journey fulfilling. To apply *dé* in responding to circumstances is to exercise agency in a virtuoso manner.

Let me now review briefly how the conception of wandering developed in this section relates to 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 within us, what is “valuable” (*Lǎo Dān*), our “constant heart” (*Wáng Tái*), our “capacity” (*Āi Tái Tuō*), or our “center” (Master *Gāo*).

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 fate (*mìng*)—that is, brute facts about which we can do nothing, such as our birth, age, and sex, past historical events, or natural phenomena such as the weather. One places greater emphasis on the natural order (*Lǎo Dān*), one on the social (Master *Gāo*). A theme of two of the passages (*Lǎo Dān*, *Wáng*) is that the Zhuangist good life involves identification with the “one,” or the totality of things. The other passages do not make quite the same point. But

“Meanderingly Wandering” and the Master Gāo 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 storehouse of resources (Wáng), and to deftly respond to states of affairs so as to carry out complex projects effectively (Master Gāo). 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 Lǎo Dān story associates it with “ultimate happiness,” the Master Gāo one with a feeling of ease or peace in the face of the inevitable, and the Āi Tái Tuō one with maintaining “enjoyment” and constantly “making spring with things.”

To conclude this section, then, let me propose a composite account of wandering that is not found explicitly in any single passage of the *Zhuāngzǐ* but draws on 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 conditional, limited nature 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, creatively, and efficaciously to changing

conditions, such that we can spontaneously find effective paths to follow in our activity. All four in turn support a fifth, a spirit of ease, 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 or zestful activity.

Wandering and Skill

The *Zhuāngzǐ* is renowned for its fascination with the performance of skills as illustrations of how to achieve “fulfillment” or “mastery” of life or to “nurture life” (*yǎng shēng* 養生).³⁶ The Zhuangist interest in skill seems closely related to the normative ideal of wandering. Specifically, I suggest that skilled performances are concrete, paradigmatic 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 Master Gāo: “act on 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.” These tips 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, Master Gāo 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 these points amount to commonsense wisdom concerning the optimal performance of

³⁶ The first of these phrases alludes to the title of *Piān* 19, “*Dá Shēng* 達生,” largely a collection of stories about skills. The second is the explicit theme of the Cook Dīng story, the most widely cited of the skill passages.

skills.

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.³⁷ Both emphasize the need to guide action by the actual conditions encountered, rather than by our biases or preconceptions.³⁸ Both are concerned with how best to steer our way around potential pitfalls or obstacles, sometimes by shifting our direction or approach entirely.³⁹

The most well-known of the skill stories is that of Cook Dīng (3/2–12, W50–51), 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.” Cook Dīng’s discussion calls for especially close examination, because a notion of wandering figures in it explicitly and because it presents important details about how wandering may best proceed. Dīng explains that an ox’s body has a fixed, inherent (*gù rán* 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

³⁷ The stories of the ferryman (19/22–26, W200–201), the woodcarver Qīng (19/54–59, W205–206), and the carpenter Chuí (19/62, W206), for instance, emphasize the links between virtuoso performance of skills and maintaining a calm, focused psychological state free from anxiety and distraction, which allows the agent to respond to external conditions efficaciously.

³⁸ For example, the swimmer who navigates dangerous rapids describes how he follows the *dào* of the water without undertaking any action of his own accord (19/49–54, W204–205). The woodcarver Qīng describes how he frees himself from any source of bias or distraction and matches his own natural propensities with those of the wood (19/54–59, W205–206).

³⁹ The swimmer obviously must avoid the rocks and boulders in the river, for instance, while the ferryman must avoid capsizing.

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.

Yet the structure, with its seams and interstices, is only half the story. The reason his knife can slip through the gaps, according to Dīng, is that the blade’s edge “has no thickness.”⁴⁰ 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” rather than viewing it with his eyes.⁴¹ As he puts it, “perceptual knowing stops, while spirit-desire proceeds.” 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 spontaneously, without prior conscious thought, intention, or deliberation, as if proceeding directly from the “spirit.” (The spirit here is probably a locus of agency that contrasts with the heart, the organ that in early Chinese thought is typically regarded as responsible for cognition and for consciously or deliberately guiding action.) 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”—almost as if the cutting occurred of itself—leaving him feeling pleased and fulfilled. The process by which he 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

⁴⁰ The Chinese phrase is “*wú hòu* 無厚,” which can also be interpreted as “dimensionless.” In some contexts in early Chinese dialectics it appears to refer to a geometrical point.

⁴¹ 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

how he moves beyond routine application of his existing skill to find new routes by which to continue his journey through the ox.⁴²

I suggest that the “blank” state Dīng alludes to probably corresponds to, or at least significantly overlaps with, a psycho-physiological state that other *Zhuāngzǐ* passages with conceptual links to wandering and skill label *xū* 虛, or “empty,” “open,” and “insubstantial.”⁴³ The *xū* or empty state is characterized as one in which the agent “fasts,” 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.” 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, crafts, and performing arts, and the descriptions in the Cook Dīng story converge in many respects with familiar experiences in such fields.

My suggestion, 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

all: “I do not look with my eyes.”

⁴² Robins (2011) presents a thought-provoking discussion of how the crux of *dào*-following lies not merely in the performance of well-honed skills but in extending and transcending such skills in response to novel circumstances.

⁴³ See, for instance, 4/1–34, W54–58, and 7/31–33, W97. For a detailed discussion of *xū*, see Fraser (2008).

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 performing an operation, a chef while preparing a complex dish, and so on.⁴⁴ A well-lived 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?

Why accept wandering as a eudaimonistic ideal? *Zhuāngzǐ* passages suggest several grounds for the normative view of the good life I have been presenting. Although this essay is not the place for a detailed critical examination of these grounds, an account of Zhuangist eudaimonism should try identify the reasons Zhuangist thinkers might offer for their stance. This section attempts to set these forth for consideration.

The most fundamental grounds for the wandering ideal are probably that, for Zhuangist writers, wandering is an appropriate response, and perhaps the only appropriate response, to the facts of the human condition as the *Zhuāngzǐ* construes them. For this tradition of thought, wandering is the attitude that follows naturally from recognizing “the inevitable” and becoming “competent with respect to fate,” as we saw in the discussion of Confucius’s advice to Master Gāo.⁴⁵ 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 our achievements will all prove transient. The “Great *Dào*” of the cosmos

⁴⁴ This Daoist “virtuoso” ideal is explored in detail in Fraser (2011). Conceptually, it is grounded in the general classical Chinese conception of action as skill discussed in Fraser (2009b).

⁴⁵ The latter phrase alludes to the well-known story of the death of *Zhuāngzǐ*’s wife, in which *Zhuāngzǐ* explains that he ceased to grieve her passing because continued wailing and weeping would show he was “incompetent” at or lacked “mastery” of fate (*mìng*) (18/19, W191–192).

provides no fixed, determinate path for us to follow. Our identity and projects are inherently dependent on our place in the totality of things and in the process of change, both of which force shifting, unpredictable constraints on us and prevent us from being able to choose a fixed, constant path. Hence for the *Zhuāngzǐ* we cannot escape a life of wandering through the world. Our only choice is whether we will wander knowingly and adeptly, while enjoying the journey, or ignorantly and incompetently, and thus perhaps finding it difficult or unpleasant.

Wandering is also a constructive response to the Zhuangist critique of value, as presented in such texts as “Discourse on Evening Things Out” (*Piān* 2) and “Autumn Waters” (*Piān* 17). For the *Zhuāngzǐ*, reflection on value reveals it to be plural, heterogeneous, perspectival, and contingent.⁴⁶ Norms for distinguishing what is or is not of value—what is *shì* 是 (this, right) from what is *fēi* 非 (not, wrong)—are perspectival, in that they are relative to some frame of reference, and so also plural, because multiple frames of reference are available. Value is heterogeneous, or of distinct, incommensurable types that sometimes cannot be jointly fulfilled, because applying one norm for discriminating *shì* from *fēi* inevitably means passing over possible alternative norms, and the achievement of one value may entail deficiency in another. Value is contingent and provisional, because it depends partly on changing circumstances. How we distinguish *shì* from *fēi* cannot be fixed once and for all, as we are likely to find ourselves distinguishing them differently as circumstances evolve. For all these reasons, according to “Evening Things Out,” we lack sufficient grounds to justify any claim to know what is “finally” or “ultimately” (*guǒ* 果) of value and thus could justify an unchanging *dào* to 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

⁴⁶ Support for and a detailed exposition of this and the next several claims in this paragraph can be found in Fraser (2009a), 446–451.

to life that acknowledges this critique of value and throws open the possibility of shifting among different, conditionally warranted paths. Arguably, this is a way of more fully appreciating the potential value the world presents to us.⁴⁷ Wandering can thus be regarded as the most appropriate approach to exploring and appreciating the “Great *Dào*,” the all-embracing totality of paths in the world.

A further potential justification is that, as an appropriate response to the inevitable, wandering promotes psycho-physiological well-being. The Cook Dīng story is intended to illustrate how to “nurture life.” The story of Master Gāo 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).⁴⁸ By contrast, wandering purportedly enables us to exercise our distinctive capacity for agency while “nurturing our center,” maintaining the inward ease and harmony characteristic of proper psycho-physiological hygiene. Agents who act from the sort of responsive openness or emptiness characteristic of wandering can purportedly “overcome things without injury” (7/31–33) because they preserve the “wholeness” (*quán* 全) of their *dé*, capacities, or spirit (*shén* 神) (5/42–43, 19/13). Since they are not “bound” to things (6/53), they can adapt flexibly and fluidly to changing circumstances while maintaining their inner psycho-physiological equilibrium.⁴⁹

A complementary point is that wandering is thought to facilitate practical success. Passages such as the Master Gāo story, the dialogue between Confucius and Yán Huí on “fasting the heart” (4/1–34, W54–58), and the Cook Dīng story all imply that the ability to

⁴⁷ Wong (2005) effectively underscores this point.

⁴⁸ The text describes the sage as “not injuring one’s body internally by means of likes and dislikes, constantly going by what is self-so without adding to life.”

⁴⁹ See Fraser (2011: 103–105), which also sketches the early Chinese physiological beliefs underlying these views about psycho-physiological hygiene.

“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 exercise of human *dé* or capacities (*cái*). 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 “Meanderingly Wandering” imply that a life of wandering is likely to be satisfying, enjoyable, and exhilarating.

In summary, the wandering ideal is deeply intertwined with the Zhuangist conception of the cosmos and our place in it, the metaethical stance of writings such as the “Discourse on Evening Things Out,” and the distinctively Zhuangist conception of human agency and well-being expressed in passages such as those collected in “Signs of Full *Dé*.” For the strand of Zhuangist thought committed to wandering as a normative ideal, it is the conception of flourishing activity that emerges from reflection on a world of constant, uncontrollable flux without absolute or universally applicable values and a conviction that our creative ability to calmly and efficaciously adapt to circumstances is the finest, most distinctive feature of human agency.

The Content of the Zhuangist Good Life

The conception of wandering as I have articulated it so far is noticeably thin on substantive content. It is primarily formal, concerning *how* we conduct ourselves more than *what* we do. Rather than a first-order *dào* offering concrete action guidance or a path toward some end, it is a second-order *dào* of how to approach the various first-order *dào* available to us—a *dào* of how to proceed along *dào*. Different agents could achieve lives of free, fulfilling wandering in a variety of contexts, in which they might justifiably follow different

paths and pursue a range of different ends.⁵⁰ 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, for unlike wandering, skills have specified ends.⁵¹ In this concluding section, I will argue that this disanalogy is not a problem. The gist of the argument is that the various paths or *dào* presented to us provide the substantive content of wandering. For we do not 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 (3/2); one justification of wandering is that it “nurtures life,” to borrow the words of Lord Wén Huì in the Cook Dīng story. Another is the welfare of our parents or family (3/2, 4/40–41). A third is political duties (4/40–41). On the whole, however, Zhuangist writings tend to keep their account of the good life substantively thin, taking for granted only what is likely to be shared by any thicker conception—such as life and health—while also stressing that even these goods are only typical of the good life, not necessary for it.⁵² A salient example of this point comes from one of the anthology’s several death stories. Master Yú, 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

⁵⁰ One might argue that, traditionally, Daoist practitioners have often pursued Zhuangist ideals by following a path with a specific content, namely retiring from public affairs to the countryside and living a simple, natural, private life of few desires or ambitions. Hence perhaps the wandering ideal alludes specifically to this lifestyle—to an idle life of literally rambling about the country. To be sure, a Zhuangist practitioner is unlikely to be motivated by worldly ambitions and may gravitate to a simple, private life when doing so seems a fitting response to her circumstances. However, the passages we have discussed imply that the wandering ideal is primarily metaphorical, not literal, and can be pursued even in “inevitable” circumstances that force one to live a busy official life, as Master Gāo must. Although a simple, rural life might be one expression of a Zhuangist ideal, the wandering mindset and mode of activity can in principle be achieved through a variety of life paths. (I thank an anonymous referee for suggesting I address this issue.)

⁵¹ Wenzel (2003: 119) stresses this point as a shortcoming of normative appeals to the Zhuangist skill stories.

⁵² The “Discourse on Evening Things Out,” for instance, suggests that life or death, benefit or loss, make no difference to the “ultimate person” (2/73).

whatever fate befalls him (6/45ff., W84–85). As this story suggests, the heart of the Zhuangist ideal seems to lie specifically in the resilient, intelligent, flexible, and creative exercise of agency in response to changing circumstances, rather than in any specific substantive content.

The substantive thinness of this ideal is an advantage, not a shortcoming, I suggest. It allows the Zhuangist to avoid the difficulties associated with attempting to conclusively justify any particular 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 a 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 all-encompassing *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 agents in certain limited contexts.⁵³ So these writers would regard it as misguided to propose a general or universal account.

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 are to “ride along with the norms of heaven and earth” and the fluctuations of the various forces that impinge on us. The *Dào* thus provides substantive content in particular contexts.⁵⁴ We always already find ourselves somewhere along the

⁵³ For reasons I discuss in detail elsewhere (Fraser 2009a), the Zhuangist stance is that there could be no universally justified account of the concrete content of the good life.

⁵⁴ As explained in the notes to the Introduction, this constitutive relation between wandering and *Dào* means that Zhuangist thought probably cannot accurately be characterized as a variety of virtue ethics. For the *Zhuāngzǐ*, *dé* is not normatively basic, but is understood through its relation to *Dào*, a source of normativity conceptually prior to it. The various normative criteria mentioned in the remainder of this paragraph reflect the Zhuangist understanding of how best to proceed along *dào* and are not derived from the notion of *dé*. *Dé* refers to the affective and cognitive dispositions and capacities that enable the agent to follow *dào* well. For a similar

Way, in circumstances in which some courses of action will be more justified by Zhuangist criteria for harmonious, efficacious *dào*-following than others.⁵⁵ 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), “responsive” or “adaptive” (*yīn* 因), and produces “harmony” (*hé* 和) (2/36–40, 2/91). Outside of “Evening Things Out,” further prominent normative criteria include guiding action by the “natural patterns” (*tiān lǐ* 天理) and inherent structure of things (3/6–7), flowing along with (*shùn* 順) what is self-so in things (7/11; cf. 3/18, 6/52, 12/40–41, 14/16), and undertaking action that “fits” or is “suitable” in particular circumstances (*shì* 適, 18/39, W195).⁵⁶ In particular, in dealing with others, the “fitting” or “suitable” path is one by which we treat them as appropriate for

interpretation of *dé*, see Hansen (1996: 174–175). I thus agree with Ivanhoe’s normative view of the *Dào* as presenting “seams” to follow in the “pattern of nature,” by which adept agents can “accord with rather than collide with the things and events they encounter” (1993: 644). Where I differ from Ivanhoe is in seeing this normative stance as compatible with a form of ethical skepticism about knowledge of “ultimately” correct paths and with normative pluralism, in that there may be a range of fitting paths the adept might follow rather than a single right Way.

⁵⁵ This observation hints at a Zhuangist solution to what we might call the “Daoist Nazi” problem: Does a Zhuangist have a ready explanation of what is wrong with the conduct of an SS officer who is as skilled and efficient at implementing genocide as Cook Dīng is at butchering oxen? Or are Zhuangists committed to the view that, as long as it is performed smoothly and adeptly, any *dào* is as appropriate as any other? A promising response is that the *dào* of the “expert” genocidal murderer is deeply deficient in that it is blind and unresponsive to the value of his victims’ lives. The Nazi mass murderer is not finding “gaps” or open paths through which to wander alongside others harmoniously, but heedlessly and obstinately destroying agents who possess *dé* akin to his own and may follow paths with an ontological and normative status equal or superior to his own. He responds to his circumstances destructively, not adaptively or harmoniously, and so fails to wander the Way proficiently. In this regard, we can agree with Hansen (1992: 290) that “the perspective of nature makes no evaluative judgment at all,” while also suggesting, as Hansen does not, that any agent seeking to practice Zhuangist ideals does have good reason to reject a Nazi *dào*. Compare Huang (2010b, 1058), who characterizes the Zhuangist normative stance as an “ethics of difference” that “respects diverse ways of life as having equal worth.” Huang points out that this commitment to the value of a variety of ways of life entails that the Zhuangist “cannot respect any ways of life that do not regard other ways of life as having equal worth” (1058).

⁵⁶ Fox (1996) offers an insightful exploration of this latter Zhuangist normative criterion, which he calls “finding the fit,” or undertaking the course of action that yields the most efficient and effortless results, minimizing conflict and leaving those involved most at ease. A potential worry is whether the substantively thin account of wandering proposed here might allow activities that seem antithetical to Zhuangist values to nevertheless qualify as “wandering.” (I think an anonymous referee for raising this point.) For instance, could a life devoted to performing Confucian rituals turn out to fulfill the wandering ideal? Were such a life justified by the sorts of normative criteria sketched in this section, I suggest it could. However, in many circumstances this justificatory hurdle would be high indeed. A more promising approach for someone pushed into such a life is illustrated by the story of Mèngsūn Cǎi (6/75–82). Pressured to mount an elaborate Confucian funeral for his mother, he held a partly but not wholly simplified ceremony, thus satisfying others’ emotional needs while living up to his Zhuangist ideals.

them, by their values or norms, while still proceeding in a way that can be justified by our own.⁵⁷ “Evening Things Out” calls this sort of adaptive, harmonious interaction “walking two ways” (2/40), or finding a path that allows our *dào* to coincide with others’.

Clearly, a thorough account of Zhuangist ethics will require a detailed explanation of these normative criteria of action as well as their relation to the eudaimonistic ideal of wandering. Such an account would take us beyond the scope of the present paper. For my purposes here, however, we can at least highlight one central aspect of this relation. Signs that we have failed to meet these criteria are at the same time signs that we have ceased to wander effectively: we are likely to experience persistent or repeated frustration, failure, resistance, or conflict in our path. Any of these is a cue for us to apply practical understanding (*míng*) to adjust or alter our course so as to realign ourselves with the “natural patterns” (*tiān lǐ*) and resume wandering along more freely, easily, and efficaciously.⁵⁸

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⁵⁷ Huang (2010a) perceptively emphasizes this Zhuangist normative idea, which he dubs an “ethics of difference”: we are to treat particular others as best fits their nature, which may be different from our own and from that of still other people and creatures with whom we interact. Huang’s is the most elaborate attempt at articulating a Zhuangist normative ethics I have seen. I note, however, that the Zhuangist texts he cites in his interpretation do not explicitly emphasize the normative theme of respecting differences. Rather, their core idea seems to be that appropriate action lies in responsiveness to the details of particular situations (which will of course often be different from each other). The thematic focus is not difference *per se*. It is that adaptive, intelligent responsiveness is needed to fluently and efficaciously find a fitting path through particular circumstances.

⁵⁸ This paper is a revised and expanded version of a talk presented at an international conference entitled “Happiness East and West,” University of Hong Kong, December 10–11, 2009. I am grateful to the conference participants for much stimulating discussion, which resulted in several improvements to the paper. I also thank

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