The Limitations of Ritual Propriety: Ritual and Language in *Xúnzǐ* and *Zhuāngzǐ*

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Abstract This essay examines the theory of ritual propriety presented in the *Xúnzǐ* and criticisms of Xunzi-like views found in the classical Daoist anthology *Zhuāngzǐ*. To highlight the respects in which the *Zhuāngzǐ* can be read as posing a critical response to a Xunzian view of ritual propriety, the essay juxtaposes the two texts' views of language, since Xunzi's theory of ritual propriety is intertwined with his theory of language. I argue that a Zhuangist critique of the presuppositions of Xunzi's stance on language also undermines his stance on ritual propriety. Xunzi contends that state promulgation of an elaborate code of ritual propriety is a key to good social order (*zhi*) and that state regulation of language is a key to smooth communication and thus also good order. The *Zhuāngzǐ* provides grounds for doubting both contentions. Claiming that ritual propriety causally produces social order is analogous to claiming that grammar causally produces smooth linguistic communication, when in fact it is more likely our ability to communicate that allows us to develop shared rules of grammar. Humans have fundamental social and communicative capacities that undergird our abilities to speak a language or engage in shared ritual performances. It is these more fundamental capacities, not their manifestation in a particular system of grammar or ritual norms, that provide the root explanation of our ability to communicate or to live together harmoniously. The Xunzi-Zhuangzi dialectic suggests that ritual is indispensable, but normatively justified rituals will be less rigid, less comprehensive, less fastidious, and more spontaneous than a Xunzian theorist would allow.

Keywords *Xúnzǐ* · *Zhuāngzǐ* · Ritual · Rectification of names · Confucianism · Daoism

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Introduction

Ritual is part of the fabric of daily life. One of the most intriguing features of the Confucian tradition is how it highlights the pervasive role of *lǐ* 禮, or ritual propriety, in constituting social order, guiding social interaction, developing character, and forming our individual identities. As a provocative recent interdisciplinary study of ritual contends,[1] early Confucianism offers deep insights into the nature and functions of ritual—insights that provide a corrective to a tendency in twentieth-century ritual theory to locate the significance of ritual primarily in the attitudes that it expresses or enacts, rather than also directly in the features and consequences of ritual itself, which are arguably just as or more important.[2] I will contend, however, that we understand the role of ritual more thoroughly if we attend not merely to Confucian theory and practice of ritual, but to the dialectic between Confucian and other texts, particularly those that criticize Confucian views. Descriptively, broadening our focus this way promises to yield a fuller understanding of ritual and its functions. Normatively, exploring the considerations offered for and against various positions on ritual may help us to evaluate what role ritual should play in our lives.

Confucian discussions of ritual were part of a wider early Chinese discourse concerning the form and direction of our social *dào* 道—our way, path, or practices. Confucians proposed that a central component of the right *dào* would be a system of formalized, repeated patterns of conduct that to them embodied the values and norms of a revered golden age of social order, harmony, and prosperity. The proper *dào* lay in emulating the tradition of ritual propriety by which ancient sage-kings—primarily the founders of the Zhōu 周 dynasty—purportedly led their civilization to its glorious achievements. Rival thinkers disputed this normative claim. In a few places, their criticisms may amount to wholesale rejections of ritual.[3] Generally, however, they are not rejections of ritual *per se*,[4] but criticisms of a particular tradition of ritual propriety or a normative conception of *dào* that assigns ritual propriety a central or fundamental role.

As a contribution to understanding this wider discourse on ritual, in this essay I examine the dialectical relations between the theory of ritual propriety presented in the *Xúnzǐ* 荀子 and criticisms of Xúnzǐ-like views found in the classical Daoist

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[1] Seligman et al. (2008), especially 4, 17, 180.

[2] Major exponents of the view that ritual functions primarily to express collective sentiments and promote social solidarity include Durkheim (1912) and Radcliffe-Brown (1965). More recent work has questioned the idea that the significance of ritual lies in supposed contents—such as sentiments or beliefs—that it refers to or expresses. This alternative line of analysis—which Confucian theorists would largely endorse—holds that the significance of ritual lies directly in ritual performances and their consequences. Representative discussions include Bell (1992), Bell (1997), Rappaport (1999), and Seligman et al. (2008).

[3] An example may be Book 38 of the *Dàodéjīng*, which calls ritual propriety 'the wearing thin of loyalty and trust and the beginning of disorder.'

[4] Seligman et al. (2008, 119) unfortunately misconstrue Mohist criticisms of Confucianism this way. While the Mohists rejected what they considered the excessive, wasteful Confucian tradition of ritual propriety, they by no means dismissed the importance of rituals. On the contrary, regular ritual sacrifices to ancestors, spirits, and Heaven are a vital part of the Mohist *dào*.

anthology *Zhuāngzǐ* 莊子.[5] I will explore both descriptive and normative implications of Xunzian and Zhuangist views—how they bear on the questions of what ritual is and how it functions as well as on what role it should play in our social *dào*. The *Xúnzǐ* provides fruitful material for such an examination because it presents the most elaborate, systematic theory of ritual propriety in the early Confucian tradition. The *Zhuāngzǐ* yields an intriguing contrast with Xúnzǐ, because it questions the epistemic and conceptual basis for a Xunzian normative stance on ritual propriety. Moreover, as I will show, one crucial passage rejects a Xúnzǐ-like conception of ritual propriety while nevertheless affirming the worth of ritual.

Following what has become the consensus interpretation of the Confucian conception of *lǐ*,[6] I will construe ritual propriety broadly, as including rites and ceremonies but also etiquette, manners, and even details of personal comportment. This broad understanding of ritual propriety dovetails with recent work in ritual studies, which tends to expand the rubric of ritual beyond merely religious rites and civil ceremonies.[7]

To help highlight the respects in which the *Zhuāngzǐ* can be read as posing a critical response to a Xunzian view of ritual propriety, I will also juxtapose the two texts' view of language. This may seem an incongruous angle from which to approach the topic of ritual, but as I will explain, Xúnzǐ's theory of ritual propriety is conceptually intertwined with his theory of language. In important respects, his views on the right use of names parallel his views on ritual propriety.[8] Moreover, in approaching ritual propriety via this route, I am developing two intriguing lines of thought raised in the literature that suggest language and ritual can be instructively compared. The first is Chad Hansen's suggestion that language is a paradigm of a conventional, normative system such as ritual propriety—both are conventionally delineated, rule-guided skills, learned largely by modeling, whose mastery is manifested in abilities that partly constitute human social nature and our form of life (1992, 74). The second is Chenyang Li's proposal that the role of ritual propriety in the Confucian *Analects* can be understood metaphorically as a system of 'cultural grammar,' analogous to linguistic grammar, the syntactical rules governing how words are combined to form acceptable sentences and

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[5] No precise chronology is available for the writings collected in these two late Warring States anthologies. (The oldest parts of the *Zhuāngzǐ* may predate the oldest parts of the *Xúnzǐ,* but many parts of the two probably overlap chronologically.) Moreover, the *Zhuāngzǐ* writers rarely name the adherents of the views they criticize. So I do not claim that the *Zhuāngzǐ* is responding specifically to Xúnzǐ's views, but only that it is responding to positions that conceptually are relevantly similar to Xúnzǐ's.

[6] See, for instance, Fingarette (1972), Graham (1989), Hansen (1992), Ivanhoe (2000), and Li (2007).

[7] For Bell (1992), for instance, ritual activity is related to, rather than wholly different in kind, from non-ritual activity. Rather than attempting to identify a discrete category of ritual acts, she focuses on the process of ritualization, to which a wide range of activities may be subjected. Ritualization is a way of acting devised to set off and privilege some kinds of activities from others (1992, 74). Rappaport defines ritual very generally as 'performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers' (1999, 24), a characterization obviously formulated to be broadly inclusive. See too Seligman et al. (2008).

[8] As Hansen observes, 'Xúnzǐ's theory of names mirrors his position on ritual' (1992, 319).

phrases (2007, 317).[9] Just as grammar is embedded in the conventionally appropriate linguistic behavior of competent speakers of a language, ritual propriety is embedded in the conventionally appropriate behavior of competent members of a society (318). Li identifies several parallels between grammar and ritual propriety (318–320). Like grammar, ritual propriety is public or shared, rooted in tradition, and largely but not entirely constant over time, since both typically undergo steady but incremental change. An explicit account of either is descriptive, in that both characterize the typical behavior of members of a community. But both also have a normative role: they set standards of proper conduct and can be used to learn such conduct.

As Li cautions (317), we should not take the metaphor of ritual propriety as grammar too far. Of course, the two have important dissimilarities; ritual propriety is not a system of norms for combining expressions with semantic content (although it may be symbolically significant in other ways). But the metaphor underscores the observation that just as grammar provides a system of conventional, structural norms for linguistic interaction, ritual propriety provides a system of conventional, structural norms for social interaction more broadly. Both language and ritual are conventional, rule-guided patterns of social activity, and conclusions about one may be instructive about the nature of the other.

I will argue that, because of the parallels between Xúnzǐ's theory of ritual propriety and his views on language, a Zhuangist critique of the presuppositions of Xúnzǐ's stance on language undermines his stance on ritual propriety as well. Xúnzǐ contends that state promulgation of an extensive, elaborate code of ritual propriety is a key to good social order (zhì 治) and that state regulation of language is a key to smooth communication and thus also good order. The *Zhuāngzǐ* provides grounds for doubting both contentions. If we take the metaphor of ritual as cultural grammar seriously, then even if we acknowledge that ritual may contribute to good order in particular contexts, it is unlikely that it plays the fundamental role in securing order that Xúnzǐ claims. The analogy to language helps us to see that a conventional code of rules for social interaction may be a product of an inchoate social order but does not itself originate order. Claiming that ritual propriety causally produces social order is analogous to claiming that grammar causally produces smooth linguistic communication, when in fact it is more likely our ability to communicate that allows us to develop shared rules of grammar. Humans have fundamental social and communicative capacities that undergird our abilities to speak a language or engage in shared ritual performances. It is these more fundamental capacities, not their manifestation in a particular system of grammar or ritual norms, which provide the root explanation of our ability to communicate or to live together harmoniously.

The Zhuangist critique leads not to a rejection of ritual—one can hardly 'reject' a part of daily life that is constantly reinvented spontaneously even by children—but to a reconstrual of ritual's foundations and functions, with normative implications.

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[9] The second part of Li's proposal is that *rén* 仁 (ethical goodness) can be understood as mastery of a culture, analogous to mastery of a language. Though interesting, this half of the analogy seems to me less successful, as *rén* probably includes attitudes that go beyond 'cultural mastery,' to the extent that notion can be made precise. Li's interpretation dovetails at least partly with Hansen's proposal that *rén* be understood as an intuitive moral competence or virtuosity in performing social roles, which are structured by the norms of conduct embodied in ritual propriety (1992, 62). For other insightful discussions of the relationship between *rén* and ritual propriety, see Shun (1993) and Wong (2008).

Ritual propriety can be regarded as an instance of what one *Zhuāngzǐ* passage helpfully calls '*dào shù*' 道術—arts or practices of *dào*. What ultimately explains the functions Xúnzǐ ascribes to the code of ritual propriety is not that code itself, but our underlying ability to engage in 'arts of *dào*'—to catch on to and engage in shared practices. The *Xúnzǐ-Zhuāngzǐ* dialectic suggests that ritual is indispensable, but normatively justified rituals will be less rigid, less comprehensive, less fastidious, and more spontaneous than a Xunzian theorist would allow.

Xúnzǐ on Ritual

Rituals, or more precisely, ritualized activities and associated duties, stand at the heart of Xúnzǐ's ethical and political vision, as for him they are the key to bringing order, harmony, and beauty to human events and conduct. In Xúnzǐ's view, people and society must inevitably follow some *dào*—some way, norm, or pattern—in their activity. Natural conditions alone—whether Heaven or nature in the abstract (*tiān* 天), the non-human natural world (*tiān dì* 天地), or people's spontaneous, untutored nature (*xìng* 性)—do not directly provide us with a *dào*.[10] As Xúnzǐ says, '*Dào* is not the *dào* of Heaven, nor is it the *dào* of the earth; it is that by which humans *dào* [guide action].'[11] People must create a human *dào,* which we follow not as a matter of the spontaneous functioning of our nature (*xìng*), but through 'work' (*shì* 事) and 'artifice' (*wèi* 偽),[12] or action that goes beyond our innate, untutored dispositions. Although the *dào* is not given by nature, however, it is not independent of nature, either. We fare better or worse depending on how well our *dào* 'aligns' (*cān* 參) with natural conditions. Humans can achieve an orderly, flourishing society only if our *dào* aligns with nature, and the sage-kings or sovereigns—the cultural heroes—who introduced such a *dào* are themselves regarded as standing in alignment with heaven and earth.[13]

Xúnzǐ holds that of the various *dào* we might follow, the course of history has established one particular path as the highest standard of *rén* 仁, or ethical goodness.[14] This is the *dào* of the 'former kings' (8/28/153)—the ancient sage-kings, specifically the founders of the Zhōu 周 dynasty. The core of this *dào* is an elaborate code of 'rituals and duties' (*lǐ yì* 禮義) governing nearly all aspects of personal and political life. Xúnzǐ calls this code 'the ultimate human *dào*' (19/92/15–16).

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[10] Xúnzǐ uses several different words to refer to different aspects of nature. *Tiān* 天 typically refers to Heaven or nature in the abstract, as the sum of all natural conditions and patterns. *Tiān dì* 天地 ('heaven and earth') refers to the non-human natural world. *Xìng* 性 refers to spontaneous, innate, and thus natural dispositions. Thus, it is sometimes interpreted as 'nature,' as in the phrase 'people's nature.' Xúnzǐ's stance here contrasts with that of some Daoist texts, which imply that Nature itself provides a *dào* for us to follow. It also contrasts with the Mohist view of Heaven or nature (*tiān*) as a quasi-personal deity that follows a *dào* of benefiting everyone, which in turn serves as a model for human *dào*.

[11] *Xúnzǐ* 8/28/15–16. Citations to the *Xúnzǐ* give the ICS concordance numbering (Lau 1996). All translations are my own.

[12] See, for example, *Xúnzǐ* 19/95/3, which states that the world comes to order as a result of the merging of *xìng* and *wèi*. See too 23/113/17–19, which explains that, like everything people become capable of through study or develop through work, ritual propriety, and duty are *wèi* (artifice). They contrast with *xìng,* which is bestowed by Nature and requires no learning or work.

[13] See 9/39/3 and 17/80/2–3.

[14] Or, on an alternative reading of the line, this *dào* is the highest standard of humanity (*rén* 人).

These traditional rituals and duties are comprehensive in scope. They encompass formal ceremonies marking major life events, political occasions, and sacred affairs—examples include weddings and funerals, a ruler's ascension to the throne, and ancestral sacrifices or sacrifices to spirits. But they also include routine, everyday norms of etiquette or propriety governing personal comportment and interactions with others, and they stipulate a network of social roles and associated duties and privileges. I will use 'ritual propriety' as an umbrella term to refer to this overall complex of traditional ceremonies, protocol, etiquette, social roles, and ethical norms. To understand Xúnzǐ's ethical and political thought, we should bear in mind that his conception of ritual propriety fuses what in principle we might distinguish as several distinct categories of norm-governed activity: state ceremonies, sacred or religious rituals, rites of passage, and everyday norms of etiquette and personal comportment. Moreover, in early Chinese thought, *yì* 義, the word I have been interpreting as referring to the duties associated with norms of ritual propriety, also has the connotation of 'right' or 'moral.' Xúnzǐ sometimes refers to *yì* independently of ritual propriety (*lǐ*) and sometimes pairs it with *rén* (moral goodness) instead of ritual propriety. But passages that expound his ethical theory typically integrate *yì* with *lǐ* and refer to the pair as a compound, *lǐ-yì*, or 'rituals-and-duties.' The implication is that for Xúnzǐ the normative sphere corresponding loosely to what we would call morality merges with those of personal excellence, etiquette, sacred rites, social protocol, and civic ceremony, all falling under a broad conception of norm-governed, formally regulated performances that together constitute the ideal human *dào*. For Xúnzǐ, human *dào* just is, in effect, a system of ritual propriety.

Xúnzǐ identifies several purposes this system fulfills, all of which extend from the central end of achieving good order in human conduct and affairs. For Xúnzǐ, 'ritual propriety and duties are the origin of order' (9/39/2). 'Order'—*zhì* 治, a word that also connotes control, management, and governance—is the paramount value in his ethics and politics. Aside from obvious elements such as the absence of disturbance or violence, his conception of order comprises ethical, aesthetic, and political components. Order requires that individuals cultivate and conduct themselves according to ethical and civil norms, which Xúnzǐ sometimes characterizes as 'beautiful' (*měi* 美),[15] and that society maintain a smoothly functioning hierarchical political structure, led by a hereditary sovereign and administered by appointed officials. Order contrasts with chaos or disorder (*luàn* 亂), which Xúnzǐ associates with conduct arising directly from people's innate, untutored nature. Nature in itself has no inherent tendency toward order, while uncultivated human nature tends toward disorder. So to achieve order, a scheme of ethical-cultural patterns must be imposed onto natural conditions. Ritual propriety is just such a system; it provides a coherent, comprehensive network of roles and norms that, if

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[15] See, for example, 19/95/1–3, which implies that the combination of nature and artifice produces both social order and beauty in individual character, or 19/94/8, which speaks of the beauty of carrying out one's duties. See too 1/3/17 and 1/4/16, which posit beauty as an end of study and cultivation.

generally followed throughout a community, purportedly bring about personal and social order.[16]

By instituting good order, ritual propriety simultaneously fulfills a second fundamental purpose: providing for people's desires and needs. 'Provision' is a key consequence in Xúnzǐ's account of the origins of ritual propriety.

> From what did ritual propriety arise? I say: People are born with desires. Desiring something but not obtaining it, they cannot fail to seek it. Seeking things without measures or limits, they cannot fail to come into conflict. Conflict leads to disorder and disorder to poverty. The former kings hated such disorder, so they instituted ritual propriety and duties to divide them, so as to provide for people's desires and give them what they seek. They ensured that desires would not exhaust goods and goods would not be inadequate for desires. The two support each other and develop together. This is how ritual propriety arose. So ritual propriety is a means of provision.[17] (19/90/3–5)

By distinguishing various hierarchical social roles, corresponding responsibilities, and associated rewards and privileges, the system of ritual propriety and duties imposes 'measures and limits' on people's attempts to satisfy their desires and distribute goods in a coherent, organized way. Those of high rank receive more and finer goods, those of low rank less and coarser, but all receive enough to survive without conflict. Hence, if members of a society generally observe the norms of ritual propriety, everyone's needs will be provided for to a greater extent than otherwise. Moreover, because it provides a coherent system of roles to perform and norms to follow, ritual propriety is a means of achieving social coordination, cooperation, and unity. It establishes 'the ranks of noble or common, the grades of elder and youth,' and 'the divisions between wise and ignorant, competent and incompetent.' This hierarchical system ensures that people are proficient in their tasks and each obtains appropriate rewards, since the different ranks and responsibilities are the basis for differ-

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[16] A Xunzian theorist of ritual would thus agree with Rappaport's suggestion that ritual form itself adds something to the substance of ritual beyond whatever content the symbolically encoded form itself expresses (1999, 31). (For related views, see Bell 1997 and Seligman et al. 2008.) For Xúnzǐ, the regular performance of ritualized activities according to the norms of ritual propriety partly constitutes social order and thus brings into existence a particular ideal of a flourishing society. The role of ritual propriety as a basis for social order means that the significance of any one ritual act extends beyond its specific content, lying partly in its relation to the overall system of ritual propriety and duties. Through the ritualized form of their activities, ritual performers may understand themselves to be contributing to the continuity of the human dào, creating and sustaining the cultural patterns that make us human. Moreover, as we will see below from Xúnzǐ's explanation of funeral rites, because of its role in the overall system, a single concrete ritual performance may have multidimensional significance. For instance, the act of offering sacrificial wine to the deceased may simultaneously express grief, display respect, acknowledge the deceased's social status, situate death within the overall process of human life, affirm the unity of the deceased's life, and reinforce the integrity of the cultural order.

[17] See too 9/36/3, which in similar language states that 'regulating ritual propriety and duty in order to divide them [people], making there be the ranks of poor and wealthy, noble and common' is 'the basis for providing for all the world.'

ences in emolument (4/17/1–2). Establishing such a hierarchy of roles, tasks, and remuneration, Xúnzǐ declares, is 'the *dào* of dwelling in a community and harmonizing as one' (*ibid.*).[18]

Several passages in Xúnzǐ tie ritual propriety to the aim of rectifying things or setting them right (*zhèng* 正). Politically, ritual propriety provides clear, reliable standards for 'rectifying the state' (*zhèng guó* 正國), analogous to how the scale, line, compass, and setsquare provide clear, reliable standards for evaluating whether things are heavy, straight, round, or square.[19] If it is promulgated effectively, no one can mislead others as to what is right (*zhèng*).[20] It provides 'a *dào* for the practice of power;' kings and dukes who follow it can win the empire, while those who fail to follow it will see their city altars fall (15/72/9–10). Personally, ritual propriety is the means for 'rectifying oneself' (*zhèng shēn* 正身) (2/8/1) and thus the major focus of learning for the gentleman (1/3/10).[21] Indeed, ritual propriety provides norms by which to guide all thought and action: one passage mentions guiding oneself by ritual propriety in 'all employment of the blood and breath, intention, and thought,' 'diet, clothing, dwelling, and activity,' and 'countenance, bearing, movements, and stride' (2/5/12–14). As part of its role in managing our disorderly nature, ritual propriety also provides orderly, elegant cultural forms (*wén* 文) by which emotions such as love and respect can be expressed. Emotions and other attitudes provide the substance of ritual propriety; beautiful ritual forms are their outward manifestation.[22] Ritual propriety regulates how happiness or sorrow are expressed in one's countenance, voice, diet, dress, and dwelling (19/94/14–19). Without sacrificial rituals for the deceased, survivors would be frustrated by their

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[18] See also 10/42/12–21. Xúnzǐ's claims here may overlap Durkheim's (1912) view that the performance of rituals reaffirms and builds commitment to the social structure or Collins's (1988) suggestion that rituals create psychological solidarity crucial to the functioning of society. A Xunzian theorist might agree that social solidarity is one of several functions or consequences of the general observance of ritual propriety. But Xúnzǐ's focus is primarily on conduct and action guidance, not attitudes: if the norms of ritual propriety are generally observed, all members of society will behave in a coordinated way, according to shared norms.

[19] 11/51/19–20. On the analogy to artisans' tools, see too 19/92/12–19.

[20] Xúnzǐ is here employing the same analogies—artisans' measurement tools—that the Mohists had previously used to explain how 'the benefit of all' provides a distinct, reliable model (*fǎ* 法) for what is morally right (*yì* 義) or the correct *dào*. Xúnzǐ contends that it is actually ritual propriety that provides such a model.

[21] Xúnzǐ underscores the social, traditional, and performative nature of ritual propriety by explaining that teachers are in turn the means of rectifying ritual propriety (2/8/1). One cannot attain competence in the rituals on one's own. They must be practiced in interaction with others under the critical eye of a master.

[22] See, for instance, 19/94/8–12 and 19/98/1–2. Xúnzǐ's explanation of how ritual propriety provides an orderly means for expression of potentially disruptive emotions resonates with Van Gennep's (1960) work on rites of passage, which proposes that such rites channel emotions into an organized cultural framework, thus subjecting them to social control. It overlaps Radcliffe-Brown's (1965, 160) interpretation of rites as regulated symbolic expressions of sentiments, with the difference that Xúnzǐ does not see the expression of emotion as the crux of the significance of ritual propriety. The significance lies rather in how ritual propriety produces order; one of the ways it does so is by providing a disciplined means of expressing potentially disruptive emotions. Moreover, Xúnzǐ would reject Radcliffe-Brown's suggestion (*ibid.*) that sentiments determine individuals' conduct and thus are the key to maintaining social order. For Xúnzǐ, the key factor producing social order is habitual performance according to ritual propriety, regardless of the performers' sentiments. Ideally, performers will come to love ritual propriety. But order can still be maintained when performers are subject to disruptive or contrary sentiments, provided they continue to approve of and thus remain committed to ritual propriety.

inability to express their loss (19/97/21–22). Without proper ritual music to express their joy, people would inevitably fall into disorder (20/98/14–19). Summing up the roles of ritual propriety, Xúnzǐ says, 'Without ritual propriety people cannot live, without ritual propriety tasks cannot be completed, without ritual propriety the state is not at peace' (2/15/5).

Ritual propriety fulfills these purposes, according to Xúnzǐ, by establishing a system of what he calls 'distinctions' (辨 biàn) or 'divisions' (fēn 分). He holds that the characteristic feature of human life, which sets us apart from non-human animals, is not cognition, which we share with animals, but our capacity for social organization based on what he calls a 'morality of divisions' (fēn yì 分義) (9/39/9–13). It may sound paradoxical to claim that people can organize themselves effectively into unified communities precisely because of a scheme of divisions between them. But Xúnzǐ's point is that social distinctions are the basis for the delegation of responsibilities, division of labor, and allocation of rewards. He claims that among the various systems of distinctions humanity might devise, 'divisions' are the greatest; among 'divisions,' ritual propriety is the greatest, and among potential systems of ritual propriety, that of the sage-kings is the greatest (5/18/17–18). As he uses it, the word rendered here as 'divisions,' fēn 分, may refer to different roles, parts, statuses, responsibilities, privileges, and rewards. So when he asserts, as we saw above, that the sage-kings instituted ritual propriety 'to divide them,' he is claiming that ritual propriety assigns people various roles, statuses, duties, and so on. These include the political and familial roles of ruler and subject, father and son, elder and younger brother, husband and wife; economic roles such as teacher, student, farmer, official, artisan, and merchant; and statuses such as noble or lowly, elder or younger, worthy or foolish, competent or incompetent, poor or wealthy. Affairs such as mourning, sacrifices, court proceedings, military affairs, rewards and punishments, and distribution of goods are all to be based on such roles and duties.[23]

Although Xúnzǐ gives only a few examples of the concrete content of ritual propriety, these are sufficient to show that it sets out detailed, specific guidelines for the conduct and treatment of those in various roles on various occasions. We have already seen how it supposed to regulate one's diet, clothing, dwelling, activity, countenance, bearing, movements, stride, intentions, and even thoughts. Another passage indicates that it also covers such things as the specific furnishings in the emperor's carriage—the type of cushions, wood, carvings, bells, pennants, and insignia, for instance (19/90/11–14). It specifies detailed procedures for sacrificial feasts, weddings, funerals, and other events, including such particulars as the types of offerings, the placement of vessels, the order in which offerings are served, the style of music, and even the specific number and type of musical instruments (19/91/7–19/92/1). Ritual propriety prescribes the sorts of ornamentation and music used to acknowledge peace and good fortune, as well as the garments and weeping that acknowledge bad fortune (19/94/9–10). It stipulates precise funerary details such as the size of the tomb, the number and type of coffins, the dressing of the corpse, and the type of grave goods, and it specifies the minutiae of mourning rituals, such as

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[23] See, for instance, 4/17/1–2, 9/39/5–7, and 19/90/10.

that the survivors must move out of their home into a small hut, wear sackcloth mourning robes, walk with a cane, eat only thin gruel, and sleep on a mat of twigs, with an earthen pillow (19/93/11–19/94/6). Xúnzǐ's examples indicate that the content of ritual propriety is utterly comprehensive yet highly concrete. Rituals cover all aspects of life, including both daily routine and weighty events, and they regulate minute details such as facial expressions, tone of voice, comportment, clothing, and diet.

This level of detail illustrates the distinctive character of Confucian ethics and the psychological processes by which ritual propriety guides action. Xúnzǐ's ethics is formulated not through abstract general principles such as 'Promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number,' nor general rules such as 'Don't lie' or 'Thou shalt not kill,' but through guidelines conceptualized as concrete, repeated procedures of ritual etiquette, such as 'Remove your hat and bow deeply before ascending the stairs to the hall.' This relatively concrete orientation reflects a conception of moral agency as lying in a commitment to and competent performance of repeated, skill-like patterns of activity, rather than in more abstract processes of reasoning or feeling. The actions of an ethically ideal agent spring not from a capacity for practical reasoning (as in Kant), nor from sentiment (as in Hume and Mill), but from a complex of concrete, repeated habits and skills, whose execution is managed by the heart (xīn 心).[24] Action is conceived of as performance of a *dào,* akin to performing a symphony, dance, or drama. The elements of this *dào* are ritualized patterns of activity, intelligently and skillfully performed in response to various particular circumstances. These circumstances are understood to be 'constant' (*cháng* 常, see 17/81/1), in the sense that they typically fall under certain regularly recurring general kinds of situations. Of course, similar circumstances display some variation, and anomalous events happen occasionally. But precisely because they are unlikely to recur, such variations and anomalies do not provide a guide to conduct. The proper *dào* for Xúnzǐ is one grounded in regularities in natural and social circumstances—hence, his insistence that the *dào* is not subject to change over time, the social divisions it institutes being of 'the same pattern as heaven and earth.'[25] Accordingly, he conceives of the *dào* as comprising a system of repeated, ritualized patterns of proper conduct. For the agent committed to Xúnzǐ's vision of *dào,* nearly all action will be to some degree ritualized, and moral character development amounts to acquiring virtuosity in performing the ritual *dào* through study and practice, grounded largely in model emulation, much as one acquires competence in music, dance, or sport.

Xúnzǐ has three interrelated justifications for this elaborate system of ritual propriety. His central justification is the consequentialist claim mentioned earlier: the system is supposedly the most effective way of 'patterning' or 'organizing' (*lǐ* 理) the natural world—including human beings, in their innate, uncultured state—so as to achieve social order (*zhì*), and, as a result, provide for people's

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[24] Fundamentally, the heart directs action through its normative attitudes of approval (*kě* 可) or disapproval (22/111/11). An agent may learn to perform the *dào* reflexively, its norms having become part of the agent's character, but such performance rests ultimately on the attitude of 'approving' the *dào* itself. See 21/103/21 and 22/111/22–23.

[25] 9/39/5. See too 5/19/4, where he vehemently dismisses the suggestion that the *dào* for achieving order might vary in different eras or circumstances.

material welfare. The system is effective, he claims, because it is uniquely successful in 'aligning' (*cān* 參) with natural conditions (9/39/3, 17/80/2–3). So a second justification he could offer is that the *dào* of ritual propriety aligns with constant or regular natural patterns better than any alternative *dào*. A third justification has a teleological flavor. Xúnzǐ claims that the cultural and ethical norms manifested in such a system of ritual propriety are what make us fully human; our capacity to live by such norms is what distinguishes us from lower creatures and enables us to dominate them (9/39/9–16, 5/18/13–17). To live according to ritual propriety is to fulfill our human capacities.

These claims are deeply insightful on an abstract level. If we read Xúnzǐ as a theorist of ritual, making general, descriptive claims about the role or functions of ritualized activity in human societies, he is surely correct to claim that humans create their own cultural *dào* by imposing an organizing pattern onto natural conditions, and that such a *dào* is feasible only if it meets some minimum standard of alignment with nature. He may also be correct that a system for social coordination and cooperation can be justified only if it helps to secure people's basic material welfare. This consequentialist criterion need not be a sufficient condition for justifying a social *dào,* but it is at least plausible to suggest it is a necessary one. Particularly interesting, and again highly credible, is Xúnzǐ's claim that ritual propriety is distinctive of human life. It does seem that, as Xúnzǐ insists, human societies inevitably establish some scheme of social divisions, along with a code of ritual performances that institute and express them. Weddings, graduations, coronations, and funerals are examples of such performances found across a wide range of cultures.

A descriptive construal of several of Xúnzǐ's other claims about ritual propriety is equally insightful and plausible. Ritual propriety may indeed guide much of our conduct; much of our daily activity probably proceeds according to ritualized or ritual-like patterns. Ritual propriety does provide outward form and ornamentation for our attitudes and social statuses and channels the expression of emotion. In some circumstances, at least, it mediates interpersonal relations and facilitates pursuit of tasks.

But of course Xúnzǐ is not engaged primarily in descriptive theorizing. He is propounding the normative stance that a certain *dào*—the tradition of ritual propriety stemming from the Zhōu sage-kings—is justified above all others because it fulfills the various functions of ritual he identifies in an especially effective way. The problem is that even if we affirm the value of these functions, the considerations he offers probably justify no particular code of ritual propriety.[26] Even if we allow that his favored code secures order, provides for material welfare, aligns with natural conditions, and enables a distinctively human form of life, numerous alternative systems—most notably, a system with less rigid, complex, and costly ritual practices,

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[26] In his recent 'constructivist' interpretation of Xúnzǐ, Hagen contends that Xúnzǐ's worldview 'allows for the possibility of pluralism' and does not assume the existence of a 'singular ultimate or transcendentally fixed Way' (2007, 10). As characterizations of Xúnzǐ's theoretical framework, these claims seem clearly correct. Despite these points, however, Xúnzǐ espouses a traditionalist conservatism with dogmatic tendencies, as Hagen acknowledges when he remarks that although Xúnzǐ provides a rationale for traditional ritual practices, '[his] justifications [fall] short of showing that only those precise norms would do the job' (2007, 112).

or one less authoritarian and hierarchical, more liberal and egalitarian—might do so as well or better. Despite the challenge of contemporaneous philosophical opponents such as the Mohists, Xúnzǐ never addresses this point satisfactorily. Nor, for that matter, do the considerations he advances necessarily justify an especially central or fundamental role for ritual propriety as a means of social organization—particularly a code of ritual propriety as extensive and elaborate as his. Perhaps the functions of ritual he identifies could be fulfilled without actively promulgating or enforcing any specific regimen of ritual propriety, simply by allowing people to find their own ways of interacting with each other.

Given the absence of a compelling justification for it, why is Xúnzǐ so deeply devoted to the Zhōu tradition of ritual propriety? One factor may be that he personally identifies so profoundly with this cultural tradition that he cannot seriously imagine living by alternative norms. He may also hold the skeptical conservative view that, whatever the merits or demerits of the prevailing social system, we have little reason to believe any alternative system could do better. But a more penetrating explanation may be that Xúnzǐ's devotion to the Zhōu tradition stems from an even deeper attachment to—verging on an obsession with—his ideal of 'order' (*zhì*). Indeed, he seems almost to equate the two: conduct that diverges from traditional ritual propriety is, for that very reason, disorderly.

Social order was a common concern among Warring States thinkers; it ranks among the Mohists' core values, for instance. But Xúnzǐ's emphasis on it goes beyond even the Mohists'. For them it is one basic good among several, and its components are simpler —primarily the absence of crime, conflict, and injury, the virtuous performance of core social roles, and the habit of reciprocally benefiting each other. To understand Xúnzǐ's devotion to his elaborate, ritualized conception of order, I suggest, we must extrapolate beyond the explicit statements in the text. My hypothesis is that for Xúnzǐ the order achieved through ritualization provides a profound sense of confidence, security, and satisfaction—a comforting sense of belonging or being at home in the world—because it embeds natural events and human affairs within a comprehensible, authoritative normative structure—authoritative insofar as he insists its inventors were brilliant cultural heroes who designed it to correlate uniquely well with nature. By virtue of our place in this traditional *dào,* our lives take on significance, authority, and beauty. The more elaborate and comprehensive the degree of ritualization, the greater is the agent's sense that even routine daily activities belong to a familiar, coherent, controlled normative order.

This metaphorical function of ritual propriety for Xúnzǐ is illustrated by his discussion of the ritual response to death, arguably the most 'disorderly' of all natural events. Xúnzǐ devotes much of his lengthy 'Discourse on Ritual Propriety' to funeral and mourning rituals, which he says manifest the ethical significance of death and life (19/95/16–17). The key to proper ritual handling of death and mourning, he emphasizes, is to maintain 'unity' between the deceased's life and death, thus bringing the human *dào* to a fitting completion (19/93/6–7). To achieve this unity, the deceased must be treated with the 'ornamentation' or 'adornment' appropriate for expressing reverence commensurate with their station in life. Specifically, they must be treated in a way analogous to how we treated them while alive.

> In funeral rituals, we adorn the dead on the basis of the living. We send them off
> to their death by symbolizing their life. So we serve the dead as if they were

alive, serve the absent as if they were present, and the end and beginning are unified. (19/95/6–7)

By insisting on continuity in our treatment of the deceased, Xúnzǐ preserves their status within the ritualized web of human interaction even though their own participation has been irreversibly broken off. He thus reaffirms the continuity of the normative cultural order even in the face of a distressing, disruptive natural event.[27] His account of death rituals is paradigmatic of how he sees ritual propriety as 'patterning' nature and thus placing even uncanny, uncontrollable natural events within a regimented, stable cultural framework. Rather than acknowledging even in the slightest that death fractures the human cultural order—that the deceased in effect exit that order to be reclaimed by nature—he waxes lyrical about the unity and wholeness achieved through ritual propriety: 'We serve the dead as we serve the living, serve the absent as we serve those present, give shape to the formless, and thus complete the proper cultural forms' (19/98/9–10).

Is the Xunzian ideal of comprehensive social order achievable or desirable? Is it needed to facilitate social cooperation and coordination and to fulfill the other purposes Xúnzǐ identifies? I propose to take an indirect route to answering these questions, by approaching them through a discussion of language, another area of human interaction that Xúnzǐ seeks to regulate.

Xúnzǐ on Language

Xúnzǐ famously contends that a sovereign should regulate language by fixing (dìng 定) the use of 'names' (míng 名), or words, to distinguish different kinds of things, so that the dào is carried out, the ruler's intentions are communicated, and he can lead the people to unity (22/108/4). This contention issues from the widely shared assumption in early Chinese thought that a crucial function of language is to guide action, through giving and following instructions and by properly distinguishing and naming various social roles and associated responsibilities.[28] Xúnzǐ holds that the purpose of having names is to mark off different referents so as to clarify social ranks and distinguish similar from different kinds of things, such that intentions can be conveyed clearly and tasks accomplished effectively (22/108/12–14). By enforcing regulations fixing the referents of names, the ruler seeks to ensure that all members of society follow the same conventions for distinguishing the titles, holders, and responsibilities of various social roles, identify the same objects by the same names, understand instructions the same way, and thus can carry out practical tasks according to their superiors' expectations. Names play a role in expressing intentions and

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[27] In this respect, Xúnzǐ's stance converges with Hertz's (1907) and Durkheim's (1912) proposal that death rites function to reaffirm the permanence of the social order after it is ruptured by a member's demise.

[28] I have elsewhere described this Chinese assumption as the 'job title' theory of language (Fraser 2009a). 'Names,' such as 'knight,' 'teacher,' 'parent,' or 'minister,' are regarded as associated with norms of conduct, much as job titles are associated with job descriptions. To be denoted by a particular name is to be subject to certain norms and expectations; conversely, only those who live up to the norms deserve the name. Part of the work of rectifying names is to clarify which jobs are indeed associated with which names and whether particular individuals live up to their name—their job title—or not.

distinguishing objects comparable to that of tallies, weights, and measures; disordering the right use of names by splitting up phrases, arbitrarily creating names, or making strange pronouncements is thus a serious crime comparable to tampering with tallies, weights, or measures (22/108/5). If the use of names is not regulated and relations between names and things become disordered, then the proper interpretation of commands and laws will become contentious, and arguments and lawsuits will be common (*ibid.*). Even law-abiding officials or devout Confucians will fall into disorder (22/108/8–9). 'Rectifying names' (*zhèng míng* 正名) is thus a crucial step toward ensuring political order.

Numerous links and parallels hold between Xúnzǐ's treatment of language and his account of ritual propriety. The use of names is based on a scheme of distinctions between similar and different kinds (*lèi* 類) that is intertwined with ritual propriety. The norms of ritual propriety are the basis for many of these distinctions, and the framework of kinds is among the 'roots' of ritual propriety (1/3/10, 19/90/20). The traditional norms of ritual propriety determine the correct use of the names implicated in them (22/107/21). Conversely, to conform to the norms of ritual propriety, people must be able to use names correctly. They must properly distinguish the various ranks, roles, and duties named in the ritual code. Before they can follow a ritual rule about bowing to elders, they must be able to distinguish which actions are referred to by the word 'bowing' and which people by the word 'elders.'[29] Using names properly by making appropriate statements (*yán* 言) in a manner conforming to the practices of the 'former kings' is itself part of ritual propriety, to which the gentleman must attend conscientiously (5/19/10–11). How one uses language to make statements is an aspect of the ritualized form (*wén* 文) that organizes and expresses things (5/19/14). Both ritual propriety and names are compared to measurement tools that provide reliable, objective standards—for conduct, in the case of ritual propriety (11/51/19–21), and for communication, in the case of names (22/108/5). Xúnzǐ treats both ritual propriety and rectifying names as pivotal aspects of governance: both are described as means of unifying the populace, carrying out the *dào,* and achieving sociopolitical order. More concretely, as keys to cooperation and coordination, both are said to be means of accomplishing practical affairs (2/15/5, 22/108/12–13).

Fundamentally, for Xúnzǐ both language and ritual propriety are fields in which sociopolitical leaders institute or regulate cultural forms for organizing nature, thus creating a normatively structured medium within which human activity proceeds. A necessary condition for either medium to function effectively is that it accord with features of nature: ritual propriety must align with natural patterns, and naming is grounded fundamentally in how human sense organs interact with the natural environment to distinguish similar from different kinds of things (22/108/14–22/109/3). But in both cases the normative medium is a cultural creation or invention, not something given by nature. Language for Xúnzǐ is part of the normative cultural *dào,* overlapping and at least partly subsumed by ritual propriety. Hence, to maintain sociopolitical order, rulers must rectify (*zhèng* 正) the use of names just as they employ ritual propriety to rectify themselves (2/8/1) and their state (11/51/19). Indeed, in the overall

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[29] Hansen emphasizes that practical rectification of names is needed to interpret and perform ritual propriety correctly. Before a code of conduct can guide us, we need to be able to distinguish the objects and actions named in the code (1992, 65–66).

context of Xúnzǐ's thought, the doctrine of rectifying names can be regarded as a step toward ritualizing language[30]—and thus imposing order on it—just as Xúnzǐ seeks to ritualize other aspects of human activity.

Xúnzǐ's contention is that just as human social flourishing requires social order, which rests on strict observance of ritual propriety, effective linguistic communication requires linguistic order, which rests on rigorous public observance of conventions governing the reference of words. In effect, he claims that people will be unable to convey instructions or jointly distinguish different kinds of things unless the sovereign intervenes to ensure that the referents of words are rigidly fixed. Does linguistic communication indeed require rigid conventions of reference, akin to ritualized norms of action, as Xúnzǐ seems to suggest? Would rectifying names be feasible or desirable, as he contends? And by extension, is the strict regulation of activity entailed by a Xunzian code of ritual propriety needed to achieve an orderly, flourishing society? Passages in the Daoist anthology *Zhuāngzǐ* imply that the answer is No on all counts.

The *Zhuāngzǐ* on Language

Xúnzǐ maintains that a king should regulate names by 'fixing' (*dìng* 定) the names that refer to different things (22/108/4). A passage in the 'Discourse on Equalizing Things,' Book 2 of the *Zhuāngzǐ*,[31] can be interpreted as presenting a skeptical attack

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[30] I owe this formulation to my colleague Dan Robins.

[31] Like most texts attributed to the pre-Han masters, the *Zhuāngzǐ* is an anthology of brief, roughly paragraph-length writings by different hands. Its hundreds of short parts are linked thematically by a network of doctrinal family resemblances and historically or genealogically probably by numerous intersecting teacher-student lineages, as the texts were likely composed and transmitted among groups of teachers and students. The anthology is organized as 33 'books,' each a collection of short stories or remarks, often grouped loosely by theme. Typically, these stories and remarks share a broadly interrelated doctrinal orientation, but they do not purport to present a unified or coherent system of doctrines. Even a conservative count, such as Liu's (1994), attributes at least four different authorial or doctrinal voices to the corpus. My own view is that there are almost certainly many more, and that even the seven so-called 'inner chapters' that many scholars attribute to the historical Zhuāng Zhōu 莊周 are most probably the work of several different writers. (For a detailed critique of the view that the 'inner chapters' represent an authorially privileged, chronologically early, or doctrinally canonical section within the anthology, see Klein (2010).) In general, however, because little historical information is available on the authorship or provenance of individual parts of the *Zhuāngzǐ,* I believe the appropriate interpretive approach is to focus on the texts, not their unknown authors. That is, instead of attempting to reconstruct the systematic thought of one or more particular authors or 'schools'—a project that simply cannot be carried out convincingly, given the disjoint nature of the various 'books' and our lack of historical information about them—interpreters should focus on exploring and reconstructing the rich discourses on various themes found in the anthology. Given the literary and physical structure of the collection, the genealogical relationships between its component texts, and their shared broad outlook, we can expect different parts to explore common themes from a variety of angles, presenting views that may overlap substantially but also diverge significantly. From reconstructions of such discourses, we can move on to consider or develop systematic positions that are grounded in Zhuangist motifs and views, but not necessarily explicitly presented in or endorsed by all parts, or any particular part, of the anthology. Hence, in this paper I use the label 'Zhuangist' loosely to refer to ideas or positions presented or grounded in at least some parts of the *Zhuāngzǐ.* This label is not intended to imply that these ideas or positions are shared by or consistent with all of the voices found in anthology; nor is there any expectation that all of the views I label 'Zhuangist' fit together as a coherent package, since they may come from different texts within the anthology. I should add that since the *Zhuāngzǐ* is a notoriously difficult, diverse, and playful text and its content the subject of much scholarly debate, the interpretations presented here may be controversial.

on this idea. The passage questions whether 'fixing' (*dìng*) reference is necessary for our statements—the linguistic expressions (*yán* 言) we utter—to succeed in saying anything.

> Stating is not blowing air. In statements, there is something stated. It's just that what they state hasn't been fixed. So in the end, is there stating? Or has there never been stating? If you take it to be different from birds chirping, is there indeed a distinction? Or could it be that there's no distinction? (2/23–24)[32]

The text makes the commonsense observation that speech is not just blowing breath; our statements do say something. However, since historically no program of rectifying names has been put into effect, the content of what we say has never been fixed: the reference of names is to some degree fluid or indeterminate. The text then poses a dilemma that forms a *reductio ad absurdum* against the premise that the use of names must be fixed for statements to say anything. Assume, with Xúnzǐ, that names must be fixed for us to communicate smoothly, and note that in fact what we state has not been fixed. Then it seems we must fail to say anything at all; the answer to the question 'In the end, is there stating?' must be negative. But this is absurd; people do communicate in language. So, on the other hand, the answer to the question 'Or has there never been stating?' is also negative. It seems that communication by *yán* 言 (speech, stating) does not require that names be fixed after all. Indeed, another passage from the 'Discourse' claims that '*yán* has never been constant' (2/55)— language has never followed fixed, unchanging norms. On this interpretation of the text, then, the project of rectifying names is redundant. Given that it would require an ambitious, burdensome project of social engineering, this point alone is probably good grounds for rejecting it.

These Zhuangist implications dovetail with an important strand of thought in recent philosophy of language, according to which linguistic communication fundamentally cannot be explained by interlocutors' agreement in following a conventional system of rules or fixed norms for distinguishing the referents of words. Donald Davidson has argued that, although convention—rule-governed, repetitive practice—is a usual, contingent feature of language, it does not explain what is basic to linguistic communication (1984, 280). Our ability to understand novel or idiosyncratic uses of language, such as malapropisms, shows that communication does not rest on 'a clearly defined shared structure which language-users acquire and then apply to cases' (1986, 107). To mean something, we must be able to follow practices that can be understood by others, but these practices need not be shared (1994, 125). Because of language-users' brute ability to interpret what others say in particular contexts, a speaker and hearer can manage to agree on what a speaker means even if they hold different theories in advance about how to interpret the speaker's words (1984, 278). Indeed, rather than convention and rule-following explaining communication, Davidson suggests, it is our more fundamental ability to communicate that explains how we can develop rules and conventions (1984, 280). Robert Brandom has taken a related approach even further,

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[32] Citations to the *Zhuāngzǐ* give chapter and line numbers in the Harvard-Yenching concordance (*Zhuāngzǐ* 1956). All translations are my own.

concluding not only that shared conventions are unnecessary for linguistic communication, but that even agreement between speakers and hearers on what particular utterances mean is unnecessary. Since meaning is determined at least partly by the inferential significance of what we say, which varies from speaker to speaker, an utterance can mean something different in a speaker's mouth from what it means in the listener's ears without necessarily hampering their ability to communicate (1994, 480). Brandom proposes that 'the paradigm of communication as joint possession of some common thing' be replaced by 'a paradigm of communication as a kind of cooperation in practice' (1994, 485). For Brandom, the ability to communicate is a special case of a more fundamental, general ability to 'keep score' of one's own and others' commitments and entitlements—an ability that grounds any sort of normative practice.

If these philosophers are correct—a big 'if,' of course—then our ability to cooperate in certain sophisticated sorts of practices explains our ability to communicate and to learn conventions. Hence, more fundamental abilities—aspects of what, in the next section, I will suggest we can dub 'arts of *dào*' (*dào shù* 道術)—explain our ability to learn conventions such as grammar, the conventional referents of words, and ritual propriety. A consequence is that rectifying names and ritual propriety cannot be essential to communication, cooperation, and coordination, as more fundamental communicative and cooperative abilities are conditions for rectifying names and following ritual propriety. A program of social control such as Xúnzǐ's cannot be fundamental to producing social order, since the existence of some form of social order is a prerequisite for carrying out such a program.[33]

In response to the implicit argument in the 'Discourse' against the need to 'fix' names, Xúnzǐ could reply that the political doctrine of rectifying names does not presuppose that people cannot communicate unless names are rectified. Although he implies that without regulation of names, miscommunication and other negative consequences are inevitable (22/108/12–13), Xúnzǐ could stop short of claiming that language simply cannot function properly without rectification of names. In principle, he need claim only that intentions can be conveyed more effectively if names are rectified and that social order requires linguistic order. A weak version of these claims might be reasonable. In particular contexts, especially while carrying out a practical project, people may find they can cooperate more effectively if they first agree on what objects their words refer to; doing so may help them work together in a more orderly fashion. But Xúnzǐ's project of rectifying names goes beyond this moderate, commonsensical point. He explicitly states that one of the aims of rectifying names is to clarify on what grounds the ruler can prohibit 'vile doctrines and deviant statements that, departing from the right *dào*, presumptuously innovate' (22/109/20). As the text makes clear, the 'vile doctrines' in question are those of his philosophical rivals, thinkers such as Sòngzǐ and the Mohists. Rectifying names is at the bottom a political doctrine: through control of language, Xúnzǐ seeks to stamp out novel or unorthodox speech and silence opposing teachings.

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[33] To clarify, the aim of this comparison with Davidson and Brandom is not to appeal to their conclusions to justify a Zhuangist critique of rectifying names. It is to highlight an intriguing, albeit partial parallel between them and one strand of Zhuangist thought and thus to illuminate the potential implications of both. If correct, Davidson's or Brandom's ideas complement a Zhuangist criticism of the need to 'fix' (*dìng*) names. But that criticism can stand on its own.

The *Zhuāngzǐ* presents at least three further lines of argument that can be directed against this project of linguistic control and, by extension, Xúnzǐ's overall program for social order. The first comprises a set of skeptical arguments aimed at the idea that the sovereign or his proxies could identify a single correct *dào* by which to rectify (*zhèng*) the use of names. Two passages in the 'Discourse' explicitly attack the idea that we can establish such a uniquely correct *dào*.[34] One argues from the observed plurality of mutually incompatible yet apparently satisfying practices followed by different creatures that there are a plurality of distinct, heterogeneous grounds for drawing the kinds of action-guiding distinctions that underlie the use of names. Among these, the text implies, we can find no systematic or unified criteria by which to draw distinctions in a universally right (*zhèng*) way that can be endorsed by all agents (2/64–70). The other contends that we cannot establish that the victor in a debate has drawn such distinctions in a way that is conclusively correct, for there are a plurality of norms by which to make the distinctions, and any attempt to rectify (*zhèng*) the disagreement must presuppose one norm and beg the question against others (2/84 ff.). The gist of these arguments is that there can be no privileged or authoritative basis for drawing distinctions, and thus rectifying names, one way rather than another. One set of arguments in the 'Discourse' even questions whether our own practices for drawing action-guiding distinctions can be expected to remain constant over time (2/78–84). How we draw distinctions rests partly on contingent, shifting circumstances, and we may come to draw them differently if we gain more information, change how we weight different factors, or change our values. Unfamiliar or changing circumstances are likely to repeatedly undermine our attempts at rectifying names.[35]

An advocate of rectifying names might sidestep this second set of arguments by claiming only that names should be rectified according to *some* set of unified, practically useful norms, not that they must be rectified according to authoritative, uniquely correct norms. However, the tenor of Xúnzǐ's argument is that the *dào* of the sage-kings is uniquely privileged and best aligns with nature, and the *Zhuāngzǐ*'s skeptical arguments make it difficult to sustain that claim.

The preceding arguments are destructive: they can be interpreted as undermining the basis for rectifying names. The other pair of Zhuangist arguments are constructive: they offer positive grounds for preferring a more liberal or pluralistic approach to language use and, more broadly, human *dào*. One argument stems from the Zhuangist doctrine of completion and deficiency.[36] The 'Discourse' concurs with Xúnzǐ that nature in itself does not furnish us with a *dào,* nor does it come ready-organized into action-guiding kind distinctions. As Xúnzǐ would agree, *dào* are formed by our practices, and divisions between kinds of things are established by our deeming them this or that (2/33, 2/55). But for precisely this reason, the *Zhuāngzǐ* implies, no one *dào* or organizational pattern can align with nature in a privileged way. Any *dào* or pattern we 'complete' or 'form' through our practices is always simultaneously

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[34] While these arguments do not specifically mention Xúnzǐ or 'rectifying names,' they can be applied to rebut the general idea that we could find an authoritative basis for 'rectifying' (*zhèng*) the distinctions that undergird the use of names. For a more detailed discussion of the arguments, a justification of the interpretations presented here, and a comparison with other interpretations, see Fraser (2009b).

[35] For a detailed justification of this interpretation of these arguments, see Fraser (2011) and (2009b).

[36] For further discussion of this doctrine, see Fraser (2009b, 449 and 454) and (2006, 536).

'deficient,' in the sense that we neglect an indeterminate number of potential alternatives (2/35), some of which may also align well with nature and in various respects be more useful. Hence, the most promising policy is not to commit exclusively to any single pattern, but to be prepared to modify or shift among patterns as best suits our situation. Rectifying names according to fixed standards, as Xúnzǐ proposes, would commit us to a single, parochial linguistic *dào* at the cost of numerous other potentially fruitful ones. From the Zhuangist stance, such control of language incapacitates us, linguistically, cognitively, and socially, by restricting us to just one of the many *dào* open to us. Rectifying names presupposes there are only certain familiar objects that need to be referred to and only certain things that need to be said, in certain ways. A thorough program of rectifying names might actually interfere with communication, by reining in the creativity that is a normal part of language use.

The fourth Zhuangist line of argument is that approaches other than rectifying names might be more effective in preventing conflict and securing cooperation and coordination. Rather than Xúnzǐ's core value of order (*zhì*), *Zhuāngzǐ* passages present values such as achieving harmony (*hé* 和) and finding paths that 'fit' (*shì* 適) in particular contexts. Instead of committing to a single *dào,* the *Zhuāngzǐ* encourages us to rest in the '*dào*-hub' (*dào shū* 道樞) (2/30–31) or on the 'wheel of nature' (*tiān jūn* 天鈞) (2/39–40), from which we can flexibly adopt one *dào* or another, adapting and responding to concrete contexts. The sagely path is to harmonize our interactions with others by flexibly adjusting how we draw distinctions in response to particular circumstances—especially others' needs—so that we can find convergences between their *dào* and our own, an ideal the text calls 'walking two ways.'[37] 'What's right is based on what fits' (18/39); we should interact with others in particular contexts by finding courses of action that fit both sides, rather than by taking for granted that what best suits us suits them as well (18/29–39). Fastidiousness about the reference of names is out of place: to achieve harmony with others, we may need to rearrange which items are picked out by which names, and in any case the crux is the actual situation, the things referred to, not the names we use.[38] This Zhuangist approach is essentially a second-order *dào*—not a concrete path to follow, but an approach to finding suitable paths in particular contexts. Admittedly, it may be vague and difficult to apply. Yet an open-ended approach of flexibly seeking compromise, harmony, and 'good fit' in particular contexts seems a promising *dào* for interacting with others, especially in cases of potential conflict. Xúnzǐ's central argument for ritual propriety is that it secures order by preventing conflict. If a second-order Zhuangist *dào* for negotiating interactions with others might be at least as effective in preventing conflict, then the justification for Xúnzǐ's elaborate program of ritualized social order collapses.

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[37] 'The sage harmonizes them with this and not-this and rests on the wheel of nature. This is called "walking two ways' (2/38–40).

[38] See 2/38–39 and 18/39. Recall too the well-known *Zhuāngzǐ* passage that states, 'The purpose of statements (*yán*) lies in the thought; getting the thought, forget the statement' (26/48–49). Against the doctrine of rectifying names, the text contends that the exact wording is unimportant as long as the audience gets the point.

The *Zhuāngzǐ* on Ritual

Xúnzǐ's approach to language presents a microcosm of his more general *dào,* I have suggested, and his proposals to regulate language parallel, at least partly, his regulation of social life through ritual propriety. Similarly, Zhuangist views on ritual propriety generally parallel the anthology's skepticism about the idea of fixing and regulating the distinctions that underlie the use of names.

Zhuangist writings typically oppose taking ritual propriety as a fundamental guide to action. One line of thought in the anthology, diametrically opposed to Xúnzǐ's, holds that ritual propriety interferes with people's constant, spontaneous dispositions and alters their inborn nature (*xìng* 性) (8/13–16, 9/6–14). Ideally, people would simply follow their constant nature (*cháng xìng* 常性) (9/7), a built-in, reliable guide to life. Xúnzǐ compares ritual propriety to artisans' tools, by which we can produce perfectly straight or round objects from imperfectly shaped materials. These *Zhuāngzǐ* passages—expressing a doctrinal stance that Graham (1981) dubbed 'primitivism'—argue that in applying such tools, we injure the nature of things. Things that are by their nature straight or round require no tools to shape them so. Promulgating ritual propriety as a guide to action amounts to misleading all the world into trying to live contrary to their inherent nature (8/13–19). Xúnzǐ would of course respond that if people simply act on their untutored dispositions, the result will be social chaos. More important, he might suggest, there is no such thing as acting directly from one's 'constant nature;' all action issues from the heart's normative attitude of 'approval' (22/111/6–11) and inevitably is a matter of 'artifice' (22/107/24), and thus something we add to our nature (19/95/1–4). The question is not whether we act in ways that go beyond our inherent nature—we can hardly do otherwise—but what source of guidance we will follow. Both Xúnzǐ's pessimism and naive 'primitivist' optimism about people's inherent, untrained dispositions seem too one-sided to be defensible. But the Xunzian point that it is the heart's attitudes, not our nature in itself, which determine action is compelling. Even other parts of the *Zhuāngzǐ,* such as the 'Discourse on Equalizing Things,' would probably reject the questionable assumption that people have a constant nature that can directly guide action.

Another line of thought in the *Zhuāngzǐ* contends that ritual propriety and other explicit standards are the 'trivia of order (*zhì*),' not the fundamentals, and thus were not a priority of the ancient sages (13/24–27).[39] The perfected person guides action by mastering *dào* and merging with *dé* 德 (virtuosity), dismissing conventional ethical guidelines such as benevolence and duty and treating ritual propriety and its trappings as 'guests'—non-essential, temporary, exterior elements—rather than the keys or fundamentals (13/64). Ritual propriety—along with the other content of the Six Classics—amounts merely to the 'traces' of the successful rule of the former kings, not the *dào* by which they created these traces (14/77). What is crucial is to get hold of the *dào* by which things proceed, not merely to imitate the outward forms of ancient rulers' actions. This line of criticism converges with the Zhuangist view that

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[39] Graham associates this passage with a 'Syncretistic' stance that combines Daoist, Confucian, and Legalist ideas (1981, 257–58). It is debatable, however, whether the *Zhuāngzǐ* books he labels 'Syncretistic' represent a coherent, unified doctrinal position, since even Graham himself assigns portions of them to other strains of thought within the anthology.

fastidiousness about the use of names is extraneous in the use of language; what is important is to get the point across, regardless of the outward form.

A third line of criticism, which complements the second, is that ritual propriety should change with the times (14/40). Customs that were effective in the Zhōu era may no longer be so today. Promoting the practice of Zhōu ritual propriety in the present day, as Xúnzǐ does, is like trying to push a boat over land instead of simply switching from the boat to a carriage—fruitless toil that is sure to bring misfortune (14/37). This argument directly contradicts Xúnzǐ's contention that ritual propriety is grounded in constant patterns of nature, as assessed by sages qualified to gauge everyone by reference to themselves, and thus 'ancient times and today are one,' the same *dào* applying to both (5/19/4). Where Xúnzǐ claims that the constancy of nature renders a single *dào* uniquely appropriate, the Zhuangist view is that circumstances are constantly changing, making different *dào* appropriate at different times. Here the latter stance is probably more persuasive.

Beyond these general criticisms, several *Zhuāngzǐ* anecdotes provide material for more detailed reflections on ritual propriety. Chief among these is a passage in Book Six about the impromptu funeral rite two men perform for their deceased friend.

Three men, Master Sānghù, Mèng Zǐfǎn, and Master Qín Zhāng were friends. They said, 'Who can be together in the togetherless, reciprocate where there is no reciprocity? Who can climb the sky and wander in the mists, whirling around in the limitless, living by forgetting each other, forever and ever?' The three men looked at each other and laughed. There being nothing contrary in their hearts, they became friends.

Suddenly, after a while, Master Sānghù died. Before he was buried, Confucius heard about it and sent Zǐgòng to help with the funeral affairs. One [of the two surviving friends] had composed a song, one strummed his zither, and in harmony they sang:

Ah, so, Sānghù!
Ah, so, Sānghù!
You've returned to the genuine
While we remain here as men, O!
Zǐgòng rushed forward and said, 'May I ask, singing in the presence of a corpse, is this ritual propriety?' The two men looked at each other and laughed, saying, 'What does this guy know about the point of ritual propriety?'[40] (6/60–65)

Zǐgòng returns to Confucius in shock, wondering what sort of men these are. Confucius explains that they are people who 'wander beyond the realm,' unlike he, who wanders within it. They are 'fellows with the creator of things, who wander in the single breath of heaven and earth' (that is, the natural world). Attaching no priority to life over death, they regard themselves as only temporarily 'borrowing' their differentiated identity, and so they forget their bodies, leave behind their ears and

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[40] *Lǐ yì* 禮意, here rendered as 'the point of ritual propriety,' is sometimes interpreted as 'the meaning of ritual propriety' (see, for instance, Graham 1981, 89). However, the role of *yì* in early Chinese philosophy of language is not that of semantic meaning, but more like that of a speaker's thought or intention—the point the speaker is trying to convey. *Yì* is roughly synonymous with *zhì* 志 'intent.' See Fraser (2005, section 4.2).

eyes, and fundamentally entrust themselves to the collective whole that is the dynamic, unending process of the cosmos, 'wandering carefree in the vocation of doing nothing.' Given these attitudes, 'How could they trouble themselves to follow customary ritual propriety?' (6/66–70) Such 'oddballs' are 'odd among people but line up with nature' (6/74).

The passage colorfully illustrates numerous contrasts between the Zhuangist and Xunzian worldviews. Rather than imposing organization on nature to achieve order, the Zhuangist exemplary figures seek to wander along with natural processes. Instead of distinguishing different roles, ranks, and duties, they roam 'beyond the realm' and 'whirl around in the limitless.' Interestingly, Xunzian and Zhuangist texts both characterize their ideal by appeal to metaphors of alignment with nature. In Xúnzǐ's case, the sovereign aligns (cān) with nature by imposing a dào that purportedly best correlates with natural patterns. According to the Zhuāngzǐ passage, eccentrics such as the three friends 'line up' or 'match' (móu 侔) with nature. The difference, of course, is that in the Zhuangist picture, alignment with nature may render one 'odd' by human norms—surely it would put one at odds with the rigid cultural order Xúnzǐ advocates—and alignment is a matter of conforming to or flowing along with natural processes rather than 'organizing' them. Where Xúnzǐ sees nature as lacking orderly pattern, the Zhuangist sees it as offering various courses along which to roam.

Intriguingly, the passage indicates that even unexceptional people, those who live 'within the realm' or, as Confucius says he is, are 'punished by nature,' are capable of living alongside each other without the 'work' (shì 事) Xúnzǐ deems necessary for a distinctively human life. The text thus calls into question the Xunzian contention that human social life requires a code of ritual propriety that is explicitly instituted and regulated by cultural and political leaders. Confucius characterizes life 'within the realm' by appeal to a key Zhuangist metaphor for thriving social relations[41]: just as 'fish forget each other in rivers and lakes, people forget each other in the arts of dào' (dào shù, 6/73). In this respect, wandering 'within the realm' resembles the three oddball friends' mode of life, as they claim to 'live by forgetting each other.' Confucius unpacks the 'forgetting' metaphor by explaining that once fish have water to swim in, their nurture is provided for. They need not make any special effort to live together or care for each other and can instead 'forget each other' (6/62). Elsewhere in the Zhuāngzǐ, such 'forgetting' is linked to the absence of conscious attention that ensues when things fit well, as when we 'forget' a perfectly fitting belt or pair of shoes.[42] 'Forgetting each other,' then, would describe social relations that proceed so smoothly as to require no special attention or work by the parties related. Concrete examples of such relations might include dancers so accustomed to performing together that their bodies move as one or jazz musicians able to improvise together without consciously focusing on what each other is doing. Analogously, as people

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[41] Besides this passage, the metaphor of fish forgetting each other appears at 6/23 and 14/60.

[42] See 19/62–64. 'Forgetting' (忘) is often valorized in the Zhuāngzǐ as signaling freedom from care or anxiety (4/43–44), the absence of maladroit consciousness of things, including self-consciousness (6/89–93, 12/45, 19/24, 19/57), and 'fitting' (shì 適) well with one's surroundings (19/62–64). The valorization of 'forgetting' is not universal, however; in some passages, it refers to neglecting matters of importance (20/61–68).

practice 'arts of *dào*' together, 'without working (*shì*) at it, their lives are settled,' and thus they 'forget each other' (6/73).

Even those who live 'within the realm,' then, have an ability to engage in 'arts of *dào*' by which they can navigate interpersonal relations without special work or attention. This Zhuangist optimism about human social life directly contradicts Xúnzǐ's view that 'work' (*shì*)—specifically, training in ritual propriety—is necessary if human society is to avoid conflict and disorder. Like Xúnzǐ, the Zhuangist writer of this passage regards social life as akin to performance of a practical art or skill (*shù* 術). For Xúnzǐ, this art is elaborately choreographed and ritualized, and smooth performance can be achieved only by striving assiduously to master one's part. By contrast, the *Zhuāngzǐ* holds that people have an inherent skill at finding ways of getting along, just as they have an inherent skill at communicating without rectification of names or formal instruction in grammar. Human beings are generally able to catch on to and practice these '*dào* skills' or 'arts of *dào*' together without the intensive training and regimentation Xúnzǐ demands, and their *dào* need not be as complex and elaborate as his version of ritual propriety.

The Zhuangist view may seem impractically optimistic. But it may well be true that, just as Davidson claims a more fundamental interpretive ability explains our capacity to establish conventions, what explains our ability to follow explicit social protocols, such a ritual propriety, is a more fundamental, spontaneous ability to invent, join, and extend or modify social practices. It is that ability, not any particular tradition of ritual propriety, that explains how we are able to coordinate our actions and cooperate when necessary. Indeed, as suggested above, it may be our inherent skill in 'arts of *dào*' that explains how we can achieve the basic level of cooperation and coordination needed to learn an explicit code of ritual propriety in the first place. The crux of harmonious social life, then, is not ritual propriety. It is something prior to ritual propriety, a brute ability to invent and follow norms and practices together, guided by an intuitive skill at adapting to and coordinating with others.

These ideas are not, however, grounds for denying ritual a place in human life. To the contrary, they are reasons for including it within the 'arts of *dào*'—practices we engage in spontaneously as part of the course of our individual and social lives. The three oddball friends are depicted as transcending characteristic human concerns—such as a preference for life over death—and thus not bothering with customary ritual propriety or caring about how they are perceived by the common crowd. Yet, intriguingly, they do not dispense with ritual altogether. Indeed, they hint that it holds great significance for them. When Zǐgòng questions their unconventional funeral rite, they respond not by dismissing ritual propriety, but by mocking his understanding of it. Although the passage does not spell out their view of 'the point of ritual propriety,' we can tentatively extrapolate from their actions. They are engaged in a performance that explicitly acknowledges a salient event in their lives—their friend's death—and gives it an interpretation, situating it in the context of nature and of human life. The performance expresses their attitudes or emotions about this event and its significance to them—specifically, in this case, that death is a 'return to the genuine (*zhēn* 真),' an allusion, in Zhuangist discourse, to a return to or embrace of nature. The joint, public character of the performance—which in this case includes even their friend's corpse—underscores and reinforces the men's relationship, their friendship or solidarity. The style and content of their performance not merely express, but partly

constitute a certain grasp of human life, death, and nature. Through their spontaneous, creative commemoration of their friend, they place themselves in a particular relation to death and nature, celebrating the process of life and death, recognizing how human life fits into nature, and exemplifying a suitable response to inevitable natural transformations, such as death.

This characterization of the point of ritual propriety partly converges with Xúnzǐ's views. Yet the two friends' response to Zǐgòng clearly implies that—*contra* Xúnzǐ—they deny there is any unique or authoritative way to fulfill the functions of ritual propriety. Rituals may answer various human needs—for acknowledgment, structure, expression, and intelligibility, to cite only a few. But the specifics of those needs and the appropriate means of satisfying them may vary for different people in different contexts. For the two oddball friends, who understood their deceased companion well, performing an improvised ditty expressing awe over his return to nature may be a wholly fitting funeral ritual. Just as language can function spontaneously, without explicit control or ritualization, so too can a funeral rite. We might question whether the friends' rite qualifies as a genuine ritual, given that it is a novel, improvised performance, corresponding to no established ritual protocol. But it is hard to see how we can deny it that status. It comprises familiar ritual elements—a gathering of friends, acknowledgement of the death, and a musical performance addressing and honoring the deceased. It is obviously recognizable as a funeral rite, one in which we would have little difficulty participating.

Another contrast with Xúnzǐ is that the friends' rite does not purport to secure order or organize nature but simply to acknowledge our place in it. Their song celebrates their companion's return to nature—for them the 'genuine' basis of human life—thus situating his death with respect both to the human *dào,* which he has departed, and the broader context of natural processes, into which he has now been reabsorbed. Also absent is Xúnzǐ's concern with employing ritual to maintain an unbroken unity in the human *dào* by incorporating death within it. Rather than seeking a sense of security or belonging from one's place in a heavily ritualized—and therefore familiar and controlled—cultural order, as Xúnzǐ does, the friends' spontaneous ritual aims at finding peace by situating oneself in and identifying with uncontrollable, unfathomable natural processes, achieving an attitude the *Zhuāngzǐ* elsewhere refers to as 'being at peace with the moment and dwelling in the flow' (3/18). An implicit lesson of the passage may be that a more profound sense of cosmic order or of being at home in the world may be available if we forsake the Xunzian preoccupation with a baroque tradition of ritual propriety and instead allow ourselves to identify with and freely respond to circumstances in whatever way seems appropriate.[43]

The story of the three friends might seem to imply that the Zhuangist ideal is complete spontaneity on occasions that call for ritual performances. Other passages, however, imply that the message is not 'anything goes,' but that in ritual propriety, as in other areas, we should seek a course of action that best fits the context. As

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[43] This point is also illustrated by the story of Zhuāngzǐ's extemporaneous drumming and singing in response to his wife's death (18/15–19). When his wife passes away, Zhuāngzǐ initially grieves, but after coming to view her death as part of an inevitable natural process, like 'the procession of the four seasons, spring and autumn, winter and summer,' he begins to 'comprehend fate,' makes peace with his loss, and commemorates her life with an impromptu musical performance.

described in an exchange between Yán Huí and Zhòng Ní (6/75–82), Mèngsūn Cái holds a worldview comparable to that of the three oddballs. Zhòng Ní remarks that 'Mr. Mèngsūn doesn't know why things live, nor why they die; he doesn't know to take the lead, nor to follow behind. It's as if he has transformed into a thing that merely awaits [further] transformations that he doesn't know about, that's all' (6/77–78). When Mèngsūn's mother died, he wailed without shedding a tear, felt no sadness in his heart, and during the mourning did not grieve. Clearly, he himself had no need for the wailing and weeping of a conventional funeral ritual; a simple, impromptu ceremony such as that of the friends might have sufficed for him. Yet Mèngsūn conducted a conventional funeral for his mother, and despite his own lack of grief—as Yán Huí observes with surprise—won acclaim for how well he managed it. Zhòng Ní explains that, although Mèngsūn could not simplify everything, he succeeded in partly simplifying the funeral. But why simplify only partly? Why bother with a conventional funeral at all? It seems that doing so was one aspect of Mèngsūn's transformations in response to his circumstances. Among his mother's survivors, 'Mr. Mèngsūn alone has awakened' and holds the attitudes he does about life, death, and his place in nature. Those around him do not. So, as part of his responsiveness to circumstances, 'when others wail, he too wails' (6/80)—probably, to meet their expectations, smooth relations with them, and soothe their distress. In this case, holding a conventional, albeit simplified, funeral was the most fitting response to the situation.

The view of ritual propriety that emerges from these *Zhuāngzǐ* passages thus is not wholly antithetical to Xúnzǐ's. In some respects the two are complementary. The pivotal difference is the Zhuangist point that ritual performances may fulfill their functions more effectively if they are spontaneous and unregulated, and if ritual propriety is regarded not as a key to guiding and 'rectifying' action, but as a 'guest' of *dào* (13/64), as one Zhuangist metaphor suggests. Ritual may be one aspect of a fitting response to circumstances. But just as regulation and rectification are not the keys to fluent linguistic communication, ritual propriety is not the key to smooth, harmonious social relations. Conventional ritual propriety can provide a convenient template for social interaction. What fundamentally drives and guides that interaction, however, is not established norms of propriety, but a more primal ability to invent, learn, coordinate, extend, and modify shared patterns of activity—an ability for which 'arts of *dào*' seems an apt label. Left to their own, speakers of a language spontaneously, without regulation or special effort, find a balance between traditional vocabulary and grammar and novel expressions and usage. Similarly, without regulation or special effort, members of communities find a balance between conventional ritual propriety and novel, creative patterns of activity. A crucial Zhuangist point is that we may coordinate action, align with natural circumstances, and thus fulfill the various purposes of ritual more effectively if we abandon the Xunzian concern with ritual propriety as a means of imposing order on nature and society, and instead regard ritual itself as, like language, a natural, spontaneous social phenomenon.[44]

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