

Psychological Emptiness in the *Zhuāngzǐ*

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Three views of psychological emptiness, or xū, can be found in the Zhuāngzǐ. The instrumental view values xū primarily as a means of efficacious action. The moderate view assigns it intrinsic value as an element of one Zhuangist vision of the good life. The radical view also takes it to be an element of the ideal life, but in this case the form of life advocated is that of the Daoist sage, who transcends mundane human concerns to merge with nature or the Dào. The instrumental and moderate views articulate a relatively commonsensical position, on which the agent continues to pursue at least some characteristically human projects. On the radical view, by contrast, the agent ceases to exercise agency and lives a life hardly recognizable as human. The three views thus signal a tension in Zhuangist ethics, and the unattractiveness of the radical view poses a potential obstacle to the application of Daoist ideas in contemporary ethical discourse. The paper argues that there are principled grounds within Zhuangist thought for detaching the instrumental and moderate views from the radical view and rejecting the latter.

References to emptiness (*xū* 虛) or nothingness (*wú* 無) appear throughout the various strata and diverse doctrinal or authorial regions of the *Zhuāngzǐ* 莊子 anthology, one of our most important sources for early Daoist thought. Some of these are ontological, often cosmological, as when the *Dào* is said to have ‘no form’ (6/29) and to be something that cannot be possessed or said to exist (25/79), the myriad things are said to ‘issue from non-existence’ (23/57), and a rare, explicit passage on cosmogony states that ‘in the primordial beginning, there was nothing’ (12/37).¹ These ontological or cosmological contexts tend to favor the term *wú* over *xū*, because *wú* more specifically denotes non-existence or absence, but *xū* does occur

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in places, as when the text refers to ‘wandering in the supreme emptiness’ (22/65) or the ‘empty form’ of the ‘supreme unity’ (32/20).

More often, however, references to *xū* allude to a psychological state, different versions of which are central to several of the normative ethical views in the *Zhuāngzǐ*.² In many passages, *xū* appears merely as one of a series of adjectives describing a valorized or ideal state, without much in the way of concrete description. Such contexts often simply exhort the reader to be empty, without specifying precisely what this involves. A few passages give us more to sink our interpretive teeth into, however, and these turn out to be rich with conceptual connections to other passages that do not directly mention *xū*. So despite the brevity of the bits of text that discuss *xū*, their content resonates with other parts of the anthology enough to provide material sufficient to reconstruct a set of interrelated Zhuangist views on psychological emptiness.³ In this paper, I examine several such passages, unpack the concept of *xū* as they present it, and explore connections between *xū* and a network of other related Zhuangist notions.⁴

I propose that we find at least three views of psychological emptiness in the *Zhuāngzǐ*. In the first, which I will call the instrumental view, *xū* is valued primarily as a means or technique for efficacious action. In the second, the moderate view, it has intrinsic ethical value as an element of a psychological state characteristic of one Zhuangist vision of the good life. In the third, radical view, it is again an element of an ideal psychological state, but this time the degree of emptiness and the form of life advocated are those of the Daoist sage or saint, who has transcended mundane human concerns to merge with *Tiān* 天 (Heaven, Nature) or the *Dào* 道 (Way) of the cosmos and lives a life hardly recognizable as human.

The three versions can be seen as ranging from a relatively commonsensical view to a form of radical religious enthusiasm. In this respect, they echo the range of views other writers have found in the *Zhuāngzǐ* concerning the perfected person and the emotions.⁵ To take the emotions for comparison, some *Zhuāngzǐ* passages seem to hold that a person with a normatively good character, living the right sort of life, is likely to experience certain moderate, healthy emotions, such as a feeling of calm or peace (*ān* 安) and delight (*shàn* 善) in the natural process of transformation.⁶ Other passages, however, suggest the more radical view that the sage may lack any human emotions at all (5/54), his heart being like ‘dead ashes’ (22/24, 23/41).⁷ A roughly parallel contrast obtains between the instrumental and moderate views of emptiness, on which the agent continues to pursue at least some characteristically human projects, and the radical view, on which the agent effectively ceases to exercise agency at all, becoming almost a mere thing pushed to and fro by changes in the environment. As an ethical ideal, I suggest the radical view calls not for refutation so much as simply diagnosis of the psychological assumptions and ethical-religious beliefs on which it rests—beliefs that are no longer a live alternative for most of us today.

The three views of emptiness thus signal a tension in Zhuangist ethics and a potential problem for philosophers interested in exploring the implications of Daoism for contemporary ethical discourse. How do the moderate views on

emptiness, emotions, the good life, and so forth that we find in the *Zhuāngzǐ* relate to the more radical views? Do the *prima facie* reasonable moderate positions in fact lead inexorably to implausible, unappealing radical ones? If not, are there principled grounds for distinguishing between them and rejecting the radical positions? I will argue that the instrumental and moderate views of emptiness are indeed detachable from the radical view, for principled reasons available within the context of Zhuangist thought itself, and that these reasons provide compelling grounds for rejecting the radical view.

In what follows, I first consider in detail a rich text from the *Zhuāngzǐ* that depicts emptiness as a kind of psychophysical technique for the efficacious performance of complex tasks. I treat this text at length, to pave the way for exploring the conceptual connections between it and other *Zhuāngzǐ* passages. Next, I examine the moderate conception of psychological emptiness as part of the good life. In the course of discussing these first two sets of views, I sketch a network of conceptual relations between emptiness and other prominent Zhuangist notions. I then explore how some of these converge to form the radical view of emptiness.

Before commencing this detailed interpretive work, let me offer some introductory remarks about the translation and interpretation of *xū*, the central concept treated in the paper. *Xū* is commonly rendered as ‘emptiness’, a translation that, though not incorrect, is potentially misleading. In classical Chinese, *xū* is sometimes contrasted with *mǎn* 滿, ‘full’. But more often it contrasts with *shí* 實, which has the connotation of being solid, filled out, real, and fully realized or developed. Rather than connoting nothingness or a void, then, *xū* suggests something insubstantial, hollow, open, unfilled, unformed, or indeterminate. (It can also connote weakness, humility or compliance, insincerity or hypocrisy, and being hypothetical or imaginary.) The texts to be discussed below help fill in the content of *xū* as understood by Zhuangist writers. But a key point to remember is that given its general use in early texts, *xū* for the Zhuangists is less likely to connote emptiness in the sense of a void as much as insubstantiality, indeterminateness, and receptiveness. Indeed, even *wú* (nothing, absence) probably does not connote nothingness so much as ‘no-thing-ness’, the absence of determinate things or forms. The frequent association of *wú* with a kind of primordial potentiality out of which things are formed suggests that it does not refer to an utter void or vacuum.

Emptiness as a Technique

The most prominent explicit discussion of *xū* in the *Zhuāngzǐ* is probably found in the extended dialogue between Confucius 孔子 and Yán Huí 顏回 that opens Book 4, ‘The World Among People’. ‘Heart Fasting’, as I will call it, is the first of a series of three dialogues on how to cope with the practical challenges of government service. All three concern how to deal with difficult people: in ‘Heart Fasting’, a capricious tyrant; in ‘Mission’, the second dialogue, the lord of a foreign state; and in ‘Tutor’, the third, a dangerous, unruly crown prince. (The titles are my own, not the text’s.)

All three emphasize the need for flexible, contextually adjusted action that responds to the particular situation without abandoning the agent's goals. In all three, there is probably a risk of death if the principal character fails to handle himself well.

'Heart Fasting' begins with Yán Huí approaching Confucius for permission to travel to Wèi 衛 to reform its ruthless tyrant, under whose capricious rule 'the dead fill the state like fallen leaves in a swamp' (4/2).⁸ By way of justification, he cites Confucius's teaching that one should leave the state that is well ordered and go to the state in disorder, much as a doctor will seek to heal as many of the sick as possible. Confucius initially rejects the proposal, citing the difficulty, Yán Huí's lack of psychological preparation, his overambitious preoccupation with his good name and knowledge, and the likelihood that lecturing a tyrant on morality will get him executed for being a pest.

In response, Yán Huí proposes to be 'upright yet humble,⁹ diligent and unified' (4/15), thus avoiding several of the criticisms Confucius has just directed at him. Confucius rejects this approach for reasons that are obscure; interpretations of the text diverge widely. The main idea seems to be that it requires too much effort, being imbalanced toward the *yáng* 陽 (positive, active force), and involves a forced, outward show of virtue that is likely to invoke inward resistance in others.¹⁰

His first approach being too aggressive, Yán Huí next proposes a more passive, yielding strategy. He will be 'inwardly straight but outwardly bending, using allusions to ally with superiors' (4/18ff.). Being inwardly straight, he views himself as 'a follower of Heaven'—the equal of anyone, even an emperor, in being a child of Heaven—and will be unconcerned about others' approval or disapproval. Being outwardly bending or compliant, he will be 'a follower of humanity', who conforms to proper etiquette, so that no one can find fault in him. In his speech, he will be 'a follower of the ancients', employing only allusions and examples from ancient times. Though his words may be instructions or criticisms, they are not his own but the ancients'. In this way, he can speak directly without being held responsible for his words. Confucius rejects this plan for being ineffectual: at best, it might help one avoid blame, but will never reform the tyrant. It comprises 'too many methods of putting things in order, without discernment' (4/23). The core diagnosis is that, as with the preceding plan, this is 'still taking the heart as master' (*shī xīn* 師心) (4/24).¹¹

The key claim so far, then, is that one can handle a complex, difficult task such as reforming a tyrant only by ceasing to 'take the heart as master'—that is, ceasing to guide one's actions by the heart. Both of the strategies Yán Huí proposes for dealing with the tyrant involve a self-conscious effort to maintain a particular inner state and to respond to situations according to a limited set of preset formulae he has settled on or formed (*chéng* 成) in his heart. This fixed, inflexible programming is a key target of Confucius's criticism.

In pre-Hàn thought, the advice not to 'take the heart as master' has special significance, for besides cognitive and affective functions, a central role of the heart was to guide action. Early texts often refer to the heart as the 'ruler' or 'lord' (*jūn* 君) of the body and other organs, responsible for command and control in action.

Moreover, cognition itself is seen as intertwined with action guidance. Cognition is conceptualized as a process of discriminating *shì* 是 (this) from *fēi* 非 (not), typically with respect to a term denoting a kind (*lèi* 類) of thing. Recognizing something as an ox, for instance, is understood as a process of discriminating (*biàn* 辨) it as *shì* with respect to the term ‘ox’. This sort of distinction between *shì* and *fēi* is seen as having an inherently evaluative, action-guiding force, in two respects. First, affirming something as *shì* or rejecting it as *fēi* triggers certain sorts of norm-governed responses—such as applying a term such as ‘ox’ to the thing or using it to pull a cart. Second, besides their general use to refer to what is or is not some contextually specified kind of thing, *shì* and *fēi* are used in ethical contexts to refer to what is ethically right or wrong. Discriminating something as *shì* implies that it is right and should be done; *fēi*, that it is wrong and should be avoided. The general pre-Hàn model of action is what I have elsewhere called a discrimination-and-response model (see Fraser, 2005).¹² Action is guided by systems of evaluative discriminations and associated responses. The heart discriminates some thing or situation as belonging to a certain kind—as *shì* or *fēi* with respect to that kind—and thereby invokes a certain type of response to it. The content of the response is determined by factors such as biological instinct, the agent’s intentions, moral guidelines, education and training, and customs. Such a system of distinctions and responses is one way of conceptualizing what a *dào* (way) is.

In proposing that action should *not* be guided by the heart, then, the text is rejecting the mainstream view of how action is normally guided. So on what basis is Yán Huí to act? What *dào* should he follow? Confucius tells him to ‘fast the heart’ (*xīn zhāi* 心齋). Specifically, he is to:

Unify your intent. Listen not with the ears but with the heart; listen not with the heart but with the *qì* 氣. Listening stops at the ears; the heart stops at the tally. As to the *qì*, it is what is empty (*xū*) and waits on things. Only follow as your *dào* concentrating emptiness.¹³ Emptiness is the fasting of the heart. (4/26–28)

The fasting of the heart is apparently stilling its activity—ceasing to ‘listen’ with it—and emptying it of all content but *qì* (breath, vapor). *Xū* here thus is not emptiness in the sense of vacuousness or nothingness. It refers to the features of *qì*—the vapor-like, volatile, dynamic stuff out of which, in ancient Chinese metaphysics, everything is made.

The passage suggests that listening merely with the ears goes only as far as the words or sounds we hear. Listening with the heart goes further, but only as far as the ‘tally’. An ancient Chinese tally consisted of two parts that fit together like puzzle pieces. The metaphor probably alludes either to thoughts (*yì* 意) and their objects or to ‘names’ or words (*míng* 名) and their referents. Normally, according to ancient Chinese theories of mind and language, cognitive processes rely on discriminating things as *shì* (this) or *fēi* (not) with respect to thoughts or names that, like tallies, pair up with their objects or referents. What the heart ‘stops’ at will thus be determined by the nature of the tallies it employs—typically, thoughts or names associated with various kinds (*lèi*) of things. These tallies will be fixed or determined in advance,

usually by the language, customs, and ethical practices we have learned. Through its conceptualizing or discriminating functions, then, the heart determines the sorts of things that ‘listening’ will ‘stop’ at. When we ‘take the heart as our master’, it guides action through the system of tallies it employs. The guidance we receive—what the heart ‘hears’ and how it directs our response—is thus determined largely by the tallies, rather than by things themselves. So our capacity for adjustment to the particular context may be severely limited by a particular system of tallies. In fasting the heart, we empty it of these tallies, removing the fixed standards by which it normally guides us. We cease to take the heart as our master and at the same time open ourselves up to being guided by things themselves—or so the text suggests.

‘Taking the heart as master’ echoes the famous line in the ‘Discourse on Equalizing Things’, book 2 of the *Zhuāngzǐ*, that if we follow the ‘made-up’ or ‘fully formed’ heart (*chéng xīn* 成心), taking it as a guide or master (*shī zhī* 師之), then even a fool has his own master (2/21–22). Evaluative, action-guiding *shì/fēi* distinctions, the text holds, exist only when formed in the heart. Indeed, the Zhuangists are acutely aware that the distinctions that ground action are artificial, in the sense that they are instituted by human activity and not by things in themselves. Without human beings around to draw distinctions, the world is conceptually and normatively an undivided whole (2/35, 2/55). Our very perception of things as things, along with our responses to them, depends on a scheme of *shì/fēi* distinctions implemented and controlled by the heart. In fasting the heart, we are to forget or empty ourselves of these distinctions, leaving only the *qì* (vapor) that permeates our body.¹⁴

The characteristic features of *qì* here, in contrast to the ears and heart, are its passivity, receptiveness, and responsiveness. It ‘waits on things’ in a state of unformed, unbiased readiness.¹⁵ The phrase ‘waits on things’ suggests that the agent does not act of his own initiative, but only responds to things as they come. Such ‘listening’ will thus be fully sensitive to and guided by things themselves, not by preformed distinctions in the heart. It contrasts with the deliberate strategizing of Yán Huí’s original plans, the second of which was criticized for (among other things) lacking *dié* 諒, which probably refers to discernment of the situation. Another way of characterizing this ‘listening’ might be to say that in guiding action the typical way, through a conventional discrimination-and-response system implemented by the heart, we are following one of many possible human *dào*. If we succeed in guiding action through the *qì*, on the other hand, we are following the *dào* of *Tiān* (Heaven or Nature) itself. By listening with the *qì*, one can become ‘an envoy of *Tiān*’ (4/31), and for this reason one’s actions are presumably more likely to be effective.

After receiving these instructions, Yán Huí says that unlike before, when he was solidly or fully himself, now it is as if he’d never begun to exist (4/28). Being solidly himself is associated with having a substantial or full heart; among the distinctions in such a ‘formed’ (*chéng*) or substantial heart is the self/other distinction. The self’s never having existed is associated with *xū*. So the *xū* state apparently involves a loss of consciousness of one’s self and presumably with it consciousness of one’s plans and intentions. Confucius affirms that this absence of consciousness of the self is precisely what *xū* is. He then gives Yán Huí a series of instructions about how to act

from this state. These emphasize contextual, flexible responses, taking advantage of any opening to influence the tyrant but otherwise laying low. Huí is to have ‘no doors, no outlets, to treat all abodes as one, lodging in the inevitable’ (4/30). ‘Lodging in the inevitable’ resonates with the normative view of equanimity presented in other *Zhuāngzǐ* passages, as I will explain in the next section. Here, it probably also relates to being empty and listening with the *qì*, for in the empty state the agent experiences himself not as intentionally undertaking action so much as being caused by the situation to respond in various ways.¹⁶ He experiences his actions as ‘inevitable’ or ‘unavoidable’, in that they are determined by the circumstances, not by self-conscious intentions, thoughts, or values—which thus cannot interfere with ‘listening’ and responding to things. This sort of action is described metaphorically as ‘walking without touching the ground’, ‘flying without wings’, and ‘knowing by means of not-knowing’ (4/30–32)—to act and know, but not by relying on the means by which one normally acts and knows, and in particular, not by means of ‘knowledge’, here probably explicit, fixed, learned standards of *shì/fēi*. Huí is to clear the channels from his sense organs so that they connect directly inward, without passing through the heart’s cognitive processing (4/32–33). This seems to be a matter of perceiving directly by means of the *qì*, rather than through the cognitive processing of the heart.¹⁷ ‘Perceiving’ is probably not the right word, however; the idea is more likely that when the channels through the sense organs are cleared, *qì* will permeate and flow through the body, allowing events outside the body to directly prompt responses.¹⁸ If one can fully achieve this sort of state, ‘ghosts and spirits will come to dwell, let alone humans!’ (4/33). This exclamation is not a mere rhetorical flourish, but probably refers to the trance state of a medium or shaman possessed by a spirit. The idea seems to be that emptying the heart enables one even to commune with spirits, let alone influence other human beings, a far easier task. Confucius concludes by citing various ancient worthies who attained this state, calling it ‘the transformation of the myriad things’ (4/33). The point is probably that by attaining the state of *xū*, one becomes perfectly responsive to and thus embodies the transformations of everything in one’s environment, without interference from the psychological processes typical of the realm of ‘the human’.

A striking aspect of this rich, untidy, fantastic dialogue is that ultimately Confucius does not simply refuse Yán Huí permission to go on the proposed mission. Thus in this particular passage, the state of *xū*, the resulting ability to listen with the *qì*, and with it the (purported) ability to respond perfectly to the particular situation amount to a means of carrying out a certain project, rather than an end or value in themselves. (This is not to say they might not also be regarded as intrinsically valuable, but only that their role in the dialogue is that of a means.) Intriguingly, although *xū* is linked to unselfconsciousness, Yán Huí is also instructed to unify his *zhì* 志 (intent). *Zhì* is usually understood as an aspect of the heart’s typical, non-*xū* functioning. In many pre-Hàn texts, it can be interpreted roughly as ‘intention’, in effect the direction of the heart or the end toward which it is directed, often settled through deliberation. *Zhì* may be conscious or dispositional. We might think of it as fixing the direction of the heart or programming the agent to act in a certain way.

In some contexts, it probably also alludes to the strength or firmness of one's intentions, and thus also may be interpretable as 'determination'. As *zhì* is typically used, then, the instruction to 'unify the *zhì*' might seem to conflict with the idea of fasting or emptying the heart. So probably the import of *zhì* is slightly different here. Instead of referring to a self-conscious intention, it may refer to a state of unified, focused, unselfconscious attention or concentration. This state would be similar to that of a tennis player awaiting the opponent's serve or a soloist in an orchestra awaiting the conductor's cue. The more unified or focused such a state is, the more 'empty' it is likely to seem phenomenologically, in that extraneous thoughts and self-consciousness either cease or are driven to the far periphery of the agent's attention. So it may be precisely by achieving this sort of psychological unity that the agent is able to 'listen with the *qì*'.¹⁹

In any case, the fact that Yán Huí still has a mission—indeed, one undertaken on his own very Confucian initiative—and still has *zhì*, in whatever sense, means that *xū* here cannot entail emptying himself to the extent that he ceases to exercise agency. He is still engaged in goal-directed activity initiated of his own accord on the basis of his moral values—in particular, on the basis of a teaching acquired in his training under Confucius. However, he is now to exercise agency through the flexible, contextually sensitive responses of the *qì*, rather than by means of the rigid, predetermined plans and distinctions of the heart. One possible explanation is that the directedness of the *zhì* has now in effect programmed the *qì*, rather than the heart, such that the *qì* will now guide his actions.

States and techniques akin to those described in 'Heart Fasting' are mentioned in numerous *Zhuāngzǐ* passages, particularly those describing the performance of marvelous skills. A hunchback's amazing skill in catching cicadas with a pole is ascribed to his intense, undivided concentration, or 'use of the *zhì*' (19/21), which seems similar to the 'unified *zhì*' required to listen with the *qì*. When catching the bugs, despite 'the hugeness of heaven and earth and the numerousness of the myriad things', he is aware only of cicada wings, his heart being empty of everything else (19/20–21). A good swimmer can quickly learn how to handle a boat because he is able to 'forget the water', his heart thus being empty of thoughts of how to navigate it (19/24). Worries about the various ways his craft might capsize are 'unable to enter his dwelling' (that is, the heart) (19/25).²⁰ The master engraver Qìng 慶, whose carvings are so fine they seem the work of spirits, begins a project by fasting to 'still the heart' until he has no thought of congratulations, reward, honor, salary, praise, blame, skill, or clumsiness and ultimately forgets even his own four limbs and body (19/55–58), just as fasting the heart led Yán Huí to forget himself. In this still, unselfconscious state, his skill is concentrated and outside distractions fade away. He then observes the heaven-made nature of the wood and sets to work only if he 'sees' the finished carving in it, a process he describes as 'matching *Tiān* (Heaven/Nature) with *Tiān*' (19/59)—being guided by the nature of things themselves, just as 'listening with the *qì*' enables one to be guided by things, rather than one's prejudices. When the carpenter Chuí 倮 drew perfect circles or squares, 'his fingers transformed with things and he did not check them with the heart, so his

Soul Tower was unified and unobstructed' (19/62)—a depiction of concentration, contextual sensitivity, and absence of conscious control by the heart that closely echoes those in 'Heart Fasting'. Cook Dīng 庖丁 the butcher famously describes his psychological state as 'encountering [the oxen] with the spirit and not seeing with the eyes. Perceptual cognition stops and spirit-desire proceeds' (3/6). He follows the natural patterns, going by what is 'inherently so' in the structure of the animals he chops up (3/7).²¹ When he comes to a complicated place, he concentrates and proceeds with great subtlety, feeling out the path between the joints (3/10). As in 'Heart Fasting', this amounts to guiding action by 'things', not by one's own heart or knowledge.

Taken together with 'Heart Fasting', then, these passages present us with a largely overlapping picture of a psychological state, or perhaps an interrelated family of states, that the Zhuangists take to facilitate the efficacious performance of challenging tasks. This ideal state generally involves intense concentration; unselfconsciousness; the elimination of extraneous, distracting thoughts; and a keen, intuitive sensitivity and responsiveness to features of the particular situation. The latter point contrasts with the more rigid, self-conscious guidance of the heart, which is probably thought of as employing fixed conceptual distinctions determined without regard for particular circumstances. Self-consciousness, conscious deliberation, reference to explicit standards, and extraneous thoughts are all seen as interfering with the flow of appropriate, contextually sensitive skilled responses. Intriguingly, of the six passages just cited, only 'Heart Fasting' refers to this sort of state as *xū*, gives a physiological explanation in terms of *qi*, or alludes significantly to mysticism.²² Outside of 'Heart Fasting', then, we could just as well label this sort of focused, indeterminate, responsive state something other than *xū*, such as 'concentration' or 'spirit-action'.

So far in this section I have been treating *xū* or a *xū*-like state as a technique for effective performance. But given how crucial this state seems to be for truly excellent performance, we might suggest that it is partly constitutive of, or perhaps a causally necessary condition for, such performance. Truly masterful performance typically issues from an unselfconscious, responsive state of concentration; to the extent that the agent is still deliberately 'taking the heart as master', his skill falls short of mastery. Some version of *xū* and of a state akin to 'listening with the *qi*' may be an inherent part of advanced levels of skill.

A further observation is that none of the passages I have cited associates this sort of state with 'nonaction' or 'doing nothing' (*wúwéi* 無為), which by contrast is associated with the radical view of *xū*.²³ The absence of any reference to *wúwéi* suggests that the psychological states and skilled performances depicted in these passages may constitute an ideal distinct from that of *wúwéi*.²⁴ Indeed, this is to be expected, given the role of the focused, indeterminate, responsive state in action. For this psychological state is still goal-directed; achieving *xū* in this sense does not entail erasing one's existing goals or intentions, as *wúwéi* seems to—at least the conception of *wúwéi* associated with the radical version of *xū* discussed below. Moreover, the advice to 'fast the heart' and become *xū* is effective only given the thorough training and preparation of an expert or near-expert agent, such as Yán Huí, who has studied

with Confucius for years, or the hunchback, Qìng the woodcarver, or Cook Dīng, all of whom have extensive training in their skills. The instrumental form of *xū* is thus consistent with having will or intention (*zhì*) and with some form of learning (*xué* 學). So it contrasts with familiar descriptions of *wúwéi*, which in the *Dàodéjīng* is characterized by an absence of will or goal-directedness and the loss or abandonment of knowledge or abilities acquired through learning.

Without guidance from the heart or ‘knowing’ (*zhī* 知), how does one exercise agency? How is it that Yán Huí, for instance, can fast the heart, yet retain *zhì* and still carry out a project? I suggest—though for brevity I will not develop the point here—that the Cook Dīng story and other passages provide a fairly straightforward answer. Cook Dīng tells us that his skill is guided not by the senses or ‘knowing’ but by ‘spirit’ (*shén* 神). Similarly, Confucius remarks of the hunchback that his *zhì* (intent) is ‘undivided, such that he is concentrated in spirit’ (19/21). Carpenter Chū’s skill is linked to his unified, obstructed ‘Soul Tower’, probably a label for either the heart or another organ as occupied by spirit. Moreover, both Qìng’s masterful carvings and the skill of the ferryman who prompts Yán Huí’s inquiry about handling a boat (19/22) are compared to the work of spirits (*shén*—in this case not the agent’s spirit, but magical, ghostlike entities). It seems plausible, then, that in much Zhuangist thought the locus of normatively ideal agency may not be the heart, prone as it is to obstruction by *shì/fēi* distinctions and emotions, but spirit (*shén*), which takes over and guides action appropriately once the heart has been emptied or calmed.²⁵ The heart may be associated primarily with self-conscious thought, deliberation, and application of explicit, rigid *shì/fēi* standards, the spirit with unselfconscious, spontaneous, intuitive, expert responses—whose efficacy might understandably strike the writers as quasi-magical or supramundane. The key to the normatively positive character of the spirit’s agency would be that, as Cook Dīng explains, it conforms to natural patterns. The Zhuangists may have a psycho-physiological explanation of this capacity, grounded in *qì* metaphysics. Presumably spirit (*shén*), which is endowed in us by *Tiān* (Nature, Heaven), is itself constituted by insubstantial, vapor-like *qì*. Thus perhaps it is regarded as especially sensitive to the patterns in things around it, such that its movements can ‘transform with things’ and ‘match *Tiān* with *Tiān*’.

Emptiness as Part of the Good Life

Insofar as *xū* is a technique for the excellent or proper performance of projects and other activities—and may even be partly constitutive of excellent performance—it will have a role in a good or flourishing human life. For as the example of exemplary figures such as Cook Dīng suggests, such a life will generally include various projects, activities, and tasks, and it would seem that a life is better, or reaches a higher level of flourishing, to the extent that these activities are performed excellently. Beyond this point, however, *xū* may itself be a constitutive feature of the best sort of life. The point of the Cook Dīng story, for instance, is that the sort

of activity it describes—fully responsive to natural patterns and what is ‘inherently so’—and Dīng’s subtle, adaptive approach to problem-solving are not merely exemplary techniques, but a paradigm of how to ‘care for’ or ‘nourish’ life (3/12). Since a *xū*-like psychological state may be a crucial part of following the sort of *dào* exemplified by Cook Dīng, such a state may be both a means of living the best sort of life and an intrinsic part of that life.

This proposal is supported by ‘Mission’, the dialogue that follows ‘Heart Fasting’ in ‘The World Among People’. In ‘Mission’, Yègōng Zīgāo 葉公子高, feverish from stress over a high-pressure diplomatic assignment, seeks advice from Confucius. In response, Confucius discusses not only techniques for handling such a mission, but general points concerning human life. He implies that the best sort of life will take into account two ‘great commandments’, from which there is ‘no escape in the world’ (4/40). The first of these is fate (*mìng* 命), by which we are bound to care for our parents; the second is duty (*yì* 義), by which we are bound to serve a political sovereign. The best life, he implies, will be one in which we manifest filial devotion (*xiào* 孝), political loyalty (*zhōng* 忠), and a third feature: *dé* 德 (power, potency, vitality, virtue), for Zhuangists the crucial element of an ethically ideal character. The first two of these concern how we serve our parents and ruler. The third concerns how we serve or care for our own heart:

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

In nearly any area of life, we encounter things beyond our control, which the Zhuangists call ‘the inevitable’ or (*bù dé yǐ* 不得已). A key to reaching the highest level of *dé* is to recognize the inevitable and be at peace with it, just as we accept and take for granted our race, place of birth, sex, height, or the number of fingers and toes we have. If we succeed in being as fully at peace with the inevitable as we are with these aspects of our fate (*mìng*), then intense emotions such as sorrow and joy, or delight in life and hatred of death, will cease to disturb us. The way to achieve such equanimity is by ‘forgetting’ ourselves—by ceasing to attend to our self, our welfare, our preferences. This is the solution to Yègōng Zīgāo’s acute psychophysical distress: Forget yourself and just focus fully on the job at hand.

Although this passage does not mention *xū*, it is linked to ‘Heart Fasting’ and other passages about *xū* through the themes of the inevitable, ‘forgetting’ or lack of consciousness of the self, following along with the facts of the situation, and the affective equanimity of the person of *dé* (power). Recall that the sign Yán Huí had attained a state of *xū* was his unselfconsciousness, which he described as feeling as if he had never existed (4/28). Having attained *xū*, he was to proceed by flexibly adjusting to the tyrant’s behavior—the facts of the particular situation—and by ‘lodging in the inevitable’ (4/30). Such an unselfconscious, calm, empty state probably also entails affective equanimity, since intense emotions would ‘refill’ the

heart and reawaken self-consciousness.²⁶ So the unselfconscious, calm, responsive psychological state described in ‘Mission’ largely overlaps with, and may be an instance of, the sort of state described in ‘Heart Fasting’ as *xū*.

‘Mission’ is not a particularly mystical or religious text, as ‘Heart Fasting’ arguably is. It is mainly a practical discussion of the challenges of diplomacy and of stress management in unavoidable, anxiety-ridden circumstances. Nevertheless, what emerges from it and other thematically related *Zhuāngzǐ* passages is a vision of the ethically good life—the life of *dé*—as one in which either *xū* or a *xū*-like state has a central place. Collectively, these passages depict the best sort of life as one in which we maintain equanimity by being at peace with the inevitable, forgetting about matters such as loving life and hating death, and just acting on the facts of particular situations. We are to ‘be at peace with the time and dwell in the flow’, so that ‘sorrow and joy cannot enter’, a state the texts call ‘being freed from the bonds’ (3/18, 6/52). This description resonates with the portrayal of the sage as ‘not harming himself internally by likes and dislikes, constantly going along with the self-so, without adding to life’ (5/57–58).²⁷ We are thus to be empty of extreme emotions, at ease, and indeterminate or receptive, continually ready to flow along with changing circumstances—descriptions that coincide with the instrumental version of *xū*. Even if seized with a disfiguring disease, for instance, one’s heart should be ‘tranquil and untroubled’ (6/49). At the conclusion of ‘Mission’, Confucius says that the ‘ultimate’ is to ‘let your heart roam by taking things as a vehicle and nurture the center by entrusting yourself to the inevitable’ (4/52–53). Even if denied the opportunity to wander about on its own accord, the heart can still roam freely by maintaining a *xū*-like state in which it rides along with things as they come. We are to nurture the ‘center’—probably the *qì, jīng* 精 (quintessence, refined *qì*), or *shén* (spirit) within us—by calmly flowing along with circumstances.²⁸ So on the one hand, we accept the inevitable or ‘things’ as ‘fate’, while on the other, we experience a form of psychological freedom, having escaped the bonds of emotion arising from *shì/fēi* judgments (5/54) or likes and dislikes (5/57) and learned to ‘roam’ (*yóu* 遊, 游) by going along with ‘things’. Accepting fate is seen as itself an ethically admirable attitude, but perhaps even more important, it is a prerequisite for free roaming, a central element of the Zhuangist vision of the good life. While accepting fate, we continue to exercise agency by finding ways to roam within the constraints provided by ‘things’ or circumstances.²⁹

These descriptions pertain mainly to affective states, but there is no doubt a cognitive side to this sort of psychological emptiness as well. This side is hinted at in Zhuāng Zhōu’s admonishment of Huì Shī 惠施 in the well-known story of the giant gourds Huìzǐ smashed because they were useless as dippers or jugs. That Huìzǐ failed to think of using them to make a raft to go boating, says Zhuāngzǐ, shows that he ‘still has a tangled heart’ (1/42). The implication is that having a ‘tangled’ or ‘disheveled’ heart is not merely instrumentally ineffective, but a normatively unattractive way to live. Like a ‘fully formed’ heart (*chéng xīn*), such a heart contrasts with one that is ready to adapt flexibly to new circumstances and thus is in some sense *xū*—empty, indeterminate, and receptive. Such a *xū* heart, I suggest—though for brevity, I will

not develop the point here—coincides with the state referred to in the ‘Discourse on Evening Things Out’ as the ‘axis of *Dào*’ (*Dào shū* 道樞), achieved through a form of practical wisdom called *míng* 明 (understanding, clarity). In the ‘axis of *Dào*’, we cease to draw *shì/fēi* distinctions, thus enabling ourselves cognitively to ‘respond without limit’ to circumstances as they arise (2/31). Interestingly, it seems likely that both this state of practical wisdom and the affective equanimity described above are achieved partly through the exercise of cognitive or intellectual capacities. The discussion in ‘Evening Things Out’ of the limitations of *shì/fēi* distinctions illustrates the cognitive attitudes of the person of *míng*, but also seeks to lead readers, at least partly through reasoning, to realize *míng* themselves. In ‘Mission’, the ‘ultimate in *dé*’ is described as ‘*knowing* what you can’t do anything about and being at peace with it’ (4/43, my emphasis), the implication being that the affective state of ‘being at peace’ is either conceptually paired with or causally the result of the cognitive state of recognizing what is beyond our control.³⁰

To sum up this section, some *Zhuāngzǐ* passages suggest that a core element of human *dé*, and thus of the best sort of life, is a *xū*-like, unselfconscious psychological state by means of which we can maintain affective equanimity, smoothly adapt to circumstances, and thus roam freely through the world. This state has both an affective and a cognitive side. Affectively, it is an aspect of psychological well-being; cognitively, it is an aspect of intellectual and practical wisdom and contributes to cognitive openness, receptivity, and creativity. This state seems also to be achieved through a combination of cognitive and affective processes, on the one hand recognizing and on the other coming to feel at peace with certain facts about the world. It may or may not be identical to the state of *xū* described in ‘Heart Fasting’, but in any case, the two are similar in significant respects. The passages that advocate this moderate form of emptiness do not suggest that perfecting one’s *dé* in this way entails leaving ordinary human life behind. Their concerns seem rather with aspects of psychological well-being, practical wisdom, and perhaps psychophysical hygiene that are intrinsic parts of the good human life. On this moderate view, then, some form of ‘empty’ psychological state is an intrinsic good, part of the good life, but not the central aim of life itself.

Emptiness as the Central End of Life

In other parts of the *Zhuāngzǐ*, we find two sorts of developments in the conception of *xū*. The scope of *xū* broadens, so that it comes to cover not merely a technique for effective action and a healthy, normatively admirable state of equanimity, adaptability and openness, but the individual’s entire psychology, affecting every aspect of life. Moreover, *xū* becomes not merely a valued state that is an element of the good life, but the central end or defining feature of the ideal life. For it is by attaining the *xū* state that the perfected individual merges with *Tiān* (Heaven) or *Dào* (the Way).

Consider the well-known description of the ‘mirror-heart’ of the perfected person in ‘Responding to Emperor-Kings’, along with ‘Heart Fasting’ one of the two most important passages on *xū* in the ‘inner chapters’:

Do not be the incarnation of a name; do not be a storehouse of plans; do not undertake affairs; do not be a master of knowledge. Identify fully with the limitless and roam in the sign-less. Exhaust what you receive from Heaven without any thought of gain. Just be empty (*xū*), that’s all. The ultimate person’s use of the heart is like a mirror, neither welcoming nor escorting, responding without storing. So he can overcome things without being harmed. (7/31–33)

The *xū* state here seems to be presented as the primary aim or end in life. It is depicted as involving three sorts of features. We are to be unconcerned with reputation, plans, affairs and knowledge—and thus with any ambition, goal, or undertaking. We are to become one with and roam in the limitless—what has no borders or signs, the primal unity of nature or the *Dào* in itself, apart from the conceptual, distinction-drawing activity of the heart. At the same time, we are to fully exhaust or realize our natural endowment, though without considering ourselves to have obtained anything and with no thought of gain. The epitome of *xū* is the mirror-heart of the perfected person, blank and empty of any content of its own, which merely reflects what appears before it. Action here is seen as guided by the heart, rather than the *qì* or spirit. But in the passages discussed in the preceding sections, the *qì* or spirit retains a direction or intention, which prompts action directed at some end. Here, by contrast, the heart cannot really be said to produce action, as such, but only reflexive responses, on the order of pulling one’s hand away from a fire. It responds to situations as they arise, without storing anything afterwards and thus without giving rise to emotions, thoughts, or memories that would disturb the *xū* state. This immediate responsiveness supposedly facilitates success in dealing with things and protects the agent from harm, presumably by ensuring that he responds appropriately, without bias or distortion, and by preventing emotional and physical distress. So *xū* here also has instrumental value, though the text’s main point is probably that it is a normatively ideal state in itself.

This passage can plausibly be given either a moderate or a radical interpretation. Allowing for a bit of rhetorical excess, we might read it as offering the commonsensical advice that we should simply strive to follow the path before us, fulfilling our natural endowment, without needlessly distracting or worrying ourselves with thoughts of success or failure, profit or loss, ambition or reputation, and so forth. In a highly traditional social setting such as that of ancient China, in which most people were born into a certain social role and way of life, had few alternatives open to them, and could simply ‘reflect’ and ‘respond’ to the circumstances in which they found themselves, this might be a reasonable attitude. *Xū* could be a key to peace of mind—and thus a good life—and perhaps to excellence in performing one’s allotted role. As in ‘Heart Fasting’, being open, responsive, and unbiased, as a mirror is, would be instrumentally useful in the performance of many tasks.³¹

A literal reading suggests a more radical view. The passage tells us not to undertake affairs or endeavors, not to accumulate knowledge, and not to aim at gaining anything beyond what we have received from *Tiān*. The reference to *Tiān* could refer to developing our natural abilities, but it might instead allude to developing only the natural or heavenly within us—our *qì*, *jīng* (quintessence), or *shén* (spirit)—while letting go of human affairs and concerns. ‘Identifying with the limitless’, ‘roaming in the sign-less’, and the mirror metaphor sound like instructions to dwell permanently in either a trance state or a state of blank, unthinking, passive readiness—though a readiness that has no goal and is not directed at anything in particular.

This normative view is bizarre enough that there is a strong temptation to dismiss the radical reading as a misunderstanding. Edward Slingerland, for instance, argues that parts of the *Zhuāngzǐ* such as the mirror-heart passage, which seem to endorse a doctrine of ‘no-self’ through metaphors of emptiness and forgetting, are directed specifically at removing ‘cognitive flaws’ such as ‘our tendencies to be “full” of ourselves or “stuck on” our values and ideals’ (Slingerland, 2003, p. 198). *Xū* and related concepts, he suggests, are properly understood not as leading to ‘annihilation’ of the self, but as producing a kind of clearing or openness that either allows the normative order—*Tiān* or *Dào*—to enter into the agent or enables a ‘normatively positive instantiation’ of the self to emerge (Slingerland, 2003, p. 198), as when Cook Dīng’s action is guided by his spirit, rather than by perception and cognition. This suggestion seems to me reasonable in spirit, if not in letter, concerning what I have been calling the instrumental and moderate versions of the emptiness ideal (with the proviso that *xū* aims at eliminating not only cognitive but affective obstacles). But numerous *Zhuāngzǐ* passages seem to advocate a stronger view, one that amounts to relinquishing agency itself in order to merge wholly with what Slingerland calls ‘the normative order’. Indeed, the very idea of the normative order entering or merging with the individual—rather than the individual *interacting* with the normative order—suggests that the individual has ceased to be an agent, in any normal sense of the word, and has instead been absorbed into the flow.³²

I have in mind passages that depict the normatively perfected person as being, for instance, like ‘an infant’, who ‘acts without knowing what he is doing, moves without knowing where he is going, his body like the limb of a withered tree and heart like dead ashes’ (23/41). Or consider the directive to ‘let your heart wander in plainness, merge your *qì* with the vastness, follow along with how things are in themselves, making no room for the personal, and the world will be in order’ (7/10–11).³³ *Sī* 私, or ‘the personal’—a word that in ancient texts typically connotes bias, partiality, and selfishness—potentially refers to all aspects of individual identity, motivation, and judgment. This advice is thus consistent with the exhortation, in another passage, to attain a state of stillness, emptiness (*xū*), and nonaction (*wúwéi* 無為) in which all desire, aversion, and emotion are eliminated as ‘encumbrances of *dé* (power)’, and all choice, knowledge, and ability (*néng* 能) are done away with as ‘blockages to *Dào*’ (23/67–70). Or consider the famous depiction of Yán Huí as ‘improving’ when he not only forgets the artificial moral standards of humaneness (*rén* 仁) and rightness (*yì* 義) and the contrived outward forms of ritual (*lǐ* 禮) and music (*yuè* 樂), but

simply ‘sits and forgets’ (*zuò wàng* 坐忘). It is hard to see what, if anything, is left of human life and agency once we have, as Yán Huí says he has, ‘smashed up limbs and body, driven out perception and understanding, parted from form, eliminated knowing, and identified with the great thoroughfare’ (6/89–93).

Descriptions of the radical sage ideal such as the following thus seem to me to epitomize an important yet unsettling strand of Zhuangist thought:

The sage’s life is *Tiān* (Heaven, nature) proceeding, his death is the transformation of things. . . . Only when roused does he respond, only when pressed does he move, only when inevitable does he arise. He casts off knowledge and reasons (*gù* 故) and follows the patterns of *Tiān* His life is as if floating, his death as if coming to rest. He does not think or deliberate, does not plan ahead His spirit is pure, his soul does not tire. In emptiness, nothingness, calm, and indifference he merges with the power (*dé*) of *Tiān*. (15/10–14)

Emptiness here is not a technique or an aspect of psychological well-being, nor is it focused narrowly at eliminating cognitive or affective obstacles to a normatively good life. It has become the very point of life. One is to live ‘as if floating’, without thoughts or plans, moving only when pushed. Such Zhuangist texts—and there are many—suggest a normative ideal no longer recognizably human, though perhaps familiar as an expression of an all-too-human impulse to assimilate into something higher and more powerful than ourselves, thus attaining a privileged, authoritative, ‘genuine’ (*zhēn* 真) (15/22) mode of being.³⁴

Unlike the instrumental and moderate views of emptiness, the radical view is not grounded in considerations that link up with characteristic human concerns, such as psychological health or effective performance of our projects. It is grounded in the religious faith—understandable, in pre-Hàn China—that *Tiān* or *Dào* constitutes an ultimate normative order, that the best life is therefore one that fully conforms to or identifies with it, and that conscious thought and human agency are not only not part of such a life but the main obstacles to it. For—on this line of thinking—if there is a natural normative order, it should be something we can just follow along with immediately and spontaneously, as an expert swimmer does in flowing through the rapids: ‘I follow the *dào* of the water without doing anything personal (*sī*)’ (19/52–53). That we do not seem to spontaneously, automatically follow the *Dào* suggests that, unlike all other parts of nature, something within us blocks us from doing so. That something is presumably what distinguishes us from other creatures: language, thought, judgment, but above all agency—the capacity for action determined by our intentions, apart from instinct.³⁵ If these obstacles are removed, supposedly, we will spontaneously accord with the normative order. The key to following *Dào*, then, will be to become empty, unselfconscious, and do nothing, simply letting oneself be pulled along by the environment—much as Yán Huí or Qìng must empty or still the heart, become unselfconscious, and respond to things, or as the swimmer follows along with the water, doing nothing ‘personal’.

Another, related way to understand the radical view is as an expression, in the context of pre-Hàn thought, of ideas akin in some respects to an ideal observer conception of morality. An ideal observer theory holds that what is morally right is

what would be endorsed by an ideally benevolent, impartial, and knowledgeable observer. The radical view is not—at least not directly—a theory about what is morally right. However, it does depict a perfected agent who resembles an ideal observer in being fully informed and impartial. Extending an idea first developed by the Mohists, in their conception of *Tiān* as the highest moral model, proponents of the radical view probably conceived of the ideal ethical attitude as one that is perfectly unbiased, in the sense of being free of any ‘personal’ or ‘partial’ (*sī* 私) intentions, desires, or judgments—in effect, the attitude of *Tiān* itself. Lacking all ‘personal’ motivation, an agent with such an attitude would take no action of his own initiative, moving ‘only when pressed’. At the same time, consistent with the pre-Hàn conception of knowledge as a form of skill and with the discrimination-and-response model of agency, they probably thought of perfect knowledge and action as manifested in a blank, unselfconscious, *xū*-like state that would generate automatic, immediate, appropriate responses to whatever particular situation might arise. Combining these conceptions of perfect impartiality, knowledge, and action yields a conception of the sage or ideal moral agent that coincides largely with the radical depiction in the passage quoted above. The problem, of course, is that for finite beings such as ourselves, this ideal is unreachable even in principle, since the level of impartiality, knowledge, and skill it demands could be attainable only by a god.³⁶

The radical view can thus be seen as the product of certain extreme religious or ethical beliefs combined with an implausible extrapolation or decontextualization of the skilled, adaptive, expert responses that issue from the instrumental *xū* state.³⁷ Phenomenologically, such responses may indeed seem to be driven purely by events in the agent’s environment—in the way that a tennis player in the *xū* state returns a serve automatically, without thinking—rather than by the agent’s intentions. Excepting reflexive or biologically driven responses, however, they can occur only within the context of intentionally initiated tasks or projects.³⁸ Even such immediate, automatic action is ultimately intentional: Yán Huí must resolve to reform the tyrant, Qìng must set out to carve a bellstand, and the swimmer must dive into the river before they can simply empty their heart and respond to things. Perfected action thus cannot issue from the utterly unthinking, non-intentional ‘emptiness, nothingness, calm, and indifference’ of the radical conception of the sage. Such a sage figure would in effect cease to exercise agency or live a human life at all.

Concluding Remarks

Purged of mysticism and rhetorical fancy, the instrumental version of the *xū* ideal is probably defensible and may capture important features of the phenomenology of skilled action. The highest level of skill performance, I think, typically does issue from states similar to those described in ‘Heart Fasting’, the Cook Dīng story, and other Zhuangist skill stories. It is reasonable to describe agents in such a state as acting by means of the ‘spirit’ rather than the self-conscious use of the heart, and

phenomenologically, they may indeed feel they are not so much acting as being guided along by things. But of course, as the stories of Cook Dīng, the hunchback, and the swimmer make clear, this sort of skilled, responsive, automatic action is typically the result of extensive, intentional training, and not merely of emptying the heart and letting the world push us along.³⁹ Moreover, it assumes at least the higher-level intention to perform some task—to reform a tyrant, carve up an ox, engrave a bellstand, and so on.

The moderate version is also correct, I think, that a tranquil, *xū*-like state may be a component of well-being, that *xū*-like cognitive openness is an element of intellectual and practical wisdom, and that the sort of empty state we experience in the performance of skills has intrinsic value and a place in the good life. For brevity, I will not argue for these claims here, but I take it that they are at least plausible.⁴⁰

One motivation for the instrumental view is a persuasive criticism of the model of ‘taking the heart as master’ and thus guiding action by conscious appeal to fixed paradigms, plans, or rules, be they Yán Hui’s recipes for dealing with a tyrant, Confucian rituals (*lǐ* 禮), or Mohist standards (*fǎ* 法). The criticism is that rigid, predetermined standards are likely to be insensitive to the variety and complexity of particular situations, and that the excellent performance of any task lies in expert, intuitive, contextual responses rather than rote, inflexible rule-following. Here the Zhuangists are surely on firm ground,⁴¹ but proponents of the radical view seem to have further concluded that one could therefore do without any intentions, plans, or standards at all, moving ‘only when pressed’. It is unlikely that this is the import of ‘Heart Fasting’ or the skill stories. Indeed, the instrumental and moderate views depict not the absence of intention, cognition, and agency, but a particularly sophisticated, efficacious mode of exercising them.

In the instrumental *xū* state, we listen and respond to ‘things’ (*wù*), rather than merely ‘tallies’, as we might in rote, mechanical rule-following. Like the English ‘things’, the Chinese ‘*wù*’ denotes not only physical objects but events and states of affairs—everything there is in the world. Human beings and their lives are thus part of *wù*. So there is every reason to think that human interests, values, and needs will be among what we ‘hear’ when we ‘listen with the *qī*’. This is one way of framing what I take to be an obvious, highly plausible response to radical Daoist views: We have good reason to think that at least some of our interests and values in fact do articulate the patterns or *dào* of nature, and that cognition and agency are aspects of our way of following these patterns. The exercise of human agency is part of following *Dào*, the natural normative order.

Indeed, it seems likely that the most reliable way for human beings to conform to ‘the patterns of *Tiān*’ is not by ‘casting off knowledge and reasons’, but through the skilled use of the heart or spirit to recognize and respond to reasons, which themselves are part of the normative order. What is at odds with *Dào* is not necessarily *shì/fēi* distinctions, knowledge, or human values, as such, but their rigid, unintelligent application. The normatively appropriate course of action should be not to abolish cognition and intentionality, but to develop greater sensitivity to the range and types of values and other reasons operative in particular contexts.

This, I suggest, is the point of such notions in the ‘Discourse on Evening Things Out’ as ‘responsive *shì*’ (*yīn shì* 因是), ‘walking two ways’ (*liǎng xíng* 兩行), the ‘axis of *Dào*’, and ‘understanding’ (*míng*), and it is among the themes of stories such ‘Heart Fasting’ and Cook Dīng.

The position I have been sketching is fully compatible with the instrumental and moderate views of emptiness. As I see them, these views are in no danger of sliding into the radical view, because—despite the mystical trappings of ‘Heart Fasting’—fundamentally both are grounded in human interests and values. The instrumental view does not reject human values and agency, but articulates a certain conception of how to realize them. The moderate view is clearly grounded in a conception of human well-being, aimed at living well or ‘nourishing life’.⁴² Add to this the familiar Zhuangist critique of absolutist knowledge claims in favor of contextual, provisional judgments (*yīn shì*) and the characterization of cognitive and practical wisdom (*míng*) as ‘lodging things in the usual’ (2/47), and even within the boundaries of the anthology itself, we find sufficient resources to rebut the radical view. For the radical sage ideal itself seems to rest on an inflexible, absolutist *shì/fēi* judgment about the highest form of human life, and the form of existence it depicts can hardly be said to ‘nourish life’ or be ‘the usual’ or ‘useful’ (2/36) for creatures such as us.⁴³

Could there be people who are naturally led by ‘listening with the *qī*’ to a life approaching that of the radical sage, who has cast off all trappings of self and merged with the power (*dé*) of *Tiān*? Such people would be rare and exceptional, since it is unlikely that even a deep, acute grasp of the patterns of nature would lead most of us to follow such a path. But let us suppose that for a few unusual individuals the radical ideal might seem a natural, inevitable way to live. Then the key observation to make about such people is that their path would still be just one human project among others. This point highlights the fundamental incoherence of radical Daoism: in the end, even the radical ideal of the sage represents a *human* way of life. There simply is no such thing as relinquishing human agency in order to merge wholly with *Tiān*. Xúnzǐ 荀子 was right when he said, of this brand of Zhuangism, that it is ‘blinded by *Tiān* and does not know the human’ (Xúnzǐ, 1986, 21/22).

Acknowledgement

Earlier versions of this paper were presented in October and December 2007 at conferences at the University of Hong Kong; the Institute of European and American Studies, Academia Sinica, Taipei; and the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. I thank Chad Hansen, Kai Yee Wong, Jiwei Ci, Sin Yee Chan, and other conference participants for constructive comments.

Notes

- [1] Textual citations to the *Zhuāngzǐ* give chapter and line numbers from *Zhuāngzǐ* (1956).
- [2] *Wú* occasionally refers to a psychological state as well. See, e.g. 15/8.

- [3] Like most texts attributed to the pre-Hàn Chinese masters, the *Zhuāngzǐ* is in fact an anthology of brief writings by different hands. Its hundreds of different parts are linked thematically by a network of doctrinal family resemblances and historically or genealogically probably by a number of teacher–student lineages, as the texts were likely composed and transmitted among groups of teachers and students. The anthology is organized as 33 ‘books’ or ‘chapters’, each a collection of stories and remarks, often grouped loosely by theme. The various short texts share a broadly interrelated doctrinal orientation, but do not purport to present a unified or coherent set of doctrines. Even a conservative count, such as Liu Xiaogan’s, attributes at least four different authorial or doctrinal voices to the corpus (see Liu, 1994). My own view is that there are probably many more, and that even the seven so-called ‘inner chapters’ attributed by some writers to Zhuāng Zhōu 莊周 might well be the work of several different authors. In general, however, because little historical information is available on the authorship and provenance 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 authors—a project that simply cannot be carried out convincingly, given the nature of the text and our lack of historical information about it—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 shared themes from a variety of angles, presenting views that are likely to overlap substantially but also to diverge significantly.
- [4] Throughout the paper I will refer to emptiness or *xū* 虛 mainly as a psychological state. However, the various conceptions of *xū* I will articulate are intimately related to the role of the body in Zhuangist thought. For, as I hope parts of this paper illustrate, the thought of the *Zhuāngzǐ* and other early Chinese texts tends to assume that psychological states are always states of embodied agents and thus normally have a physical or behavioral aspect. It seems likely that the state of *xū* involves achieving certain bodily conditions, in which the agent maintains a kind of loose, responsive, psychophysical equilibrium and lets the body take over, or move ‘of itself’, in guiding action. This is described as letting oneself be guided by the *qì* 氣 (vapor) or the *shén* 神 (spirit), rather than by the heart. So *xū* is partly a state of the body, though I think it more accurate to say it is a state of the agent, who necessarily is embodied. As we will see, states associated with *xū* are also seen as playing a key role in the performance of skills, in psychophysical health, and in guiding ethically appropriate action.
- [5] On Zhuangist views of the perfected person, see Yearley (1983). On the different views of emotion, see Chan (forthcoming).
- [6] See, e.g. 3/18, 4/41–43, 6/26–29, and 6/82. These feelings of calm or peace and delight are probably thought of as normal responses of human *xìng* 性 (inherent dispositions) to changing circumstances, which do not disturb the agent’s psychological well-being by causing suffering, stress, or injury. One well-known *Zhuāngzǐ* passage characterizes the sage as ‘lacking human *qíng* (affective states)’, such that evaluative *shì/fēi* 是非 distinctions do not obtain in him (5/54). Such a person does not ‘harm himself internally by likes and dislikes, [but] constantly goes along with the self-so, without adding to life’ (5/57–58). I think this and the other passages just cited suggest a contrast, for some *Zhuāngzǐ* writers, between normatively appropriate feelings of ease and delight, which are associated with flowing along with or adapting to change, and stubborn, inappropriate preferences, emotions, and evaluative attitudes, which harm the agent’s psychological equilibrium, cause affective distress, or interfere with the ability to adapt. These latter states are unhealthy encumbrances that are ‘added to life’. Note that in principle, an agent could experience and act on certain provisional, flexible preferences without allowing them to ‘harm him internally’. Such preferences might be normatively acceptable or appropriate, by Zhuangist standards.

- [7] In early Chinese thought, the *xīn* 心 is the site of both cognitive and affective functions, which in Western thought have been associated traditionally with the mind and the heart, respectively. Accordingly, *xīn* is often translated as ‘heart-mind’. Because the *xīn* is conceived of as a physical organ located in the center of the body, however, I prefer to render it as ‘heart’ and simply note that the heart is understood to handle cognitive functions as well as affective.
- [8] The irony of the text’s using Yán Huí and Confucius as mouthpieces for Zhuangist views has often been noted. Though Confucius is mocked in many parts of the *Zhuāngzǐ*, a few passages are sympathetic to him and depict him positively, using him as a spokesman to express what the Zhuangist writers probably think he should or would have said, were he as wise as reputed. Other passages treat him as a conventional authority who humbly explains the superiority of Daoist ways or exemplary figures. The implications of the *Zhuāngzǐ*’s treatment of Confucius remain to be fully explored. Of particular interest in ‘Heart Fasting’ is that though the character of Confucius is used to present Zhuangist views, the project to which these views are applied remains recognizably a Ruist one.
- [9] Ironically, the word rendered here as ‘humble’ is *xū* 虛, the same word that later in the dialogue refers to the ‘empty’ psychological state Confucius endorses.
- [10] With Wáng Fūzhī 王夫之 and A. C. Graham, I read Confucius’s response as an evaluation of Yán Huí’s proposed approach. Many traditional commentaries construe it instead as a description of the tyrant. Either way, the text is obscure, but I suggest it seems more reasonable to take Confucius to be commenting on what Yán Huí has just proposed, as he does in response to Yán Huí’s next suggestion. See Wáng (1995, part II, p. 36); and Graham (1981, p. 67).
- [11] ‘Taking the heart as master’ could alternatively be translated as ‘following the heart’ or ‘guiding action by the heart’.
- [12] A Chinese version of Fraser (2005) is forthcoming in *Zhēxué Pínglùn* (Wú Hàn University). I discuss this model at length in my doctoral dissertation (Fraser, 1999).
- [13] My interpretation of this sentence diverges from that of most commentaries and translations. Most interpreters follow Guō Xiàng’s 郭向 gloss that if one empties the heart, the *Dào* will gather there. In his vernacular translation, for instance, Chén Gǔyìng 陳鼓應 writes, roughly, ‘Only if you achieve an empty heart, the Way will naturally merge with you’ (see Chén, 2000, p. 130). Burton Watson has ‘The Way gathers in emptiness alone’ (Watson, 1968, p. 58). Wáng Shúmín 王叔岷 supports these readings by helpfully citing passages from other texts, such as the *Huáinánzǐ*, that refer to emptiness as the dwelling place of the *Dào* (see Wáng, 1999, p. 132). The problem with these interpretations, as I see it, is that they construe the text as if it read *wéi xū jí dào* 唯虛集道, when in fact it reads *wéi dào jí xū* 唯道集虛. They thus seem to me grammatically implausible. A better reading along similar lines is Paul Kjellberg’s ‘Only the Way gathers in emptiness’ (Kjellberg, 2001, p. 223). The idea would be that only the *Dào*—and not thoughts, emotions, *shì/fěi* distinctions, and so forth—collects in an empty heart, so if we hope to guide our actions by the *Dào*, we should become empty. Grammatically, I am unsure whether this interpretation is plausible, however, since *xū* 虛 appears to be the object of the verb *jí* 集, not an adverb specifying the location where *jí* 集 takes place. Graham’s interpretation, ‘Only the Way accumulates the tenuous’, clearly fits the grammar of the original (Graham, 1981, p. 68). However, to my mind both Kjellberg’s and Graham’s readings cohere poorly with the content of the dialogue, which is not about *Dào*, does not mention guiding one’s action by *Dào*, and outside of this line says nothing to suggest either that the aim is to use emptiness to collect *Dào* or that only *Dào* can collect emptiness. Indeed, the only other mention of *dào* in the text clearly refers not to the ‘great *Dào*’ of the cosmos but to the path one follows (4/4). Hence I suggest that ‘*dào*’ here may refer not to the *Dào* of the cosmos, but to the path Yán Huí is to follow in preparing to deal with the tyrant. Thus I suggest reading ‘*dào*’ as a verb, yielding roughly, ‘Only follow-as-your-*dào* concentrating emptiness’. A potential problem

for this interpretation is that ‘*dào*’ is rarely used as a verb in this way in the *Zhuāngzǐ*, though it is in other texts, such as the *Xúnzǐ*. Alternatively, ‘*dào*’ could be read as a noun, yielding ‘the only *dào* [to follow in this case] is to concentrate emptiness’. A potential problem is that if this were the correct parsing of the sentence, we might expect it to include a final noun predication marker *yě* 也, but it does not.

- [14] As David Nivison, among others, has pointed out, this Zhuangist doctrine is diametrically opposed to the view presented in *Mencius* 2A:2: ‘What you don’t obtain in the heart, do not seek in the *qì*—permissible; what you don’t obtain from statements, do not seek in the heart—impermissible’ (Nivison, 1996, p. 129). For Mencius, action-guiding distinctions may be learned through statements (*yán* 言, also ‘doctrines’) or found directly within the heart, but either way the heart controls the execution of action. The moral agent cannot be guided merely by the *qì*. Interestingly, the *Mencius* and ‘Heart Fasting’ agree that at some level *qì* is guided by the intent (*zhì* 志).
- [15] *Qì* 氣 may have been understood roughly along the lines of water vapor. Zhuangist writings frequently pair it with clouds. Solid physical objects are formed when *qì* thickens and hardens, much as water and ice are formed when water vapor condenses and freezes. Several *Zhuāngzǐ* passages liken the still, clear, and empty heart of the sage to a pool of still water (e.g. 13/2–5, 15/16–17). So ‘listening with the *qì*’ might be understood by appeal to the metaphor of a pool of still water or a cloud of water vapor responding to perturbation.
- [16] I should emphasize that this is only a phenomenological description of how the agent is likely to experience his responses. In fact, the responses are still a form of intentional action, since fundamentally they remain grounded in the agent’s intentions—in this case, the intention to reform the tyrant. As I discuss in the following paragraphs, the text itself seems to recognize this point, for it indicates that Yán Huí retains a kind of intention (*zhì*). For a detailed discussion of the intentional character of phenomenologically spontaneous action, see Fraser (2008). (I will return to this issue toward the end of the penultimate section of the paper.)
- [17] Wáng Fū Zhī suggests a similar reading. See Wáng (1995), part II, p. 39. See also part I, p. 5.
- [18] On this point, see the insightful paper by Yang (2003).
- [19] This suggestion echoes Wáng Fūzhī’s comment that *xū* 虛 is produced by unifying the *zhì* (Wáng, 1995, p. 38). By concentrating fully on one thing, the agent pushes everything else out of consciousness.
- [20] According to the text, this is an instance of the general rule that, in performing a skill, if we put too much weight on ‘outside’ matters, such material reward, we get ‘clumsy on the inside’ (19/26).
- [21] Though thorough consideration of these points would take us beyond the scope of this paper, the details of Dīng’s explanation are probably important. Dīng explains that in ‘conforming to the natural patterns’, he ‘cleaves along the main seams’ and ‘is guided by the main cavities’, ‘never touching a ligament or tendon’, let alone a bone (3/6–7). How can he do this? ‘Between the joints there are spaces’, in which the edge of the knife has room to ‘roam’ or ‘play’ (3/9). These descriptions I think constitute metaphors that can be cashed out to provide details of the ‘essentials of nourishing life’ Dīng is said to convey. An implication would be, for instance, that in any complex situation we can find ‘spaces’ within which we can move freely, avoiding obstacles and finding a path by which things are suddenly ‘already resolved’.
- [22] By ‘mysticism’, I have in mind the text’s references to spirit possession, to becoming ‘an envoy of *Tiān*’, and to the empty heart giving birth to an inner light (4/32).
- [23] See, e.g. 13/5–6 and 15/8. The latter passage is discussed in the section on the radical view below, though the part I translate there does not mention *wúwéi*.
- [24] I thus disagree with Edward Slingerland’s view that *wúwéi* is the predominant normative ideal in Zhuangist ethical thought. See the chapter on *Zhuāngzǐ* in Slingerland (2003). *Wúwéi* is more likely an ideal endorsed by one or more branches of Zhuangist thought,

not by all. ‘Heart Fasting’ and the Cook Dīng story, for instance, may well depict normative ideals conceptually distinct from *wúwéi*.

- [25] Slingerland (2003, pp. 199–203) develops a similar idea in an interesting way.
- [26] Most of the textual evidence concerning the absence of emotions in an empty, still, or calm state occurs in passages that present the more radical views I discuss in the next section. See, e.g. 13/4–7, 15/8–9, and 23/67–70.
- [27] Another possibility concerning these passages about emotion is that emotional states such as sorrow and joy might be thought of as occurring in the body but not ‘entering’ the heart and ‘internally injuring’ the person who has achieved equanimity.
- [28] I am taking the ‘center’ (*zhōng* 中) here to refer to the center of the body, where the *jīng* 精 and *shén* 神 are located. An alternative interpretation would be to take it as denoting a mean between extremes.
- [29] Though I do not have space to explore the topic here, this conception of roaming within the boundaries set by contingent circumstances may suggest a distinctively Zhuangist variety of a compatibilist conception of free will. (I thank Sin Yee Chan for suggesting this as a direction in which to develop some of the ideas in this essay.)
- [30] The cognitive and affective aspects are described in a pair of coordinate phrases linked by the conjunction *ér* 而, suggesting that they are two components or aspects of the same overall action or event.
- [31] An alternative moderate interpretation would be to take the passage as having a specifically political import, because it appears in a chapter of the *Zhuāngzǐ* devoted to political themes. On this approach, empty responsiveness would be an ideal of government, rather than of individual agency. However, nothing in the passage itself suggests that it concerns political policy rather than individual action, so I find this approach unpersuasive.
- [32] It also suggests that individual agency, along with whatever motivating states occur naturally within the individual, is not itself part of the normative order, a view that should be controversial even within Zhuangist thought. Many *Zhuāngzǐ* passages could be marshaled to argue that characteristically human motivations and activities are as much a part of the natural order as anything else. I will return to this point below.
- [33] Because this directive appears in book 7, ‘Responding to Emperor-Kings’, one interpretive possibility is that it refers specifically to the attitudes of an absolute monarch, rather than to agents in general. ‘Following along with how things are in themselves, making no room for the personal’, might well be a defensible political guideline, amounting to a form of liberalism.
- [34] In fact, the *Zhuāngzǐ* presents a range of diverse views on the relation between *Tiān*—the natural order—and the human. A detailed study of these views and how they intersect with conceptions of emptiness, spontaneity, and unselfconsciousness is called for but is beyond the scope of this essay.
- [35] Perhaps I should say, more specifically, *moral* agency. Xúnzǐ specifically tells us that *yì* 義 (morality) is what distinguishes human beings from other living creatures. For Mencius as well, the practice of morality seems to be what sets us apart from animals. For the Mohists, an orderly society in which everyone conforms to unified moral standards is what prevents us from falling into a state of disorder akin to that of animals. For both the Ruists and the Mohists, then, morality is what makes us human. For Daoists, imposing the sort of artificial moral standards promulgated by the Ruists and the Mohists is precisely what prevents us from living the best sort of life.
- [36] I thank Chad Hansen for comments that prompted me to include this paragraph.
- [37] Obviously, the radical view exaggerates the features of the moderate view as well, extending its affective tranquility and cognitive suspension of judgment into a comprehensive, permanent state of psychological blankness. My point is that the motivation for the radical state seems to grow mainly out of religious views—e.g. that human cognitive and affective activity are in some way disturbances in or obstacles to the flow of the *Dào* rather than part

- of that flow—and valorization of the automatic, attuned, and apparently unthinking responses associated with the instrumental version.
- [38] Another way of understanding the radical ideal is perhaps to say that it aims to replace intentionality with biology: we are to achieve a state in which action occurs as naturally, spontaneously, and unselfconsciously as biological processes, such as physical growth.
- [39] Cook Dīng is said to have practiced for three years to reach an intermediate level of skill and as many as 19 to reach his current level. The hunchback describes a long training process by which he reached his incredible level of skill; the swimmer reports many years of experience in the water. In ‘Heart Fasting’, though Yán Huí is depicted as catching on to the *xū* state almost instantly, it is clear that he has previously studied with Confucius for a long time.
- [40] I have offered some considerations in favor of them elsewhere. See Fraser (2008).
- [41] Some of their arguments are fallacious, however, based on a confusion between concrete paradigms and general principles that is rooted in the analogical nature of early Chinese logic. From the fact that no single concrete policy is applicable in all contexts, they sometimes infer that no general justification can be given for different policies adopted in different contexts. See, e.g. *Zhuāngzǐ* 17/34–41.
- [42] One might worry that in advocating unselfconsciousness and emotional tranquility, the moderate view tends to slide into something resembling the radical view. I think it does not, for I see the moderate view as grounded in a conception of psychological well-being and normal, healthy functioning that is absent from the radical view. The moderate view is motivated by concerns such as preventing psychological suffering and stress-induced physical ailments, for instance.
- [43] An accurate account of Zhuangist thought does require acknowledging that similarly radical views are found in many parts of the anthology, however, sometimes alongside passages that express a more moderate stance.

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