

New Visions  
of the  
*Zhuangzi*

edited

by

Livia Kohn

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## Contents

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Preface	
Livia Kohn	v
Beyond Our Control? Two Responses to Uncertainty and Fate in Early China	
Mercedes Valmisa	1
Joys of an Empty Skull: The Tension between Nature and Death in the <i>Zhuangzi</i>	
Agnė Budriūnaitė	25
Zhuangzi and the Heterogeneity of Value	
Chris Fraser	43
Zhuangzi's <i>Weiwuwei</i> Epistemology: Seeing through Dichotomy to Polarity	
Alan Fox	64
Paradoxes of Health and Power in the <i>Zhuangzi</i>	
Hans-Georg Moeller	76
Zhuangzi x Comme des Garçons: When Dress Meets Body in the Warring States	
Lucia Q. Tang	89
How Metaphor Functions in the <i>Zhuangzi</i> : The Case of the Unlikely Messenger	
Robert Elliott Allinson	102
Different Layers of Ineffability in the <i>Zhuangzi</i>	
Roy Porat	125
The Rhetoric of Transformation: The Arts of Persuasion in the <i>Zhuangzi</i>	
Jung Lee	143

Hermits, Mountains, and <i>Yangsheng</i> in Early Daoism: Perspectives from the <i>Zhuangzi</i> Thomas Michael	154
Forget or Not Forget? The Neurophysiology of <i>Zuowang</i> Livia Kohn	171
Infants, Children, and Moral Development in the <i>Zhuangzi</i> and the <i>Daode jing</i> Erin M. Cline	191
Zhuangzi and the Coming Community Eske J. Møllgaard	213
Contributors	224
Index	227

# Daoism and the Heterogeneity of Value<sup>1</sup>

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Chris Fraser

A commendable trend in ethics over the past two decades has been the growing amount of work that explores the complexity of moral life. One instance of this trend has been the thesis, shared by a number of leading moral philosophers, that the sources of value, including moral value, are irreducibly heterogeneous. Prominent writers who have advanced views along these lines include Nagel (1979), Taylor (1982), Wolf (1982), Williams (1985), Larmore (1987), Stocker (1990), and Griffin (1996). By the “heterogeneity” of value, I mean the thesis that there is more than one fundamental kind of morally relevant value.

Multiple, independent, mutually irreducible sources of value may make distinct claims on us and pull us in conflicting directions. For instance, in an influential essay, “The Fragmentation of Value,” Nagel identifies five basic types of value—obligations to people, basic rights, utility, intrinsic value, and our own projects (1979, 129-30). In work partly influenced by Nagel, Larmore holds that there are at least three mutually independent types of principles of practical reason—deontic duties, consequentialist principles, and our partial interests—each of which plays an irreducible, ineliminable role in our moral lives (1987, 131-50). If we look beyond moral value, Wolf (1982) famously argues that the morally most worthy life—that of a moral saint—is not necessarily the best life, all things considered. Moral value must be balanced against other values, which may sometimes outweigh it.

The thesis that value is heterogeneous has far-reaching significance for ethics. If correct, it entails that no single, ultimate value or principle unifies all moral norms. It thus places important limitations on the scope and nature of normative theories. There will be no general, systematic theory of right and wrong by which we can resolve all moral questions. Indeed, no systematic, reasonably complete normative theory may be available at all. We must admit the possibility of irresolvable moral

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<sup>1</sup>This paper was originally presented at the 14th conference of the International Society for Chinese Philosophy (ISCP), University of New South Wales, 13–19 July 2005.

dilemmas, in which there may be no single “right” answer—and, in some cases, no wholly “wrong” one, either. Many judgments and actions may be rationally defensible, but not conclusively or uniquely justifiable, and different agents in similar situations may reasonably arrive at different judgments about what they should do.

The heterogeneity of value tends to redirect attention from normative theory to other aspects of ethics, such as the role of practical judgment and wisdom in dealing with conflicts between values. It casts doubt on the plausibility of certain forms of perfectionism. It suggests that a flourishing life may be one that explicitly recognizes a plurality of foundationally distinct values. It explains why reasonable disagreement about ethical issues is likely, and it motivates a tolerance toward and respect for the judgments of sincere, reasonable people with whom we disagree. It thus tends to motivate a sophisticated form of political liberalism.

I want to suggest that some of the writers whose work is preserved in the *Zhuangzi* anthology were implicitly responding to the heterogeneity of value, and they may have explicitly recognized it as a central aspect of ethical life. Partly in response to this heterogeneity, they develop an appealing conception of a flourishing life that addresses cognitive and emotional tensions that may arise from recognizing multiple, potentially conflicting sources of value. Indeed, the Zhuangist view of human flourishing emphasizes features that may be crucial to living well under any conception of the good, yet are little discussed in recent ethics.

For these reasons, among others, I suggest that the *Zhuangzi* offers resources that may be used to contribute constructively to contemporary ethical discourse—resources that, in my view, have more constructive potential than those available from either the Ruist or Mohist traditions, which both rest on relatively specific, narrow conceptions of the good. Moreover, Zhuangist ideas yield a political stance that justifiably can be described as an ancient Chinese brand of proto-liberalism. They thus deserve a prominent place in discussions about how traditional Chinese political thought might relate to liberal democracy.

Having made these claims, I hasten to add several caveats. Strictly speaking, the thesis that value—or, more specifically, morally relevant value—is heterogeneous is the claim that there are multiple, mutually irreducible kinds or types of moral value. The *Zhuangzi* does not recognize the plurality of types of value as explicitly, or in the same terms, as contemporary theorists do, such as by drawing a distinction between duties, impartial goods, and self-interest, as Larmore does, or between

agent-relative and agent-neutral values, as Nagel does.<sup>2</sup> Nor, on the political side, am I suggesting that in the *Zhuangzi* we find an explicit expression of liberalism. We cannot lift the ethical or political worldview of any ancient text out of its historical context and expect it to apply directly to our own situation, especially given the vastly increased complexity of our ethical and political circumstances. In the case of Daoism, in particular, some of the texts' most fascinating ideas are embedded in a religious and cosmological framework that is simply not a live option for us. So my stance is a modest one. I claim only that *Zhuangzi* writings may be instructive concerning our ethical predicament and offer insights that can be developed in ways that bear on contemporary theoretical and practical concerns.

### The Heterogeneity of Value in the *Zhuangzi*

In investigating the heterogeneity of value in early Chinese thought, what should we be looking for? I suggest that in the pre-Qin context, a value can be conceptualized as a *shi-fei* 是非 distinction—an action-guiding distinction between actions or circumstances that are “this/right” and “not-this/wrong.” On this hypothesis, heterogeneous moral values probably will not be conceptualized as multiple, irreducible moral principles, as they typically are in contemporary discourse. Instead, we should look for textual references to discrete, incompatible ways, standards, or practices of distinguishing *shi-fei*, which may be applicable in different circumstances. We should also be alert to remarks about the absence of any unified, “regular” or “constant” (*chang* 常) standard of *shi-fei* applicable in all contexts, as well as the need to attend to diverse grounds for drawing *shi-fei* distinctions so as to respond appropriately to different circumstances.

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<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the *Zhuangzi* writers often do not clearly distinguish the contextuality of value—the likelihood that the same general value or norm may justify diverse actions in different contexts—from the heterogeneity of value—the idea that diverse values or norms may be more or less relevant in different contexts. (One reason for this that the ancient Chinese conception of reasoning does not distinguish between general, abstract principles and concrete exemplars that guide analogical extension, assimilating both under the concept of an analogical “model” or “standard.” See Fraser 2013.) However, a plausible way to interpret Zhuangist passages about the nature of *shi-fei* is as implying not only that there are a range of contextually justified ways of discriminating *shi* from *fei*, according to a unified set of values, but also that there are a range of different kinds of values on the basis of which we might discriminate.

If we articulate value in this way, then the recognition of and relations between distinct, competing values are obvious, prominent themes in the *Zhuangzi*. Passages in the text that contrast distinct, yet admissible practices call attention to the plurality of values, while those that depict the grounds for judging *shi-fei* as shifting with context may be articulating the heterogeneity of value.

Among the many potentially relevant passages in the *Zhuangzi*, let me survey several that seem crucial to the question of whether some Zhuangist writings acknowledge or respond to the heterogeneity of value.

1. A passage in the “Autumn Waters” dialogue contends that “Noble and mean depend on timing; one cannot take them to be constant” (17/35).<sup>3</sup> Because of changing circumstances, the same action may result in a noble outcome in one context and a mean one in another. Different jobs call for distinct tools, different animals have distinct skills, and different creatures have distinct natures. Analogously, the text implies, it is foolish to commit to any one norm of *shi* 是 (right) or *zhi* 治 (order) while avoiding their opposite. Attempting to do so is like trying to acknowledge only heaven and not earth or only *yin* and not *yang*. The two form an inseparable pair with distinct, equally indispensable functions.

A battering ram can be used to smash through a city wall but not to plug a hole—this describes distinct tools. The steeds Qi Ji and Hua Liu galloped 1000 *li* in a day but in catching rats were no match for a wildcat—this describes distinct abilities. The horned owl plucks fleas at night and can discern the tip of a hair but in daylight stares without seeing a hill—this describes distinct natures. So I say: Would you make *shi* (right) your master, eliminating *fei* (wrong), or make order your master, eliminating disorder? This is failing to understand the patterns of heaven and earth or the facts about the myriad things. This is like making heaven your master, eliminating earth, or making *yin* your master, eliminating *yang*. That one cannot proceed this way is clear. (17/35–39)

The analogy to distinct, incomparable functions or abilities and to the opposing, irreducible pairs heaven-earth and *yin-yang* suggests that the text is referring to fundamentally distinct kinds of considerations on which one might act. What is *fei* 非 (wrong) by one such consideration may be justified by another, and agents who understand “the patterns of heaven and earth” may find it appropriate to act on differ-

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<sup>3</sup> Citations to the *Zhuangzi* give chapter and line numbers in Hung (1956).



ent considerations at different times. One implication of this passage, I suggest, is that just as different tools are fit for different tasks, distinct values may become more or less relevant in determining our actions in different circumstances.

2. The next passage in “Autumn Waters” poses the question, “What do I do? What do I not do? In accepting and rejecting, preferring and discarding, in the end how am I to manage?” (17/41). The poem offered in reply advises, “do not bind your intention,” nor conduct yourself by a single, unified norm, or you will be unable to adapt to the endlessly shifting, boundlessly turning Dao 道 (way) (17/42–43). Instead, the text urges that we embrace the myriad things, having no biases, boundaries, or fixed “direction” or “method” (*fang* 方) (17/43–44).

Since things constantly “transform of themselves” (17/47), one cannot rely on their “formation” or “completion” (*cheng* 成) into one form (*xing* 形) or another but must remain open as circumstances change shape—decaying, growing, filling, and emptying, each ending becoming a new beginning. The ability to act appropriately rests on understanding the diverse patterns (*li* 理) of Dao, on whose basis we can apply situational discretion (*quan* 權) to weigh various considerations against each other in particular cases (17/47–48).

The passage thus contends that contextually appropriate actions cannot be grounded in any single, unified norm or value. Given the emphasis on transformation and alternation, on the different “forms” things may take, and on resisting fixed boundaries and remaining open to shifts in “direction” (*fang*), I suggest we can plausibly extrapolate from the text’s explicit pluralism to the view that action-guiding considerations are not only diverse and shifting but heterogeneous.

3. The notions of “clarity” or “understanding” (*ming* 明, 2/31) and the “axis of Dao” (*daoshu* 道樞, 2/30–31) in the “Qiwulun” 齊物論 (Discourse on Equalizing Things), strongly suggest implicit recognition of the heterogeneity of value. “Clarity” involves understanding how *shi-fei* distinctions can be drawn in indefinitely many ways by distinct standards, none of which are fixed by the Dao of nature. There is no definitive or ultimate way to distinguish “this” from “that” or *shi* from *fei*. By some standard or another, anything can be deemed either. What is “this” or *shi* by one standard or from one perspective could also be “that” or *fei* by another. “Things, none are not “that”; things, none are not “this/*shi*.”...”This/*shi*” is also “that,” “that” is also “this/*shi*.” “That there” (*bi* 彼) is also one *shi-fei*; “this here” (*ci* 此) is also one *shi-fei*” (2/27–30).

One plausible way to construe this passage is as making the contextualist or perspectivalist claim that in different contexts or from different perspectives, value judgments may justifiably be drawn differently. Arguably, however, the passage also implies the stronger claim that even within a single context or perspective, we can recognize contrasting or incompatible factors as distinct bases for value judgments. We can ground one way of proceeding to distinguish *shi-fei* in “that there,” or we can adopt as an alternative basis “this here.”

“Clarity” about the variety of grounds for *shi-fei* distinctions enables the agent to reach the “axis of Dao,” a metaphorical hub or centerpoint where we temporarily cease to differentiate “this” from “that” or *shi* from *fei* and so desist from pursuing any path at all (2/30). The axis frees us to pivot in any direction and thus take up any one of a diverse range of potential paths, responding to circumstances by deeming things *shi* or *fei* in an endless variety of ways (2/31). However, provisionally taking up any one such way entails temporarily setting aside others. This incompatibility between paths by which we might set forth from the “axis of Dao” is a counterpart, in the Zhuangist framework, to distinct, heterogeneous sources of value.

4. In the “Discourse on Equalizing Things,” the paired concepts of *cheng* 成 (completion, formation) and *kui* 虧 (deficiency) or *hui* 毀 (damage) imply recognition of discrete, incompatible sources of value, by which “formation” of one entails “deficiency” in another (2/35, 2/42–47).<sup>4</sup> Whenever agents undertake action, including speech and judgment, they apply action-guiding distinctions that divide the world into distinct kinds of things. This dividing is a process of “completion” or “formation,” for it results in things being “formed” as certain kinds of things out of the indeterminate Dao-totality (2/35).

At the same time, however, it brings about damage or deficiency in the original, undivided wholeness of Dao (2/42). We can think of this deficiency as taking two forms. One is that, in dividing things out of the “one,” judgment and action damage or injure the whole that is the original, pristine Dao of nature. The other is that, in dividing things by one pattern of distinctions or similarity relations, we necessarily overlook others. So *kui/hui* is also “deficiency” or “loss” in the sense of forgoing alternative potential ways of drawing distinctions and acting (see also Fraser 2009).

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<sup>4</sup> *Kui* and *hui* are near synonyms, and the text uses both to contrast with *cheng*. Compare, for instance, 2/35 and 2/42.

Since action-guiding distinctions articulate values, the Zhuangist conception of the interplay between *cheng* and *kui* recognizes a plurality of potential values, some of which must be sacrificed in the pursuit of others. This interplay is plausibly interpreted as acknowledging the heterogeneity of value. It implies that there exist distinct, incompatible ways of “forming” value, such that the formation of one entails the loss of others. Such values are thus grounded in distinct, heterogeneous considerations.

5. A dialogue in “The Human World,” identifies “fate” (*ming* 命)—facts of our lives that we cannot change, such as having parents, whose welfare inevitably concerns us—and “duty” (*yi* 義)—such as political duties to one’s sovereign—as inescapable “great decrees” that may conflict with our desire for self-preservation (4/40). This passage thus explicitly recognizes three distinct kinds of morally relevant value—family relations, articulated through the virtue of *xiao* 孝 (filial devotion), political obligation, articulated through the virtue of *zhong* (political loyalty), and prudential self-interest, articulated through *de* 德 (power, potency) (10/41–43).

6. In a well-known dialogue in “Equalizing Things,” Gaptooth asks Wang Ni whether he knows what all creatures agree in affirming as *shi* (right)—that is, whether he knows of any value on which there is universal consensus (2/64). In reply, Wang Ni skeptically questions how he could know such a value and to what criteria he could appeal to determine whether he knows or not. Citing the plurality of ways different creatures conduct their lives—humans, fish, monkeys, and other animals sleep in different places, eat different diets, and have different standards of beauty—he concludes: “As I see it, the bases of benevolence (*ren* 仁) and right (*yi* 義) and the paths of *shi* and *fei* are all snarled and jumbled. How could I know the distinctions between them?” (2/70).

Different creatures follow diverse, incompatible paths in drawing action-guiding distinctions, each seemingly justified in its particular context. Hence, Wang Ni implies, it is unclear how we could identify unified, universally applicable value standards. Against this stance, one might argue that despite the diversity of their practices, the creatures Wang Ni mentions could still be acting on a unified, general value, such as well-being. The well-being of different species requires that they follow different concrete norms, such as eating different diets. However, given the dialogue’s topic—whether there is something all creatures agree in deeming *shi* (right)—its line of argument plausibly covers not only concrete practices but more general action-guiding values, such as well-being, happiness, or dignity. The implied point is

that, when considering any candidate universal value, we will always find agents pursuing a variety of diverse, incompatible practices, acting on a range of values.

Wang Ni finds the “bases” of benevolence and right inextricably tangled. The word I render “bases” is *duan* 端, or “starting point.” In Xunzi, *duan* is used in a technical sense to refer to distinct senses or uses of a word, as when Xunzi rebuts the view that to be insulted is not disgraceful by explaining that “disgrace” has two *duan*, which give rise to two distinct types of honor and disgrace, one moral, the other social (Hung 1966, 69/18/104-08). Being insulted is socially disgraceful but not necessarily morally disgraceful. When Wang Ni concludes, from the plurality of norms different agents follow, that the *duan* of benevolence and right are a tangled jumble, he implies that there are diverse bases or sources of value that cannot be unified or systematized into a single type—something that all creatures agree in affirming as *shi*.

### Our Predicament

On the basis of these and similar passages, we can summarize aspects of the Zhuangist view of our predicament as agents roughly as follows. Value has a plurality of heterogeneous sources that become more or less relevant in different contexts, for different agents. The extent to which different values justifiably guide our actions is contextual and contingent. Distinct, incompatible values may take priority in different circumstances. Our circumstances are subject to incessant change, which also affects which values are most pertinent. Different agents find themselves in diverse situations and accordingly may sometimes justifiably act on different, incompatible values.

For these reasons, we can identify no general, systematic, “constant” (*chang* 常) values or norms to guide action reliably across contexts. This stance dovetails with the general Zhuangist emphasis on accepting the inevitable (*bu de yi* 不得已), fate (*ming*), and contingency (*youdai* 有待), rather than seeking an unattainable ideal of control (*zhi* 治)—a prominent value in Mohist and Ruist thought. For the *Zhuangzi*, life is marked by contingency. The scope of our control is limited, and so living well demands that we apply our *de* (power, potency) to cope with variable, unpredictable circumstances.

Since “constant” norms or standards are unavailable, in the Zhuangist view, the wise person does not place them at the center of life, and the best sort of life does not appeal to them. The attempt to rely on such norms, with the expectation that

they will reliably yield clear, authoritative guidance, interferes with the conduct of a genuinely flourishing life. It is likely to generate emotional frustration and to be prudentially and ethically less fulfilling, no matter what one's own core values are. It renders us less responsive to our own and others' needs in particular contexts, leads us to overlook alternative, contextually warranted values, and may induce social or political oppression.

In the view of Zhuangist writers, the ways of life promoted by the "moralizing" schools, the Ruists and the Mohists, emphasize training in such regular, constant norms or standards as the foundation of a good life. Despite attention in both traditions to practical judgment or contextual discretion (*quan*), both assume that action can reliably be guided by a small set of explicit standards or values, most prominently benefit, or *li* 利, for the Mohists and benevolence and ritual, or *ren* 仁 and *li* 禮, for the Ruists.

### Consequences for Personal Flourishing

From reflection on the plurality and heterogeneity of value and the contextual nature of justification, Zhuangist writers draw a number of lessons concerning how we might best conduct our lives. These points cover a range of concerns broader than morality or ethics, as typically understood. They are more adequately described as a philosophy of life, addressing the theme of how to live well, no matter what specific values we find justified. They emphasize the ability to cope with the heterogeneity and contextuality of value by developing the intellectual and emotional capacity to adapt to changing circumstances, partly by exercising flexible practical judgment. It is convenient to distinguish these points into two groups, those most relevant to personal flourishing and those concerning social and political life.

The Zhuangist view of individual flourishing can be elucidated as having two main components. First, it is grounded in a form of practical understanding or wisdom that "Equalizing Things" calls *ming* (clarity), which has both a cognitive and a practical side. Second, it presents a loose, general conception of flourishing, which allows pursuit of a range of contextually justified values. Core notions in this conception of flourishing include life (*sheng* 生), harmony (*he* 和), and free roaming or wandering (*you* 遊). The capacity or power for human flourishing, as understood on this conception, is the core of the Zhuangist conception of *de*, "power" or "potency,"

which refers to a sort of resilience of character and acuity of judgment.<sup>5</sup> *De* can be regarded as a capacity for intelligent, responsive agency.

Cognitively, the agent with *ming* is aware that the “great Dao” (33/44) of the natural world does not in itself fix any single scheme of *shi-fei* distinctions for us. The agent recognizes the plurality of potential schemes of distinctions, by which anything can be *shi* or *fei* in one context or another, and the relationship between “completion” and “deficiency,” which prevents such schemes from being unified into a single coherent system. The agent sees that the nature of value is contextual and contingent, and thus the justification of *shi-fei* judgements is subject to unpredictable change. The best-justified value judgments, whether moral or prudential, involve adaptive responses to varying practical needs that arise in shifting contexts. Values justified in different contexts are unlikely to be grounded in a unified principle, and what is a source of value in one context may sometimes be a source of disvalue in another.

Practically, such an agent has the intellectual, emotional, and motivational capacity for appropriate, context-sensitive practical judgment and action. Part of human flourishing is learning to accept *ming* (fate), the facts of our existence. Fully grasping the contextual nature of value requires being psychologically ready to shift our action-guiding *shi-fei* attitudes as circumstances change. This emotional and intellectual readiness leads to harmony (*he*), calm (*an* 安), and resilience in the face of change, failure, conflict, danger, and even death—all traits associated with the Zhuangist conception of *de*.

As sketched earlier, the agent with *ming* can step back from the values by which she acts at any time and place herself on what the “Discourse on Equalizing Things” calls the “axis of Dao,” from which she can respond to particular contexts by *shi*-ing or *fei*-ing things in indefinitely many ways (2/30–31). Such responsive, flexible practical judgment the text dubs *yinshi* 因是, or “adaptive *shi*” (2/29, 2/37–39). The agent who practices adaptive *shi* does not adhere rigidly to any fixed scheme of *shi-fei* distinctions but adapts to particular situations in pursuit of contextually appropriate values.

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<sup>5</sup> For a detailed interpretation of a Zhuangist conception of personal flourishing, see Fraser (2011) and (2014b).

In any context, we find ourselves with certain initial, defeasible values that are given by default. As implied in passages such as that about the “great decrees” (4/40–43) or the opening lines of “The Keys to Nurturing Life” (3/1–2), these are likely to include concern for our own life and health, concern for our parents or family, and social duties, such as the demands of our sovereign. Other values may arise from our character and interests, or from our social and physical environment, as our context changes. Intelligent responses to these values are one aspect of Zhuangist well-being.

*Ming* (clarity) includes the ability to balance competing values against each other by responding (*ying* 應) with discretion (*quan*) to changing contexts, without following fixed rules. We can think of this aspect of *ming* as a kind of generalized “skill of living.” The “adaptive *shi*” judgments that issue from it are guided by a focus on what “Equalizing Things” calls “the ordinary” (*yong* 庸). According to an ancient annotation incorporated into the text, “the ordinary” refers to pragmatic efficacy in pursuing the values in play in some context (2/36–37).<sup>6</sup> Contextual responses are also guided by a state of receptiveness or openness (*xu* 虛) that enhances the agent’s responsiveness to the situation. The model for this is the performance of skills, as illustrated by the paradigm of Cook Ding, the wonderfully adroit butcher (3/2–2) (see Fraser 2014a). The capacity to be at ease continually adjusting to circumstances, no matter how trying, issues from the agent’s *de* (power) (4/43).

The process of deftly, resiliently responding to and shifting through contexts is one aspect of what the *Zhuangzi* calls “*you* 遊”—“wandering,” “roaming,” or “play.” The notion of “wandering” encapsulates the Zhuangist conception of flourishing or well-being (Fraser 2014b). It is a psychological agility or freedom, produced by *de*, or more specifically by a resilient, open responsiveness to the diversity of values in changing contexts. Some *Zhuangzi* writers probably considered wandering to have intrinsic value, as the highest expression of self-awareness, practical wisdom, and intelligent agency. Prudentially, it readies the agent to partake in a greater range of value, as it renders one open to appreciating a diverse spectrum of goods.

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<sup>6</sup> The annotation equates “the ordinary” with “the useful” and with practical success: “The ‘ordinary’ is usefulness; usefulness is proficiency; proficiency is achievement. Reaching achievement is about it—all this is just adaptive *shi*. Adaptively *shi*-ing things without knowing they’re so is called Dao” (2/36–37).

Components of wandering include psychological harmony and an openness to and delight in change. Like it or not, we all go through life being tossed and pushed to and fro, beyond our control. The Zhuangist agent makes the best of the situation, transforming this Brownian motion into “wandering,” infused by a spirit of wonder. In extreme situations, wandering may involve even a readiness to give up one’s life with equanimity. Fundamentally, however, it expresses a life-affirming attitude, a way of asserting mastery and agency in the face of uncontrollable situations and events. The ideal of boundless wandering distinguishes Zhuangist equanimity from the partly similar ideals of *ataraxia* or *apatheia* advocated by Hellenistic schools such as the Epicureans, Pyrrhonians, or Stoics. Unlike these schools, there is a prominent element of playfulness, good cheer, and liveliness in the Zhuangist conception of human flourishing, reflected in this conception of life as a process of playfully roaming about without any fixed destination (for more, see Fraser 2014b).

### Zhuangist Respect for Others

Kantian ethics and some forms of political liberalism are grounded in equal respect for others as rational, autonomous agents. Classical utilitarianism is based on equal consideration for other members of a civilized community, who each have their own interests and are capable of experiencing pleasure and pain or happiness and unhappiness. These familiar ethical views are fundamentally individualist: moral consideration is directed primarily at individual rational agents or individuals who feel happiness or unhappiness. In contrast, the Zhuangist ethical and political stance appears to be grounded implicitly in a non-individualist version of respect or consideration, directed at the variety of ways or practices made available to us by the Dao of nature.

In the context of the *Zhuangzi*—and perhaps early Chinese philosophy of action more generally—to be an agent is to be a performer of Dao, or ways, practices, and skills. Hence, respect for other agents is likely to be conceptualized in terms of Dao performance, rather than individual rationality, autonomy, or happiness. Equal respect for various Dao practices then extends to individuals as performers of these practices. Other people—and non-human creatures—deserve respect or consideration as performers of various practices that are part of the “great Dao” of nature as a whole.

We can find three sorts of grounds in the *Zhuangzi* for such implicit respect for other practices and those who perform them. The first set of grounds stems from the ontological claim that all feasible practices are ultimately part of one and the same



“great Dao.” The “Discourse on Equalizing Things” suggests that all practicable ways, practices, and values are parts of Dao and for that reason merit respect, appreciation, or acknowledgment. All might be legitimate ways of finding a path through the world in some concrete context.

This view is reflected in the notion of Dao as an overarching, undivided “one” or “unity” (2/35–36) as well as in the metaphor of the “axis of Dao” (2/30) that allows us to respond to particular contexts by temporarily adopting any of a variety of ways of distinguishing *shi-fei*. It also appears in the implied stance that Dao is present everywhere and that within it, there is no such thing as “genuine” or “false” practices (2/24–25). It further manifests in the metaphor of the “pipes of Heaven” (2/4), the myriad things performing in harmony as part of the workings of Dao.

The corresponding respectful attitude appears in Wang Ni’s answers to Gap-tooth, suggesting that the divergent practices of different creatures may all be contextually justified (2/66–70). It is further shown in the story of the monkey keeper, who found a compromise between his practice of three nuts in the morning and four in the evening and his wards’ demand for four in the morning and three in the evening, thereby satisfying the monkeys at no loss to himself (2/38–39).

The second set of grounds is epistemic. As we have seen, Zhuangist writings argue that anything can be *shi* or *fei* in some context or other and that *shi-fei* distinctions are not “constant.” The skeptical, critical arguments in “Equalizing Things” undermine any claim that our own practices for judging *shi-fei* are authoritative or privileged. Alternative *shi-fei* judgments may be justified in other agents’ contexts or could become justified in our own as it develops over time. So we have grounds for acknowledging and respecting the contextual justification of other practices or values (see Fraser 2009).

The third grounds are instrumental. For the Zhuangist, a flourishing life involves a state of harmony, peace, or calm, denoted by terms such as *he* (harmony) and *an* (calm). *He* appears to refer to both social and psychological harmony—the monkey keeper’s dietary compromise with his charges is an example of socially “harmonizing things with *shi-fei*” (2/39), while there are also several references to internal harmony or harmony of the heart (4/56, 5/47). Respect for others’ *shi-fei* judgments is more likely to yield social harmony, as the monkey story illustrates, while an openness to alternative practices may foster adaptiveness and thus psychological harmony in changing conditions.

## “Morality”

In any given context, we are likely to interact with others who may follow different practices for distinguishing *shi-fei*, each in their own way seeking to fulfill their interests and “nurture life” (3/12). How are we to deal with them, particularly when their practices conflict with our own? All such practices, and all of the lives involved, are parts of “great Dao,” aspects of the world to be taken into consideration if we are to respond to circumstances competently. One Zhuangist view seems to be that we are to interact with each other by applying *ming* (clarity) to harmonize our values and practices in various contexts, seeking compromises that enable both sides to pursue their ends in a compatible way.

One passage refers to this process of compromise as “proceeding in two ways” (*liangxing* 兩行, 2/40)—that is, proceeding along both our own way and the other’s, jointly fulfilling both sides’ values. The text’s concrete example of “proceeding two ways”—also an instance of “adaptive *shi*”—is the keeper who adjusts his monkeys’ feeding schedule when they object to the first plan he proposes. The implied point is that an effective way to interact with others is to seek equilibrium or harmony between their wants and practices and our own. The keeper satisfies the monkeys’ demand for more nuts in the morning without sacrificing his underlying practice of distributing seven per day.

Other illustrations of such balancing and compromise between one’s own aims and those of others include: the story of Mengsun Cai, who simplified his mother’s funeral partly, but not radically, because he needed to meet the expectations of the other mourners (6/77); as well as, in a negative example, the story of how the ruler of Lu unintentionally killed a rare seabird by feeding and entertaining it as appropriate for an honored human guest, not a wild bird (18/33–39, 19/72–75) (see also Fraser 2014a; Huang 2010; Wenzel 2003).

Themes such as harmony and “proceeding two ways” address the core moral issue of how to interact with others. Readers might legitimately worry, however, that *Zhuangzi* writers are unrealistically optimistic about the chances of achieving harmony and successfully “proceeding in two ways.” One reason for this optimism may be a quasi-religious faith that, provided we are responsive enough, the “great Dao” ensures that things will work out harmoniously, even if a solution is not obvious.

A second reason may be the assumption that the agent who lives a flourishing life of *ming* (clarity) and *you* (wandering) is open-minded, relatively unattached to

any particular path, and thus ready to modify his or her own path in order to cope with others' legitimate needs. A third reason may be that the rhetorical aim of passages such as the monkey story is merely to present a simplified paradigm of adept, contextually sensitive conduct. There is no implication that contextual discretion (*quan*), "adaptive *shi*," "proceeding in two ways," and finding "the ordinary" are always so easy or can ensure a satisfying outcome. Given Zhuangist doubts about the reliability or utility of general rules, however, all we can do is pursue this loose, adaptive approach as best we can.

### Daoist "Liberalism"

Zhuangist recognition of the heterogeneity of value and respect for ways other than our own suggest a proto-liberal political stance. They direct us to avoid *zhi* 治 (governing, controlling, ordering), in the sense of imposing a unified scheme of values on members of society. Instead, they prompt us to seek harmony (*he*) and to "proceed in two ways." Both of these notions implicitly encourage us to seek concurrence between our way and others' when conflicts between them are likely to impede both. When no conflict occurs, we and others may justifiably employ different values and follow different practices.

We can further articulate the Zhuangist political stance by considering the notions of *si* 私 (selfishness or partiality) and *ziran* 自然 (self-so-ness). Since, for Zhuangist thinkers, value judgments must be justified contextually, the sovereign or the ruling class cannot legitimately impose their values on the rest of society. Values must be justifiable from within the context of all the ways of life involved, to the performers of each way. Otherwise, imposing them is an instance of *si* (partiality), in which a sovereign or interest group takes account only of its own, partial values and overlooks the broader, impartial (*gong* 公) perspective of Dao as a whole. Conversely, if value judgments can be justified from within the way of all those involved, they achieve the status of a social consensus. In this sense, we can say they are *ziran* (self-so)—they are fitting or "so" by the lights of agents themselves (see also Lai 2007). One passage expressing the Zhuangist political stance recommends that aspiring leaders maintain a blank, responsive attitude, following along with how things are in themselves, while allowing no partiality. To the greatest extent possible, political leadership should allow individuals to proceed in their own way, without interference motivated by the leaders' own "partial" (*si*) judgments.

The text has, “May I ask about governing the world? . . . “Let your heart wander in plainness, merge your qi with the vastness, follow along with what is ‘self-so’ of things without allowing partiality, and then the world will be governed” (7/7-1). “Governing” the world or putting it “in order” (*zhi*) is achieved by setting aside one’s personal preferences and flowing along with how things proceed of themselves—what is “self-so” for them.

A further Zhuangist justification for a proto-liberal stance is instrumental. One passage scorns the Ruist idea that a ruler should attempt to transform others ethically by specifying rules and duties. The text compares this to asking a mosquito to carry a mountain, implying that this approach to governing is impractical and only creates trouble (7/5-7). Another passage indicates that political leaders should influence society only indirectly, by setting an example to be emulated or by arranging conditions that allow people to flourish by themselves, rather than by establishing explicit rules or attempting to indoctrinate their subjects. The achievements that ensue from their leadership should seem to be “not from them,” but from the people, who feel “joyful in themselves” (7/14-5). The implication is that social harmony and flourishing are most effectively achieved when the sovereign refrains from exerting control over society but instead responds to people’s own values.

Of course, these passages exemplify at most only what I am calling “proto-liberal” political attitudes, not views that closely resemble modern political liberalism. They employ no explicit notions comparable to liberty or equality. They suggest no ideas akin to determining policy through rational public discourse, rule according to an overlapping consensus, or the Harm Principle. Nor do they hint of anything resembling democratic political institutions; for these ancient writers, monarchy is the obvious, only known model of political organization. Clearly, however, they do advocate minimizing government interference in the lives of members of political society, ruling in a manner responsive to the values and needs of the people, and allowing individuals to live by whatever way seems most justified or fulfilling for them.

### Concluding Remarks

I have contended that parts of the *Zhuangzi* recognize that value is heterogeneous in two ways. First, different agents or communities may legitimately practice different, incompatible ways of life, without one being wrong and the other right according to some overarching, objective conception of the good. Second, one and the same agent

or community may find that contextually appropriate action is guided by a variety of mutually irreducible values, among which different values may take priority in different circumstances. Ethical guidance thus depends on flexible practical judgment or discretion (*quan*). No unified, “constant” model or norm of right and wrong is available to guide action. This grasp of the heterogeneity of value tends to motivate a moral stance grounded in implicit respect for, understanding of, and compromise with those who follow ways of life other than our own and a political stance that shares key features with political liberalism.

The Zhuangist approach helps to highlight the limitations of systematic normative theory and the central role of practical discretion in ethical life. It implies that normative theory as traditionally conceived may be of only limited usefulness, yielding at best only broad, incomplete practical guidance. The Zhuangist outlook encourages us to shift our ethical focus from identifying and applying general moral principles or models to a conception of human flourishing centered on ideals such as *ming* (understanding, clarity), *you* (wandering), *he* (harmony), and *de* (power, potency).<sup>7</sup> One might say that this conception of flourishing redirects our attention from “morality” to “life.” It capitalizes on the diversity of values by prompting us to shift among alternative values when appropriate. It offers a vision of excellent or masterful human agency without advocating any specific brand of moral perfectionism.

Its conception of *de* (virtue, power, potency) refers not to moral virtue but to a resilient ability to live well—to respond effectively to circumstances and to other people. Perhaps most striking is that this conception of human flourishing replaces the spirit of seriousness that infuses much traditional ethics, Chinese or Western, with a free, ironic, playful responsiveness to changing circumstances. This responsiveness in turn underwrites the Zhuangist approach to political life, which is marked by an

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<sup>7</sup> Given Zhuangist claims about the diversity of values and the contextual nature of justification, can the text recommend this vision of flourishing without contradiction? I suggest it can, because the Zhuangist vision remains compatible with a wide range of other values. Its norms function on a higher level, as guides to the conduct of life—or the practice of *dao*—no matter what more concrete values or path one commits to. The Zhuangist stance is a normative recommendation less about *what to do* in life than about *how to do it*. The claim is that given the heterogeneity of value, the contingency of our circumstances, and the limitations on our abilities, “wandering,” “clarity,” “harmony,” and so forth are features of efficacious and satisfying *dao*-following and so are potentially justified across a range of particular paths or schemes of values.

aversion to interfering with the contextually justified practices of others. Different practices or ways of life are respected as parts or aspects of Dao, which are of genuine worth to those who follow them.

These Zhuangist ideas and attitudes may face several fundamental challenges, however. One potential criticism is that Zhuangist writers give up too quickly on critical inquiry into moral principles and their application. Even if no plausible general, comprehensive normative theory is available, surely we can still seek to clarify the role of general principles or considerations in contextually justified moral judgments. Similarly, even if no decision procedure can ensure appropriate contextual judgments, we might still seek to clarify how competing considerations tend to relate to each other. Arguably, Zhuangist writings implicitly acknowledge as much in their references to the “patterns of things” (17/46, 17/48).

Another important question is whether the Zhuangist conception of flourishing agency allows for the commitment needed to live what we think of as a normal life. Many of the projects that provide the substance of our lives require a degree of commitment that may seem incompatible with the idea that the values underlying these projects are contingent and in some sense an optional choice from among a plurality of alternatives.<sup>8</sup> Once we have children, for instance, we do not really believe there is any choice about whether to care for them. Bearing children commits us to providing for their needs until they are self-sufficient. However, a *Zhuangzi*-inspired view can probably answer this question by developing the text’s inchoate conception of contextual justification and impartial, unselfish responsiveness to circumstances, including our relations to others. Certain commitments may indeed be so strongly justified that practically we could not give them up unless our circumstances changed radically.

However, this fact is fully consonant with the Zhuangist claim that agents always face an open field of alternative paths, some of which entail forgoing certain values in order to take up others. This claim seems grounded in undeniable aspects of agency and the human predicament. Indeed, one could argue that far from weakening our commitments, the Zhuangist stance fosters greater engagement with justi-

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<sup>8</sup> Nivison (2000) articulates this issue as a dichotomy between the “detachment” fostered by Zhuangist attitudes and the “engagement” needed to live a full human life. Wong (2003, 409) responds by proposing that the Zhuangist approach potentially removes the tension between “detachment” and “engagement.”

fied values. As Wong (2003, 409) suggests, a stance from which we are detached enough from our own way of doing things to recognize a range of genuine, yet heterogeneous values can also be regarded as “an engaged perspective from which our original ethical commitments become broader and more inclusive.”

A third potential area of criticism, mentioned briefly above, concerns the quasi-religious trust in the Dao of nature that underwrites some strands of Zhuangist thought. Some of the voices in the *Zhuangzi* are grounded in a quasi-religious faith that the heterogeneity of value is in some sense only apparent, a product of the epistemic limitations associated with guiding action by *shi-fei* distinctions. On this line of thought, the “great Dao” of nature ultimately ties all sources of value together, resolving tensions between them, much as whatever blows the “pipes of Heaven” produces a harmonious symphony of nature (2/4-9). The Dao will guide and underwrite our actions, if only we can achieve psychophysical attunement with it. To do so, we must empty our hearts of desires, *shi-fei* distinctions, and other attitudes that interfere with adept, skillful responses, and, using the heart like a mirror, let ourselves respond spontaneously to particular circumstances.

This view is implausible, for two main reasons. One is that nature was long ago disenchanting for us. We can no longer share the ancient Chinese mythico-religious trust in an underlying normative flow of the cosmos, which will carry us along like leaves floating down a river, if only we let it.<sup>9</sup> The other is that the view reflects a confusion common in early Daoist texts. It rightly emphasizes the crucial role in agency of immediate, uncalculated, adaptive responses to particular situations. But it untenably extrapolates and decontextualizes our capacity for such responses, implying that they could function without input from values and projects that agents commit to intentionally. The result is the confused idea that there could be a general skill of living that guides action without our intentionally adopting any ends whatsoever. However, a skill is a skill only in the context of some practical end, which an agent must first adopt as her own.

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<sup>9</sup> The paradigmatic statement of this view is the summary of Shen Dao’s thought in the *Zhuangzi* “Under Heaven” chapter, which reports he advocated becoming “like an insentient thing,” which “moves only when pushed,” “like a feather swirling in the wind” (33/45-50).

Zhuangist thought offers many key insights that can be detached from the problematic implications of this religious position, however. This essay has attempted a preliminary sketch of how several of these might be developed.<sup>10</sup>

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