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## ZHUANGZI AND PARTICULARISM

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What practical norms are we to follow in interacting with others? A memorable story in the *Zhuangzi* might seem to reject the idea of following any general norms at all. A seabird once landed serendipitously near the capital of the landlocked state of Lu.<sup>1</sup> Taking the bird's visit to be an auspicious omen, the Lord of Lu had it escorted to the ancestral temple, where he honored it with a ritual feast and concert. Sadly, the bird became disturbed, refused to eat, and soon died. Despite his good intentions, the Lord only harmed his esteemed guest, because he followed the ritual protocol for honoring a human dignitary, neglecting the likelihood that music and crowds would only frighten a bird. The story concludes that "names stop at the facts; what's right is based on what fits."<sup>2</sup> That is, explicitly formulated protocols or rules must yield to the facts of the particular situation; the appropriate course of action is what best fits the context. If your visiting dignitary is a seabird, do not insist on following protocol and subjecting it to a noisy gala. Set it free by a lake where there are plenty of fish.

Passages such as this might seem to suggest that the *Zhuangzi* presents a variety of moral particularism—or, more precisely, "dao particularism," since the standard of appropriate performance in the *Zhuangzi* is *dao* 道, "the way," and some *Zhuangzi* passages reject moral norms as guides to *dao*. On this line of interpretation, the passage's concluding slogan could be read as claiming that the appropriate course of action is determined by what "fits" the particular situation, which cannot be codified into general norms articulated through "names." Indeed, at least one interpreter, Jung Lee, has characterized Daoist ethics as "a form of moral particularism."<sup>3</sup> Lee suggests that the

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<sup>1</sup> *Zhuangzi* 18/39. References to *Zhuangzi* 《莊子》 cite chapter and line numbers in William Hung, ed., *A Concordance to Chuang-tzu*, Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series, Supplement no. 20 (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1956).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 18/39.

<sup>3</sup> Jung H. Lee, *The Ethical Foundations of Early Daoism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan,

Daoist seeks only “to attune to the Way,” an imperative applied “to particular circumstances on a case-by-case basis.”<sup>4</sup> He assimilates this stance to the widely discussed moral particularism advocated by Jonathan Dancy. Dancy construes particularism as the strong claim that moral thought and judgment and the moral status of our conduct do not depend in any essential way on general principles.<sup>5</sup> Lee proposes that the ethical thought of the *Zhuangzi* coincides with Dancy’s stance, suggesting that for the *Zhuangzi*, “principles and rules do not possess even *prima facie* authority in the chain of moral reasoning.”<sup>6</sup>

If we reconsider the seabird story, however, the claims in the text stop short of contending that general norms play no role at all in guiding or justifying conduct. The text asserts only that contextual factors take priority over general norms: “names stop at the facts.” Indeed, the passage itself cites general considerations to explain what sort of conduct would fit the context. To care for a bird, for example, we should “let it roost in the deep forest, wander among the banks and islands, float on the rivers and lakes, and eat mudfish and minnows.”<sup>7</sup> The story could be calling attention to the importance of contextual features in guiding and justifying action without denying that general norms play some epistemic or justificatory role in determining appropriate conduct. The need for contextual sensitivity could justify acting on a defeasible, general norm that fits the case. The art of following *dao* might then involve mastery of how to draw on a range of defeasible norms to adapt one’s conduct to particular cases in light of their varying features. Insofar as *dao* is variable and uncodifiable, this range of norms might be indeterminate and open-ended.

This article will examine a series of *Zhuangzi* passages that reject the use of invariant general norms to guide action and instead stress the importance of contextual factors in shaping the apt *dao* to follow in concrete situations. I will argue against interpreting the passages as committed to particularism and thus denying that *dao* rests on, is shaped by, or comprises general patterns or norms. Instead, I suggest, these texts present a combination of contextualism about the factors that determine appropriate responses to particular situations and pluralism about defeasible general norms or standards. The target of their criticism is not generalism, the view that general patterns play a role in determining and explaining appropriate courses of action. It is the blunt, monolithic application of fixed norms without regard for context. The texts contend that since *dao* is highly variable, no invariant, universally applicable norms pick out the most fitting course of conduct in every particular case. A plurality of ways of proceeding may

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2014), 48–49.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Dancy, *Ethics without Principles* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 73.

<sup>6</sup> Lee, 147.

<sup>7</sup> *Zhuangzi*, 18/36.

be appropriate for different cases. The appropriate path or paths for any one case are determined contextually, in response to features of the particular situation, with different features taking on greater or lesser relevance in different contexts. However, the explanation or justification of such contextually determined paths may invoke general norms or patterns. Indeed, as we will see, at least one *Zhuangzi* passage suggests that competence in adapting appropriately to particular contexts depends on a grasp of general patterns and thus the sorts of action that are generally justified across relevantly similar contexts.

The purpose of the article is primarily interpretive. Although I will offer a few critical remarks about particularism, the chief aim is not to evaluate particularism as a philosophical doctrine, nor to assess the Zhuangist views explored. It is to explicate the stance presented, explicitly or implicitly, in *Zhuangzi* passages that address the status of general norms of conduct and thereby to clarify the extent to which they coincide with particularism as discussed in recent moral philosophy. Accordingly, the first section below reviews the core claims of Dancy's moral particularism, the most prominent version of particularism. The subsequent section considers Lee's grounds for characterizing Zhuangist ethics as particularist. I will suggest that although Lee's interpretation of Zhuangist views is defensible, these views do not coincide with particularism, as Dancy understands it. The next several subsections examine five *Zhuangzi* passages that criticize the broad application of invariant general norms and propose alternative, contextually sensitive approaches to guiding and justifying action. As the discussion will show, none of these passages is best explained as taking a particularist stance. The final section explores the implications of the passages, suggesting that Zhuangist ethical discourse illustrates how expert contextual judgment draws on competence in applying an open-ended range of general patterns to help determine appropriate conduct in particular cases.

## I. WHAT IS PARTICULARISM?

Moral particularism is the stance that generalizations—general principles, rules, norms, patterns, and so forth—have no fundamental role in determining moral status and accordingly that moral thought and judgment do not depend fundamentally on grasping and applying moral principles. Hence, as Dancy puts it, “the possibility of moral thought and judgement does not depend on the provision of a suitable supply of moral principles.”<sup>8</sup> Qualifiers such as “fundamentally” or “the possibility of” are crucial here, as the particularist can allow that we often invoke general heuristics or rules of thumb in moral thought and discourse. The particularist's claim is that such generalizations are not essential or basic to moral judgment and justification and that an expert, discerning moral agent could do without them. They have no role in the core or fundamental

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<sup>8</sup> Dancy, 7, 73.

conceptual structure of morality.

At its heart, particularism is driven by a distinctive view of reasons relations—what it is for something to be a reason for something else. For the particularist, what it is to be a reason for something to have a certain moral status—for an instance of lying to be wrong, for example—is exhausted by the relations between features of a particular context. How those features fit into a general pattern or can be described in a way that subsumes them under a general norm is irrelevant to their constituting a reason. As Dancy says, “reasons do not function in virtue of generalizations; they are about the ways things add up here,” in the concrete context.<sup>9</sup>

Dancy takes this stance because of how he understands the contextual nature of reasons. He points out that in ethics, “context can affect the ability of a feature to make a difference in a new case.”<sup>10</sup> “A feature that is a reason in one case may be no reason at all, or an opposite reason, in another.”<sup>11</sup> In the context of defrauding elderly investors, for example, lying is wrong, but in the context of shielding nonviolent protesters from the fascist police, lying may be right. In the context of bullying, inflicting pain is wrong; in the context of resolving a medical emergency, it may be right; and in the context of training for a sports competition, it may be neutral. On these grounds, Dancy advocates what he calls “holism” about reasons: whether and how a factor counts as a reason for ethical judgment and action is determined by the holistic context in which it obtains. If holism is true, Dancy contends, then, since every particular context is different, reasons cannot be general. By contrast, a view that assigns a fundamental role to general principles, he thinks, must reject holism and embrace “atomism” about reasons, the stance that “a feature that is a reason in one case must remain a reason, and retain the same polarity, in any other.”<sup>12</sup> Since such “a principle-based approach to ethics is inconsistent with the holism of reasons,”<sup>13</sup> Dancy argues, it must be mistaken.

The resulting picture is one in which “actions get to be right or wrong in a wide variety of ways,” which cannot be captured by general principles.<sup>14</sup> The particularist is thus also a pluralist, holding that “many properties (or features) are capable of making a difference to how one ought to act, and are therefore capable of being morally relevant.”<sup>15</sup> If a variety of features can contribute to the moral status of some action, yet

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<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Dancy, *Moral Reasons* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 106.

<sup>10</sup> Dancy, *Ethics*, 7.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 7, 73.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 7

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 77

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Dancy, “Moral Particularism,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Zalta. <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/moral-particularism/>> , section 3.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

these features are not organized in any general way, how do moral agents manage to understand the complex interrelations between the various features that may be operative in some case? Dancy suggests that “what the experienced moral judge knows is a range of ways in which a feature can contribute to determining how to act,” such as “the sort of difference it can make that what one proposes to do would be cruel.”<sup>16</sup>

One difficulty facing Dancy’s version of particularism is that in fact holism about reasons is compatible with the stance that morality can be codified into general principles. The proponent of such principles need only incorporate a reference to the context into the formulation of the principles. For example, a utilitarian could specify that promoting pleasure is a reason if and only if, in the context, the pleasure is non-sadistic. A Kantian could claim that promoting happiness is a reason if and only if, in the context, the action that promotes happiness is done from a good will. Once this point is acknowledged, the argument for particularism is in danger of collapsing.<sup>17</sup>

Another weakness in particularism stems from Dancy’s idiosyncratic construal of the function of moral principles. Dancy allows that moral thought and discourse may employ general heuristics and suggests that a competent moral agent grasps “a range of ways” by which features can determine moral status and “the sort of difference” that a certain feature makes in various contexts.<sup>18</sup> Generalists—those who hold that general norms or principles have a basic role in ethics—are likely to respond that such general knowledge is precisely what general principles articulate, and thus Dancy does acknowledge a role for principles after all. Dancy disagrees, as illustrated by his remarks about what he calls “invariant reasons,” or reasons that hold in all contexts. Invariant reasons are obvious candidates for general principles. Consider Dancy’s example of a possible invariant reason, that killing an unwilling, blameless victim is wrong.<sup>19</sup> A general principle based on this reason might be that, generally, if an act involves the feature of killing an unwilling, blameless person, then, *ceteris paribus*, that feature is a reason the act is wrong. However, Dancy seems to construe the point of an invariant reason as the claim that *because* all acts of killing unwilling, blameless people are wrong, that some act involves the feature of killing an unwilling, blameless person is a reason it is wrong. He rightly objects that “this feature is the reason it is here quite independently

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. See too Dancy, *Ethics*, 107.

<sup>17</sup> See Frank Jackson, Philip Pettit, and Michael Smith, “Ethical Particularism and Patterns,” in *Moral Particularism*, ed. Brad Hooker and Margaret Little (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Sean McKeever and Michael Ridge, “What does Holism have to do with Moral Particularism?” *Ratio* 18 (2005): 93–103; and Joseph Raz, “The Trouble with Particularism (Dancy’s Version),” *Mind* 115 (2006): 99–120. My examples are adapted from McKeever and Ridge.

<sup>18</sup> Dancy, “Moral Particularism.” See too Dancy, *Ethics*, 107.

<sup>19</sup> Dancy, *Ethics*, 78.

of how it functions elsewhere.”<sup>20</sup> This objection is correct but irrelevant to generalism. The generalist’s claim is not that the feature is a reason here because it is a reason elsewhere. It is that the feature is a reason everywhere it occurs.<sup>21</sup> The generalization is not what makes the feature a reason in some context; it is the claim that this sort of feature is a reason generally, across contexts. As Mark Lance and Margaret Little note, Dancy seems to require that, if there are general principles, it must be in virtue of the principles that reasons function as the reasons they do.<sup>22</sup> Dancy here seems to be thinking of principles as akin to positive law or to the rules of a game. What makes it wrong to drive on the wrong side of the road or to move your pawn four spaces forward are the traffic laws and the rules of chess. Generalists need not hold that what makes it wrong to kill an unwilling, blameless person is that there is a rule against doing so. If Dancy insists that a general principle must be something that makes features of particular contexts the reasons they are—rather than simply being a general statement of what sorts of features constitute reasons—then he is in effect arguing for particularism by construing general principles in such a way that there are unlikely to be any.

Although features that are reasons in particular cases do not derive that status from general principles, a generalist can argue that features can function as reasons, and thus support actions and judgments, only if they form a general pattern with other features that function as reasons in other contexts. This conceptual point threatens to render particularism incoherent. The concept of a reason essentially concerns norm-governed proprieties of inference between claims or between features of situations and judgments about them or actions in them. The relation of “being a reason for” is intelligible only against the backdrop of general, norm-governed practices in which some things count as appropriately supporting or following from others. Hence to claim that something is a moral reason in some context—such as that if an action would kill an unwilling, blameless person, that feature is a reason for judging the action wrong—is implicitly to contend that it stands in an inferential relation that conforms to general norms. As Lance and Little remark, “to be committed to the propriety of an inference is to be committed to its propriety in some set of other contexts.”<sup>23</sup> The very idea of something being a reason invokes generalization: to speak of good reasons for judgment or action is to allude to norms by which any similar reasons relation would also count as good.

Accordingly, even Dancy cannot discuss reasons without alluding to the “sort of

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> I adapt this observation from Raz, “The Trouble with Particularism (Dancy’s Version),” 112.

<sup>22</sup> Mark Lance and Margaret Little, “Particularism and Antitheory,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory*, ed. D. Copp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 585.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 587.

difference” that some feature makes in a situation and “the ways things add up.”<sup>24</sup> Sorts and ways are general patterns, in this case norms governing what count as good grounds for or against various judgments and actions. Features that function as reasons in particular contexts indeed do not do so “in virtue of generalizations,” as Dancy insists.<sup>25</sup> But that they count as reasons at all is due to how they conform to general norms of thought and action. This point explains why, as Brad Hooker insists,<sup>26</sup> moral knowledge starts not from judgments about particular cases but from learning general norms such as that it is wrong to harm others or to take their possessions. What little Annie learns when her parents teach her not to shove Betty and grab her toy is not merely that doing so is wrong in this case but that, as a general norm, hitting others and grabbing their toys is unacceptable and that, by extension, there is a general norm against violent theft of property. Such norms need not be exceptionless. They can be what Lance and Little call defeasible generalizations, which hold subject to various well-understood conditions.<sup>27</sup> As James Griffin suggests, they may be rough, high-level expressions of values, which must be fleshed out in light of practical constraints, epistemic limitations, and familiar exceptions.<sup>28</sup> But they are central to moral thought and judgment nonetheless.

For the purposes of this essay, the key takeaway from this brief review of Dancy’s particularism is that one can agree with the particularist about contextualism—the thoroughgoing context-dependence of what constitutes a reason for judgment and action—and about pluralism—the variety of properties that may function as good reasons—yet reject the particularist stance that generalization plays no role in the structure of moral thought and judgment. One need only hold that moral values can be articulated through a plurality of defeasible norms, applied with due sensitivity to variable factors in different contexts.

## 2. LEE ON DAOIST ETHICS

In a stimulating and insightful treatment of Daoist ethics, Lee proposes that for Daoists, including the *Zhuangzi*, the reasons that guide action lie in the Way (*dao*), which he construes as “the ultimate power in the cosmos” and the “objective order of the cosmos,”

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<sup>24</sup> Dancy, *Ethics*, 107.

<sup>25</sup> Dancy, *Moral Reasons*, 106.

<sup>26</sup> Brad Hooker, “Moral Particularism and the Real World,” in *Challenging Moral Particularism*, ed. Mark Lance, Matjaž Potrc, and Vojko Strahovnik (London: Routledge, 2008), 23.

<sup>27</sup> Lance and Little, “Particularism and Antitheory,” 588. An example of such a generalization is that a match lights when struck, but only if it is dry, there is sufficient oxygen, and so on.

<sup>28</sup> James Griffin, *Value Judgment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), chapter 7.

to which we must conform in order to flourish.<sup>29</sup> As the objective order of things, the Way is the source of normativity.<sup>30</sup> Accordingly, for the Daoist, decisive reasons for action do not lie in exercising autonomy, realizing one's nature, acting from a good will, "or some other ethical principle but in the Way itself." The "organizing imperative" of the well-lived life is to conform to the Way as we encounter it in "particular circumstances on a case-by-case basis."<sup>31</sup>

These remarks sketch the framework for a plausible interpretation of Daoist ethics. Lee seems to regard this framework as coinciding with Dancy-style particularism, approvingly citing Dancy's explanation of the holism of reasons, by which features have variable relevance in different cases.<sup>32</sup> He characterizes particularism as "the view that moral reasoning should proceed on the basis of a sensitivity to the reasons at hand rather than on the basis of general principles."<sup>33</sup> As we have seen, however, this way of framing particularism is a false dichotomy. Contextualism—the view that moral guidance and evaluation should be responsive to the vagaries of particular contexts—is compatible with the view that moral thought and judgment involve generalization. Indeed, as Joseph Raz contends, the generalist should agree that "responsiveness to reasons" in particular contexts requires "a good deal of implicit knowledge," including "competences in discrimination and judgment that cannot be exhaustively articulated" and are "not a matter of consulting a rule book." Such points are not grounds for rejecting general principles, Raz remarks, but part of an explanation of "what constitutes mastery" of them.<sup>34</sup>

Lee further remarks that "the reliance on rules and principles is detrimental...to the extent that they circumscribe and limit the imaginative possibilities of a particular circumstance."<sup>35</sup> As we will see in section 3, this claim offers a defensible interpretation of remarks in several *Zhuangzi* passages. However, the claim justifies only contextualism and an open-minded pluralism in guiding action. It stops short of particularism, the view that general norms have no fundamental role in guiding and justifying action.

Lee draws an apt distinction between adaptive, high-level general norms such as "attune oneself to the Way" or "respond in the most fitting manner" and a more concrete, "fixed rule or principle that determines in advance what an agent should do." As he correctly says, "the protean nature of the Way prevents the agent from determining in

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<sup>29</sup> Lee, *Ethical*, 44.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 47–48.

<sup>34</sup> Raz, "The Trouble with Particularism (Dancy's Version)," 119.

<sup>35</sup> Lee, 48.



advance a discursive principle or rule that can be applied invariably from case to case.”<sup>36</sup> Again, however, these points—all of them accurate descriptions of views in the *Zhuangzi*—are covered by contextualism and pluralism, without committing us to particularism. Indeed, depending on how notions such as “fitting” are fleshed out, they may hint at various contextually defeasible yet general norms by which to find the Way.

### 3. GENERAL AND PARTICULAR IN *ZHUANGZI*

As a consequence of the composite, accretional structure of the writings collected in the *Zhuangzi*, Zhuangist ethics is not a unitary or monolithic position but a set of intersecting and overlapping discourses concerning—among other topics—the appropriate *dao*, or way of conduct, and how to find and follow it. In the course of exploring these points, several prominent *Zhuangzi* passages directly address the role of general norms or standards in guiding and justifying action. They frame the issue somewhat differently from contemporary moral particularism. The question is not how general norms bear on the status of actions as morally right or wrong but how they relate to *dao*, the apt way or path. As we will see, the texts concur in denying that any single, invariant general norm or set of norms is a reliable guide to *dao*, including the prevailing moral norms, values, or virtues designated by terms such as *ren* 仁 (benevolence) and *yi* 義 (right, duty). Morality itself is among the general norms criticized. At the same time, however, some passages apply high-level, formal general norms or indicate a role for general patterns in guiding and explaining appropriate action. The overall picture the texts present—or so I will argue—is that the appropriate *dao* is determined by interaction between particular, contextual features and an open-ended plurality of defeasible general norms.

#### 3.1 FIXED NORMS VERSUS CONTEXTUAL FIT

We can begin examining the interplay between general norms and contextual features in *Zhuangzi* by returning to the story of the seabird.

The gist of the story is that the Lord of Lu considered the bird an auspicious guest, in effect an emissary from the spirits, and accordingly sought to accommodate it with a level of hospitality appropriate for a visiting dignitary. However, instead of adjusting his treatment of the esteemed visitor according to prominent contextual features—namely, that it was a bird, not a human—he foolishly followed a fixed, codified protocol associated with “names” or “titles,” such as the social role of “honored guest” and treatment such as “courteous hospitality.” Sadly, this protocol resulted in the bird’s death. It not only harmed the bird but failed miserably as an expression of esteem. By rigidly following a general norm, the Lord of Lu pursued a course of conduct that turned out to be badly mistaken.

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

Clearly, the passage advocates contextualism. It contends that what is “right” is what “fits” “the facts,”<sup>37</sup> namely the features of the particular context, such that a course of action appropriate in one context, when one’s guest is a human dignitary, may be inappropriate in another, when one’s guest is a bird. It is less clear whether the passage also endorses pluralism. Commenting on the seabird story, the text says the Lord made the mistake of trying to “nurture a bird with what nurtures oneself” rather than “nurturing a bird with what nurtures birds.”<sup>38</sup> Instead of throwing a raucous banquet for the bird, the Lord should have set it free in a natural setting hospitable to birds. These remarks can plausibly be interpreted as alluding to the need for a plurality of general norms for different sorts of agents or contexts. But another interpretation might take them to allude to the flexible, contextually sensitive application of a single, high-level norm, such as “nurture yourself and others.” A few lines later, the passage highlights differences between different sorts of creatures—here likely standing both for different animals and for different persons—and remarks that these differences justify assigning them different “affairs”: “fish dwell in water and live, but if people dwell in water they die...so the former kings did not regard their abilities as one or regard their affairs as the same.”<sup>39</sup> These lines are probably better explained as expressing pluralism, here understood as the need for different “affairs” or “matters” for different agents.

The passage concludes that “names stop at the facts; what’s right is based on what fits; this is called adeptly attaining the patterns and preserving welfare” (18/39). In this context, “names” alludes to fixed, explicit norms, so these lines caution against guiding action by invariant norms, which may fail to “fit” the “facts” in a particular context. To act adeptly in practice, agents must be ready to adapt or set aside general norms associated with labels or titles, attending primarily to the facts of the concrete situation.

Does the passage imply that generalization has no place in guiding and justifying action? Its target seems to be not general norms, specifically, but clumsy, rigid application of such norms. The remark that contextually “fitting” conduct accords with the “patterns” (*tiao* 條) of things and promotes the general end of “preserving welfare” seems most plausibly explained as implying that *dao* lies in subtle general patterns that promote well-being, which adroit contextual discernment enables us to follow. Perhaps a particularist interpretation could attempt to explain the patterns as one-off arrangements rather than general regularities. However, the text seems to imply that the patterns include generalizations such as that fish thrive in water and seabirds flourish in wetlands. The very idea of “pattern” here likely involves generalization. I will return to this point in section 3.5.

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<sup>37</sup> *Zhuangzi*, 18/39.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 18/35.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 18/38.

## 3.2 THE LIMITATIONS OF ACTION-GUIDING DISTINCTIONS

The “Discourse on Evening Things Out”—*Zhuangzi* book 2—offers a theoretically rich perspective on the role of general norms in Zhuangist ethics. Attacking what it implies are prevailing assumptions among the Ruists and Mohists about *dao* and action-guiding distinctions,<sup>40</sup> the text undermines claims to privileged authority for any single, general way of drawing value distinctions, or distinctions between *shi* 是 and *fei* 非, to mark out the appropriate path, or *dao*. The import is pluralist and contextualist: no one set of *shi-fei* distinctions maps out *dao* because a plurality of feasible paths may be or become available and may be more suitable for different agents or in different situations. Accordingly, since no single general norm or set of norms for distinguishing *shi-fei* are likely to apply invariantly, how we guide and justify action may justifiably vary with the context.

*Shi* and *fei* are a pair of labels for the positive and negative sides of any evaluative judgment or action-guiding distinction, covering such contrasts as “pro” versus “con,” “this” versus “not,” and “right” versus “wrong.” In early Chinese philosophy of language, they are understood fundamentally as marking a distinction between what does or does not take some “name” (*ming* 名), or general term, such as “ox” or “horse,” or “benevolent” or “righteous.” *Shi*-versus-*fei* distinctions have an inherently general dimension, since such “names” are considered to apply to things on the basis of relations of “sameness” (*tong* 同) or “similarity” (*ruo* 若) across contexts. To deem something *shi* is to distinguish it as belonging to a general kind (*lei* 類) constituted by objects that are similar in some respect. For example, objects deemed *shi* with respect to the kind *ox* share a bovine body shape, cloven hooves, and a tail with a switch; objects deemed *shi* with respect to the kind *horse* share an equine body shape, unified hooves, and a tail with a skirt. “Names” in turn are understood to guide action through general norms concerning how to interact with objects that take a certain name. For example, creatures named “ox” are generally used to pull a plough; creatures named “horse” are generally used for transportation. Courses of conduct named “benevolent” or “righteous” are to be pursued and encouraged; those named “not benevolent” or “not righteous” are to be avoided and discouraged.

“Evening Things Out” contends that action-guiding distinctions are formed only when agents deem certain things *shi* or *fei* and thus pick out certain similarities and differences as significant.<sup>41</sup> According to the text, this “small-scale” formation of value distinctions actually obscures *dao*,<sup>42</sup> which to an agent with “understanding” (*ming* 明) presents itself as an indeterminate field of potential paths offering various ways by which

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 2/26.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 2/22.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 2/25.

to respond to particular circumstances.<sup>43</sup> Those with “understanding” grasp that anything can be *shi* or *fei*—and accordingly, deemed relevantly similar or not—depending on the agent’s circumstances or perspective.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, any way of drawing *shi-fei* distinctions “forms” selected values while being “deficient” in others.<sup>45</sup> Any action-guiding distinction presents selected, partial insights and values while being subject to blindspots and omissions. This inevitable pairing of strengths and weaknesses renders it unlikely that any single way of distinguishing *shi-fei* will be appropriate for all agents, in all contexts. To illustrate, one passage gives examples of how different agents—represented by different species of animals—find it suitable to dwell in different places—people in houses, monkeys in trees, fish in water.<sup>46</sup> Even a single agent is likely to find her evaluative judgments shifting in different contexts over time, as when Lady Li first grieved at being married off to the King of Jin but later came to regret her tears when she found her life in Jin delightful.<sup>47</sup>

In itself, the field of *dao* we encounter—the range of potential paths we could take up—draws no distinctions, the text implies.<sup>48</sup> So the key to following *dao* adeptly is a combination of pluralism and contextualism: we avoid the shortcomings of any one way of distinguishing *shi-fei* by setting aside any invariant, general norm for doing so, thereby allowing ourselves to respond without limit to particular contexts by flexibly adjusting how we draw action-guiding distinctions.<sup>49</sup> Such contingent, contextual *shi-fei* distinctions the text refers to as “*yin shi* 因是”—“adaptively” or “responsively” deeming things *shi*.<sup>50</sup> This approach is illustrated by the story of a monkey-keeper who “harmonizes” (*he* 和) with his wards by adjusting the size of their meals in response to their preferences, rather than insisting on a predetermined rule.<sup>51</sup>

“Evening Things Out” thus rejects invariant general norms as guides to *dao* in favor of a potential plurality of ways of drawing *shi-fei* distinctions, adjusted to fit particular contexts. This pluralism and contextualism are consistent with either a particularist interpretation or a generalist interpretation that recognizes an open-ended plurality of defeasible general norms. The generalist interpretation seems more justified, however, for the text also invokes general norms to guide adept *dao*-following. The monkey-keeper’s contextual response is guided by the abstract, formal norm of “harmonizing,” or

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 2/31.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 2/27, 2/34.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 2/35.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 2/67.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 2/79.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 2/55, 2/35.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 2/30.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 2/37.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 2/38.

resolving conflict, and by the less abstract norm of “proceeding along both sides” (*liang xing* 兩行), or finding a path jointly acceptable to both interacting parties.<sup>52</sup> The adept *dao*-follower is said to provisionally “lodge” things in “the ordinary,” understood as what is “useful,” “successful,” and “free-flowing (*tong* 通).”<sup>53</sup> The underlying picture seems to be that the adept agent follows a loose, generally coherent *dao* that is then modified in response to the exigencies of particular contexts according to flexible, general policies such as “proceeding along both sides.” The normatively apt *dao* is understood to have the general features of being “useful,” “successful,” “free-flowing,” and “harmonious.”

### 3.3 INVARIANT NORMS OBSCURE DAO

The passages we have looked at so far emphasize the limitations of fixed action-guiding distinctions, roles, and norms, implying that no single, invariant way of drawing *shi-fei* distinctions or naming and responding to other persons is likely to reliably guide us to a contextually appropriate *dao*. Other *Zhuangzi* passages that bear on generalization place more emphasis on the variability of *dao* itself. One such passage contends that because of the protean nature of *dao*, invariant norms not only are unreliable guides to conduct but can obstruct us from recognizing the apt path. A character named Yi'erzi reports to Xu You, a Zhuangist adept, that the sage-king Yao taught him to devote himself to the moral virtues of benevolence and duty while clearly specifying *shi* and *fei* (right and wrong). Xu You dismisses this advice as akin to a mutilating punishment that handicaps the listener from finding *dao*: “Why come to see me? Yao having already tattooed you with benevolence and duty and cut off your nose with right and wrong, how will you wander the aimless and wild, unbound and uninhibited, turning and shifting path?”<sup>54</sup> The “wandering” metaphor is informative: *dao* is not a straight, regular path that aligns with invariant, clearly specified norms or standards of moral value. Indeed, because of how *dao* twists and turns without any fixed direction, end, or boundaries, focusing on such norms or standards can blind us to the contextual features we must discern in order to follow it well, just as “the sightless lack the means to appreciate the look of richly coloured embroidery.”<sup>55</sup>

Insofar as apt conduct will require responding to the twists and turns of *dao* in particular contexts, the passage seems committed to contextualism. Since *dao* can shift in multiple directions, which may be oriented toward different values or dimensions of value, the passage is probably also committed to pluralism. Does *dao* wholly resist generalized guidance or explanation? Although one further line seems to characterize

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 2/40.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 2/36–37.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 6/83.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 6/85.

*dao* as having general qualities such as “nurturing the myriad generations,”<sup>56</sup> the passage seems neutral on this issue.

### 3.4 THE VARIABILITY OF DAO

Another passage that rejects fixed, invariant standards because of the variability of *dao* nevertheless seems to leave room for abstract, formal general norms.

Walking in the mountains, Zhuangzi and his students see a massive tree untouched by woodcutters, who consider its timber useless.<sup>57</sup> Zhuangzi comments that because it is worthless, the tree gets to live out its natural lifespan. Later, when the group arrives at a friend’s home, their host orders a servant to butcher a goose for dinner. “One of the geese can honk, one cannot,” says the servant. “Which should I butcher?” The host instructs him to kill the one that cannot honk. The next day, Zhuangzi’s students point out that although both the tree and the goose were considered worthless, in one case the result was a long life, in the other a premature death. What, then, should we take as a general rule? Is it better to be perceived as worthless, as the tree was, or as useful, as the goose that could honk was?

Zhuangzi suggests that no single, invariant norm can reliably keep us out of trouble—not even a mean between being useful and worthless. Instead of following any fixed norm, we should seek to “wander about by riding on *dao* and *de*.” (*De* 德, or “virtue,” refers to the capacities for agency by which we follow *dao*.) What is it to “wander about” in this way?

Without praise or criticism, in one case a dragon soaring in the sky, in another a snake slithering along the ground, change along with circumstances, never committing to acting only one way, in one case going above, in another below, taking harmonizing as a measure.<sup>58</sup>

No fixed general rule, such as “be worthless,” “be useful,” or “be neither,” is a reliable guide to *dao*, because *dao* itself is inherently variable, changing across contexts and over time. Hence “riding along” with *dao* is a process of “wandering,” rather than proceeding in a fixed direction toward a predetermined end. To apply our inherent *de* to “ride along” with *dao* requires constant adaptation to shifting circumstances, without adhering to any invariant norm.

The passage seems committed to contextualism, as it advocates adapting one’s conduct to changing circumstances in such a way that one might take up opposing courses in different contexts (“in one case going above, in another below”). It also seems

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 6/88.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 20/1.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 20/6.

to endorse pluralism, as the injunction not to “act only one way” can plausibly be taken to imply that the agent will pursue different values in different circumstances.

Clearly, the passage rejects invariant general rules as guides to or standards of *dao*. It does not seem to reject all general guidance, however, as it endorses an abstract, formal norm—“harmonizing” (*he* 和)—which is also presented in the story of the monkey-keeper. Although *dao* cannot be marked out by fixed, substantive rules, norms, or ends, we can “measure” how to act—and thus measure adept performance of *dao*—by the general feature of “harmonizing.” If we interpret harmonizing in light of the monkey story, the implication is that *dao* generally involves a smoothly flowing (*tong* 通), contextually effective course that accommodates different parties and resolves conflict.

How can the passage reject invariant norms while also recommending “harmonizing” as a general “measure”? One plausible explanation is that “harmonizing,” like “fit” in the seabird story, does not specify a determinate, substantive norm but rather a formal feature of how the adroit *dao* performer follows *dao* in practice. The *dao* adept aims to avoid, resolve, or defuse sources of friction or conflict, seeking a contextually determined arrangement by which things “flow freely” (*tong*) and thus accord with *dao*. “Harmonizing” is not a substantive principle, such as “promote welfare” or “avoid cruelty.” Nevertheless, arguably, it does function as a general guideline to *dao*, and it provides explanatory value, for it may clarify why courses of conduct do or do not constitute appropriate *dao*.

### 3.5 DAO, PATTERNS, AND “WEIGHING”

The “Autumn Waters” dialogue ties together major themes from several of the passages just discussed—the need for contextual responsiveness, the rejection of invariant norms, the variable nature of *dao*—while also suggesting that competence in *dao* requires an understanding of general “patterns” (*li* 理). The stance of this text thus seems best explained as endorsing pluralism and contextualism without particularism.

The dialogue contends that the grounds for distinguishing what conduct to value are deeply contextual, such that no one norm can be applied invariably in all contexts. One and the same type of conduct can be appropriate in one case and inappropriate in another.

In the past, Yao and Shun ceded the throne yet became emperors; Zhi and Kuai ceded the throne and perished. Tang and Wu contended for the throne and became kings; Duke Bai contended for the throne and was destroyed. Looking at it this way, whether it is the propriety of contending or ceding or the conduct of the [virtuous] sage-king Yao or the [vicious] tyrant Jie, what to value or deprecate depends on the circumstances; none of these [paths of

conduct] can be taken as constant.<sup>59</sup>

Conduct is thus admirable or contemptible because of how it relates to features of the context. Features that contribute to making some course of conduct appropriate in one context could be absent from another, which could have other features that make the same sort of conduct a mistake. The text elaborates on this contextualism by likening norms or standards of conduct—standards of what is *shi* 是 (right) or *zhi* 治 (orderly)—to tools or skills that are useful for some purposes, in some situations, but not others. This analogy is especially telling in the context of early Chinese thought, because the concept that most closely overlaps our notion of a general principle—*fa* 法 (standard, model, rule)—refers also to tools such as the wheelwright’s compass or the carpenter’s set square. The metaphor of different tools being suitable for different purposes thus suggests that a plurality of different standards may be needed to cover different contexts.

A battering ram can knock down a city wall but can’t block up a hole—this refers to different tools. A legendary steed gallops a thousand miles in a day but in catching mice is no match for a cat—this refers to different skills. At night the horned owl snatches up fleas and discerns the tip of a hair, but when daylight comes it is blinded by the glare and can’t see even a mountain—this refers to different natures. So you say you’ll follow only what’s right, avoiding what’s not, and follow order, avoiding disorder? This is failing to understand the patterns of Heaven and Earth and the facts about the myriad things. This is like following Heaven without Earth and *yin* without *yang*—it’s clear that it can’t be carried out.<sup>60</sup>

Just as no single tool, skill, or ability suits every task, the text claims, no single norm or standard applies invariably to all contexts. The patterns (*li*) of the world and facts about things are such that, in practice, the appropriate course may sometimes be to do what in other contexts we originally considered wrong or disorderly.

The tool and skill analogies seem best explained as expressing pluralism and contextualism, not particularism. The point is that just as different tools and skills are applicable for different tasks, a plurality of different norms or standards may be appropriate in different contexts. No one tool or skill—and, by analogy, no standard of “what is right” or “good order”—is “constantly” applicable across contexts. This stance is distinct from claiming that general norms do not guide or justify action. The text does not question appeals to generalizations such as that battering rams are useful in demolition or that cats are helpful in eradicating mice. Just as tools and skills may be

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 17/34.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 17/35.



generally applicable in relevant contexts, the analogical argument here should allow that norms and standards can apply generally to a range of similar contexts.

The underlying explanation of the pluralist, contextualist stance is again the variability of *dao*. If we ask what to do or not do—and thus how to identify the *dao* to follow—the text’s answer is that, like life itself, *dao* is constantly changing, shifting, and transforming.

The life of things is like galloping or racing, changing with every movement, shifting at all times. What to do? What not to do? [The path] will surely transform of itself.<sup>61</sup>

In practice, then, *dao* is deeply contextual, and no single, invariant rule, standard, or path captures it.

Do not constrain your intent, or you’ll be hobbled with respect to *dao*....Do not proceed in just a single [way or direction], or you’ll be at odds with *dao*.<sup>62</sup>

Here again the tenor of the discussion seems best explained as contextualist and pluralist. The variability of *dao* entails that the appropriate course of action depends heavily on contextual features. The emphasis on the shortcomings of a single way invites the inference that a plurality of ways could be helpful for guiding, justifying, and understanding appropriate action.

A proponent of a particularist interpretation might rejoin that both the contextualist remarks criticizing invariable norms and the pluralist stance rejecting a single way are consistent with particularism. Moreover, since a single norm would perforce be general, in criticizing reliance on a single norm, the text could be rejecting generalism. Perhaps, then, the text’s stance might still be particularist. However, the next part of the dialogue is difficult for a particularist interpretation to explain, because it presents expertise in contextual judgment as deriving from competence in general patterns, which follows from knowing *dao*. Mastery of *dao* is thus regarded as involving a grasp of general patterns and an understanding of how to judiciously apply them in particular contexts.

The text poses the question of what value there is in *dao*.<sup>63</sup> If *dao* has no fixed direction and provides no clear, determinate guidance, why bother with it? The answer is that “those who know *dao* are surely adept in the patterns (*li*),” a description synonymous with how the seabird story describes “fitting” courses of action as “adeptly attaining the

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 17/46.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 17/42.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 17/47.

patterns.”<sup>64</sup> Moreover, “those who are adept in the patterns surely understand how to weigh things (*quan* 權),” and so they are “discerning about safety and danger, calm about good fortune and bad, and judicious about what to pursue or forgo.”<sup>65</sup>

To grasp the import of these remarks, we need to unpack the pivotal notions of “patterns” and “weighing” as understood in late classical ethical discourse. Across the pre-Qin literature, the term “pattern” (*li*) refers to how things are structured or organized, how they function, how they relate or interact, and how they develop or transform.<sup>66</sup> “Patterns” cover relations of similarity and difference between things along with regularities and variations in their behavior. Patterns are commonly regarded as general, as when the *Xunzi* speaks of the “overall patterns of the world”<sup>67</sup> and describes the object or content of knowledge as the “patterns of things,”<sup>68</sup> which the text regards as organized into a coherent system of general “kinds” (*lei* 類).<sup>69</sup> For the *Xunzi*, patterns can be comparable to law-like generalizations, as when the text compares the patterns covering the paradigmatic social roles of ruler and subject, father and son, elder and younger brother, and husband and wife to those of natural phenomena such as the functioning of “Heaven and Earth.”<sup>70</sup> *Dao* itself is sometimes referred to as “pattern,” as in a *Zhuangzi* passage that states “*dao* is pattern”<sup>71</sup> or a *Xunzi* passage that describes *dao* as the “canonical pattern of good order.”<sup>72</sup> As the latter passage also illustrates, “pattern” can be used descriptively or normatively. The Mohist “Dialectics” refer to the norms by which “names” (*ming* 名) are paired with “objects” (*shi* 實) as “patterns,” which we examine by clarifying similarities and differences between things.<sup>73</sup> An implication is that the various

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<sup>64</sup> The two passages use the same verb, *da* 達 (“attain,” “fulfill,” “adept,” “proficient”), and synonymous expressions for “pattern,” *tiao* 條 in the seabird story and *li* 理 in “Autumn Waters.”

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 17/48.

<sup>66</sup> The word *li* 理 is typically used syntactically as a mass noun referring to patterns in the aggregate, roughly analogous to how the English word “grain” is used. Since *li* often refers to multiple instances of pattern(s), for the purposes of this discussion, I will use the English plural “patterns.”

<sup>67</sup> *Xunzi* 18/72. References to *Xunzi* 《荀子》 cite chapter and line numbers in William Hung, ed., *A Concordance to Hsun Tzu*, Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series, Supplement no. 22 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966).

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 21/79.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 21/83. See too 8/122.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 9/27.

<sup>71</sup> *Zhuangzi*, 16/3.

<sup>72</sup> *Xunzi*, 22/40.

<sup>73</sup> *Mozi* 45/1. References to *Mozi* 《墨子》 cite chapter and line numbers in William Hung, ed., *A Concordance to Mo Tzu*, Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series,

ways that things can be distinguished as *shi* or *fei*, as described in section 3.2, can be considered “patterns.” Unsurprisingly, then, the *Xunzi* links the “kinds” (*lei*) into which we distinguish things for the purposes of guiding action to general patterns, claiming that since the patterns do not change, the kind distinctions remain the same across different historical contexts.<sup>74</sup>

Given the common understanding of “patterns” in early texts, then, when “Autumn Waters” speaks of being “adept in the patterns,” it is probably referring to a grasp of how general similarities, regularities, norms, relations, distinctions, and so forth do or do not apply in various contexts. This grasp is in turn the basis for “weighing things.” “Weighing” (*quan*) is the pre-Qin technical term for contextual discretion, in which the comparative “weights” of different features of a situation are evaluated to determine how to judge or act in that case. In exigent circumstances, through “weighing,” features of particular contexts may prompt adjustments to general norms or override them. The Mohist “Dialectics” explains that a “weighed” judgment is when, in unusual circumstances, what might normally be considered wrong is instead deemed right.<sup>75</sup> For example, consider a situation that forces us to choose the lesser of two harms, such as sacrificing a finger to save a hand. Normally, sacrificing a finger would be a harm, which we would deem wrong. However, according to the “Dialectics,” in a context in which the only way to save the whole hand is to sacrifice a finger, sacrificing the finger is pursuing benefit and so is right. Another well-known example of “weighing,” from *Mengzi*, is that the general norm that unmarried men and women do not touch is outweighed by the need to grab hold of a drowning woman in order to rescue her.<sup>76</sup> The value of saving a life in an emergency overrides an everyday norm of propriety. Another *Mengzi* passage claims that invariably following any single general norm without contextually “weighing” it against other norms or values “harms *dao*,” for it “promotes a single [point] at the expense of a hundred others.”<sup>77</sup> The judicious practice of *dao* requires that we consider a plurality of norms or values.

These examples show that “weighing”—contextual discretion based on consideration of variable features—was not understood as opposed to or incompatible with general norms but as complementing them and guiding their application. The Mohists’ finger example shows how “weighing” guides application of the general norm of promoting benefit even in a special case when the action we take is harmful and so would normally be wrong. The *Mengzi* rescue example shows how, when general norms or values conflict, “weighing” allows one to override another. The remark about

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Supplement no. 21 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956).

<sup>74</sup> *Xunzi*, 5/36.

<sup>75</sup> *Mozi*, 44/4.

<sup>76</sup> *Mengzi* 《孟子》 4A: 17.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 7A: 26.

“harming *dao*” implies that no single general norm can be applied invariantly; all are defeasible and require contextual “weighing” against each other. This point is not, however, seen as grounds for rejecting general norms, since the *Mengzi* itself clearly endorses general norms of propriety and benevolence.

As the notions of patterns and “weighing” were commonly used, then, the remarks in “Autumn Waters” about *dao*, patterns, and “weighing” imply that *dao* is shaped, at least partly, by a variety of general patterns that relate to each other or interact in various ways. Accordingly, grasping *dao* yields mastery of general patterns, how they relate, and how they do or do not apply in particular contexts. This mastery is reflected in competence in contextual discretion concerning judicious action. For “Autumn Waters,” expertise in the contextual judgment needed to navigate particular situations rests on mastery of general patterns coupled with discernment in evaluating to what extent features of particular contexts fit into these patterns. Without a grasp of general regularities, the agent would not understand the significance of particular features. This dual understanding of the general and the particular is underscored by the concept of “weighing,” which involves assessment of both similarities and differences between the features of particular cases and those paradigmatic of general norms.

#### 4. PATTERNS IN ACTION

If we think of *dao* as a path shaped by features that form various patterns (*li* 理), we can easily understand why texts such as the *Zhuangzi* or *Mengzi* do not see general norms as sharply opposed to the contextually sensitive judgments needed to respond to variable circumstances. As sections 3.2 and 3.5 explained, whether something counts as “this” (*shi* 是), of the same “kind” (*lei* 類), and thus fitting into some general pattern (*li*) is determined by relations of similarity or analogy. To claim that a general norm applies in a particular case—that is, that the case falls into a specified pattern—is to claim that features of the case meet a threshold of relevant similarity to other cases that manifest that pattern. It is not to subsume the case under an exceptionless law, along the lines of a deductive-nomological explanation. Since the relation to the general pattern is understood as a matter of similarity or analogy, not subsumption under a law, each particular case is expected to be slightly different, potentially requiring contextual adjustment. Conversely, to deny that a norm fits a case and thus that the case fits into a certain pattern is to claim that the case is in some respect significantly unlike those that form the pattern. In the early Chinese theoretical framework, the natural response is not to conclude that the pattern is mistaken or that general patterns are unhelpful but that the case at hand counts as a different “kind” and thus that other patterns may apply. To be “adept in the patterns” is to understand the variety of patterns and the respects in which they apply to some cases and not others. The competent agent grasps both similarities and differences across a diverse range of particular cases. What is distinctive of the *Zhuangzi* is that it takes the pluralism and contextualism advocated in the *Mengzi*

remark about how any single, invariant norm “harms *dao*” and dramatically expands their scope. For the *Zhuangzi*, the range of patterns potentially relevant to determining the most “fitting” course of action in some context is indeterminate and open-ended.

The story of Pao Ding the masterful butcher helpfully illustrates a Zhuangist vision of how patterns guide action. In what is perhaps the most informative use of “patterns” (*li*) in the *Zhuangzi*, Pao Ding describes his practice of *dao* as a matter of “going by the natural patterns (*li*), cutting through the main gaps, following the major seams, and responding to what is inherently so” in the structure of the cattle he chops up.<sup>78</sup> As this description suggests, the concept of patterns may cover both general regularities in how things are organized—the grain of the meat, as formed by gaps and seams common to all cattle—and the features of particular cases—the precise shape of the gaps and seams in a particular carcass. A masterful butcher is one who recognizes and acts on general structural patterns as they occur in individual cases. Each animal has a similarly structured body, with similar organs, muscles, tendons, and joints. The details of the structure will be different in individual cases, but the relations between the details will be largely analogous across cases of the same kind. A grasp of patterns will include an understanding of both the relations between features in a particular case and how these relations do or do not fit into general regularities observed across a range of cases.

The butcher’s expertise thus involves simultaneously recognizing both general similarities and particular differences, including exceptions to norms or patterns. Pao Ding needs to grasp structural similarities across cases, by which skills developed working on a limited sample of cattle extend to others as well. Yet he also needs to respond to differences in the details of each case, which call for contextual adjustment. His expertise is inherently general, an ability to recognize gaps and seams and apply a repertoire of cutting techniques; yet it is also contextually sensitive, since each case may call for somewhat different moves. Moreover, Pao Ding himself explains that his competence sometimes reaches its limits, as when he encounters a knotty section that temporarily forestalls his progress.<sup>79</sup> Here neither proficiency in general patterns nor agility in contextual fine-tuning are enough to carry him forward immediately. By drawing on this combination of general competence and particular adaptiveness, however, he is eventually able to find a fitting path forward. Presumably, in some cases he does so by modifying or extending how he applies familiar patterns, in others by identifying new patterns or subpatterns.<sup>80</sup>

To sum up, in Zhuangist thought, it is unlikely that the general and the particular

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<sup>78</sup> *Zhuangzi*, 3/6.

<sup>79</sup> *Zhuangzi*, 3/10.

<sup>80</sup> For a discussion of related points, see Chris Fraser, “A Path With No End: Skill and Ethics in *Zhuangzi*,” in *Skill in Ancient Ethics: The Legacy of China, Greece, and Rome*, ed. Tom Angier and Lisa Raphals (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

are opposed in the way particularism contends. The contextual discretion characteristic of appropriate conduct in particular cases is seen as drawing on a grasp of general patterns of similarity and difference, which yields an understanding of both the applicability and the limitations of general norms. The adept agent's course of action in particular contexts is informed by general patterns and norms, but the agent can apply this general know-how appropriately only through judicious sensitivity to contextual features. Moreover, since *dao* is variable, a plurality of patterns may be relevant in different contexts. Which patterns are pertinent and how they shape the apt course of action in any one context will depend on the distinctive features of that context.