How *Dao* and *De* Can Shape a Plausible Zhuangist Ethics

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1. Introduction

In two previous essays, I have proposed that certain threads of discourse in the *Zhuangzi* present an ethical outlook revolving around the paired concepts of *dao* 道, or ways or paths, and *de* 德, the agentive powers by which we pursue ways or paths.[1] Hong-Ki Lam presents a forceful, invigorating challenge to several aspects of my interpretation of a Zhuangist ethical outlook.[2] Her discussion reveals several respects in which my previous treatments were insufficiently clear or precise. I am grateful for her meticulous critical appraisal, which highlights several dimensions along which I need to elaborate my proposed interpretation.

When a scholar is tasked with critiquing another's work, the resulting discussion can come to seem mainly negative, and invariably there will be respects in which the subject of the critique disagrees with the characterization of their views. Disputing such points seems to me unproductive. Instead, I want to accentuate the positive, by first remarking on the extensive agreement between Lam's own interpretation of *Zhuangzi*, that of Yong Huang, on whose work she draws,[3] and how I understand my own interpretation. In my view, we share an interpretive picture with many of the same elements. Our differences, to the extent they exist, concern details of how these elements fit together, along with the explanatory vocabulary we use to elucidate them. Moreover, we all agree that the points Lam identifies as potential weaknesses in my interpretation are indeed pivotal issues that must be resolved by any plausible attempt to develop a Zhuangist ethics.

Instead of offering a point by point review of Lam's treatment of my views, then, I want to take the issues she raises as a springboard for constructive development in our joint interpretation of the *Zhuangzi.*

Lam offers two main sets of criticisms of my account of a Zhuangist ethics.

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[1] The two main presentations of this interpretation are in Fraser (2021) and (2022). A revised version of this interpretation will appear in Fraser (forthcoming).
[2] See Hong-Ki Lam, this volume.
[3] The major sources of Huang's views are his important pair of papers (2010a) and (2010b), along with his more recent (2018), (2023a), and (2023b).

(1) The first is that the interpretation I propose of a well-lived or flourishing life for (parts of) the *Zhuangzi* is too narrow, as it neglects certain external conditions that make life better, such as negative liberty.

(2) The other is that my account of a Zhuangist ethics of interacting with others falls short because it fails to provide the normative force needed from such an ethics. In particular, my account allegedly fails to offer a suitably robust explanation of what is wrong with harming other creatures, when certain prominent *Zhuangzi* stories, such as the seabird story,[4] clearly disapprove of harm to others. Lam proposes that to explain the disapproval of harm, an account of Zhuangist ethics must incorporate a principle of equal respect.

I'll address these two issues in turn, focusing more on the second, which I think is among the most significant issues in Zhuangist ethics and touches on questions of broad interest. I'll argue for two main contentions.

(1) As presented in the texts themselves, the core conception of the well-lived life in the thread of Zhuangist thought I addressed in earlier work is indeed relatively narrow, and for good reasons, because this narrow conception prevents the flourishing life from being subject to chance. A broader conception of the good life may complement this core conception but cannot replace it.

(2) Far from failing to provide grounds for avoiding harm to others, my account of Zhuangist ethics in terms of *dao* and *de* actually explains why the texts disapprove of harm and why they show consideration for others.

2. The Life of *De* and the "Good" Life

Some *Zhuangzi* pericopes valorize *de* 德, "agentive power," "Virtue," or "Virtuosity," as a distinctive feature of admirable agents.[5] I have suggested that for one thread of Zhuangist thought, *de* is the core of a conception of a flourishing or well-lived life, and activity manifesting *de* will typically coincide with the mode of activity some *Zhuangzi* passages label "wandering" (*yóu* 遊). This conception seems formally, although not substantively, analogous to the role of eudaimonia in much Hellenistic thought. My grounds for proposing this account were several pericopes that tie the value of life and the functioning of our core capacities to *de* and the resilient, adaptive activity associated with it. Key examples include Lǎo Dān's remarks on value lying in ourselves and not being lost in change, as we can maintain "overall constancy" in our activities;[6] the description of the strikingly ugly Āitái Tuō as someone whose "capacities are whole" (5/42–43); and Sūnshú Áo's attitude that

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[4] See *Zhuangzi* 18/33, 19/72. References to the *Zhuangzi* give book and line numbers in the Harvard-Yenching concordance text (Hung 1956).

[5] "Pericope" (pur-RICK-uh-pee) is a term borrowed from traditional philology and theology to refer to sections of text that can be read alone as independent short writings, such as the various skill stories.

[6] "[They] proceed through minor changes without losing overall constancy…Value lies in oneself and is not lost in change" (21/31–34)

gain and loss do not affect one's self-worth.[7] Going beyond explicit uses of *de* in the texts, I suggest that this sort of activity is also manifested in examples such as Zhuangzi using a giant gourd to float along rivers and lakes (1/42), Cook Dīng finding his way through a knotty section in his work (3/10–11), the whitewater swimmer following the *dao* of the water (19/52–53), and the dying Zǐyú proactively adapting to the damage his disease wreaks upon him (6/49).

An Aristotelian conception of eudaimonia ties it to excellent functioning. My proposal was that Zhuangist notions such as maintaining "overall constancy," "wholeness of capacities," and *de* allude to a partly parallel conception of agentive functioning.

Lam argues that a conception of the good life is empty unless we specify the content of such a life, implying that my account fails to do so (p. 5). But my proposal does address the content of an admirable Zhuangist life, on both a general and a specific level. Generally, it identifies features of a Zhuangist conception of the excellent exercise of human agency, namely those just mentioned—a resilient capacity for creative, fitting responses to changing circumstances, supported by equanimity in the face of alternations of fortune, such that one maintains "overall constancy" in responding to change.[8] In the same discussion,[9] I link these general traits to the activity of following various particular *dao.* So I propose that the general traits associated with *de* along with their instantiation in adept performance in a particular agent's *dao* or life-path jointly provide enough content to answer the charge of emptiness. Moreover, consistent with a Zhuangist recognition that different agents may occupy different perspectives, pursuing different *dao*, this approach allows that the concrete realization of the well-lived life will be different for different agents.

Here a critic might rejoin that my proposal is still too empty, as it places insufficient constraints on the content of the *dao* through which an agent might manifest *de.* This rejoinder converges with the criticism that my account fails to provide strong enough normative constraints on action, which I will address in the next section.

For the sake of discussion, let's grant that the pleasure of floating along rivers and lakes, the exhilaration of whitewater swimming, and the satisfaction Cook Ding derives from his work all illustrate fulfilling or worthwhile activities, which enrich the lives of agents who pursue them. These and other examples suggest that a full, worthwhile, or admirable life may include a range of features beyond the bare application of *de* to "wander" without any fixed end. One such feature might be the performance of certain skills—such as whitewater swimming—for the sake of the sort of "flow" experience they provide, which is perhaps intrinsically valuable.

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[7] "I hold that gain and loss are not my self" (21/64). The Sūnshú story does not mention *de* but shares with these other passages the theme that exemplary agents adapt to gain and loss without disturbing their equanimity, because they locate value in the self, not in external things or events.

[8] See section 2 of Fraser (2014).

[9] See section 6 of Fraser (2014), entitled "The Content of the Zhuangist Good Life."

Another such feature, Lam proposes, is negative liberty, or freedom from coercion, which she proposes is a requirement for a flourishing Zhuangist life.

Regarding this issue, I suggest we distinguish two dimensions or senses of a good life. One is the well-lived life in the sense of living with robust *de* and approaching one's situation with an adaptive, "wandering" responsiveness. The other is a good life in the sense of a life in which we enjoy a sufficient supply of other goods. There is no contradiction between holding that the core or minimal qualification for a good life is that it be a life of *de* while also acknowledging that such a life can be enriched by other goods.

The issue Lam raises here partly parallels a familiar complication in Aristotle's ethics. Aristotle held that eudaimonia lies in activity caused by the rational soul in accordance with the virtues or excellences. In principle, virtuous persons could engage in such activity regardless of whether they face unfavourable circumstances. For Aristotle, virtuous activity is not subject to chance: it is within our control. But Aristotle also holds that to live well one must have other goods that are subject to chance, such as friends, family, wealth, power, and physical beauty. If we lack these goods—if we encounter misfortunes in life that cost us these goods—we may lack opportunities to realize eudaimonia. So we live a better life all around if we both engage in excellent activity and are materially fortunate.

Some *Zhuangzi* pericopes may suggest we enjoy a better life overall if things go well for us materially. Perhaps the story of Old Man Scatterlimb (4/83) is an example—it implies that he lives well because he prospers materially. The "Autumn Waters" dialogue indicates that an advantage of grasping *dao* and possessing *de* is that we can avoid harm.[10] Numerous passages suggest that living out one's natural lifespan is a good (Old Man Scatterlimb is again an example). So, as in Aristotle, in selected *Zhuangzi* writings, perhaps a conception of excellent activity—possessing robust *de*, such that one smoothly adapts to change—constitutes the core of the well-lived life, but beyond this core, our lives may be considered richer if we also enjoy certain other goods, perhaps including an absence of coercion, as Lam proposes, and material well-being. Moreover, stories such as that of the ugly Āitái Tuō (5/32) imply that, in some circumstances, at least, potent *de* may tend to facilitate our obtaining certain external goods, such as friendship and career opportunities.[11]

On the other hand, a central theme of some prominent *Zhuangzi* writings is that the life of *de* is insulated from contingency. The stories about the one-footed Wang Tai (5/1), the ugly Aitai Tuo (5/32), the thrice-dismissed prime minister Sunshu Ao (21/61), and Lao Dan's ultimate happiness (21/30) indicate that *de* does not depend on external conditions. We can realize *de* in the face of uncontrollable,

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[10] "Someone who knows the Way is surely adept in the patterns…[they] do not let things harm them...Someone of ultimate Virtue...is discerning as to security and danger, calm regarding fortune and misfortune, and meticulous in what they pursue or reject, and so nothing can harm them" (17/49–50).

[11] I owe this point to a conversation with Herbert Hu.

"inevitable" (*bu de yi* 不得已) circumstances, including circumstances that limit our negative liberty, such as the predicament of Zigao, the anxious diplomat (4/34). In "Freely Wandering About," the motif of "wandering in the limitless" (*you wu qiong* 遊無窮) is presented as a way of attaining "non-dependence" (*wu dai* 無待) on any fixed external conditions (1/21). Passages that describe the "ultimate person" as unaffected by mundane concerns such as benefit and harm or life and death suggest an idealized conception of the well-lived life as immune to chance events (2/73). So I suggest that in many *Zhuangzi* pericopes, there is indeed a core view of the well-lived life as independent of external goods.

3. Are All *Dao* Equal?

In recent articles, I have proposed an interpretation of Zhuangist ethics as structured by the concepts of *dao* and *de*. The aim is to develop an understanding of certain strands of Zhuangist thought on which *dao* and *de* function as what Shelly Kagan calls evaluative focal points (among other roles).[12] I approach the texts this way because I am particularly interested in trying to understand action and ethics through the concept of *dao*, which I see as structurally central to early Chinese approaches to action, ethics, mind, and knowledge. *Dao* and *de* refer to formal, structural features of this ethics, which contrast with principles (as in duty ethics), standards (as in Mohism), norms of ritualized propriety (as in Ruism), and virtues (as in virtue ethics). The inspiration for this approach is *Zhuangzi* passages that highlight *dao* and *de* as the keys to appropriate action, such as the "Mountain Tree" story, which rejects fixed norms of conduct in favor of "drifting about by riding *dao* and *de*" (20/6), a passage that presents attuning and aligning oneself with *de* and *dao* as the crux of handling human relations (22/38–39), and the "Autumn Waters" dialogue, which concludes by describing how to direct action when guided by *dao* and *de* (17/48).

As I develop this approach for the *Zhuangzi*, action is conceptualized as *dao*, or a path of conduct an agent follows. In my view, different *Zhuangzi* passages refer to *dao* in several senses. Sometimes *dao* is the path we actually follow, along with the manner or style in which we follow it. This is the sense in which we can speak of evaluating how well an agent follows *dao*. Besides this use, sometimes *dao* can refer to various paths open to us in particular circumstances. In some contexts, *dao* seems to refer to the overall totality-path of the cosmos, which is sometimes referred to the "ancestral source" (*zōng* 宗) out of which things and more specific paths arise. When referring to paths that agents follow, *dao* may be used in either a normative or a descriptive sense, to distinguish between the path or paths that would be appropriate to follow and those they actually follow.

The agentive powers or capacities by which we follow paths are *de*. Possessing *de* enables us to perform *dao* well; to perform *dao* in a smooth,

[12] See Kagan (2000). The idea of *dao* as an evaluative focal point is due to Hansen (2011).

masterful way is to manifest *de*. The previous section discussed *de*; here I will focus on *dao*.

Faced with the plurality of different, perspectival *dao* explored in *Zhuangzi* writings found in “Freely Wandering About” and “Discourse on Evening Things Out,” a natural question to ask is: Are there constraints on *dao* by which to distinguish better from worse paths of activity, or are all *dao* equally justified? This question breaks down into two: (1) For any particular *dao* one might follow, are there better and worse ways to follow it? (2) Are some particular *dao* better or worse than others, or are all *dao* on a par? More vividly, is the *dao* of a malevolent actor somehow on equal footing with that of a benign agent? Does a Zhuangist have grounds for criticizing the *dao* of a serial killer or of a headhunting tribe whose warriors win social status by murdering members of neighbouring tribes in weekly raids?

Question (1) is easy to answer. Numerous *Zhuangzi* pericopes distinguish better from worse ways to proceed and discuss techniques for improving our performance. Obvious examples include the Cook Dīng story (3/2), Huìzǐ’s giant gourds (1/35), and Yán Huí’s attempt to reform the tyrant of Wèy (4/1).

Question (2) is a subject of much concern in *Zhuangzi* scholarship. The roots of the concern are a line of argument in the “Discourse on Evening Things Out” that seems to place all ways of distinguishing value on equal grounds. The argument runs roughly as follows. Action-guiding distinctions between *shi* 是 and *fei* 非 (this/right versus not)—a general pro/con concept pair referring to values or evaluative judgments—are not predetermined by the world but formed in the mind (2/22). Accordingly, the *dao* we follow, including the norms by which we deem things to be “so” or not, are constructed through our practices (2/33). The point is not that these practices are ungrounded, floating free of how things stand in the world. They do pick out human-independent features of things (2/34). The crux is that there is a plurality of ways to pick out such features so as to divide things up (*fen* 分) to form (*cheng* 成) *dao* to follow (2/34–35). From one perspective or another, anything can be “this” or “that” (2/27). Analogously, each perspective furnishes its own way of distinguishing *shi-fei* (2/29–30), and we lack grounds by which to identify absolutely or universally justified *shi-fei* distinctions, since any judgment of *shì-fēi* is always made from some particular perspective. Accordingly, any justification for a way of distinguishing *shi-fei* will be to some extent circular or “internal,” as it will be grounded in the perspective of those who follow it. Hence it may be rejected by those who hold a different perspective.[13] The de facto plurality of pro tanto justified, practically successful *dao* we observe among different agents or communities provides grounds for questioning any claim purporting to identify absolute or universal norms of conduct.[14]

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[13] This point follows from the discussion of whether “winning” a distinction-drawing debate actually establishes that one’s view is “ultimately” correct (2/89).

[14] This point follows from the “pluralism” argument questioning how we could identify absolute or universal standards for what is *shi* (2/64ff).

Of course, that no particular *dao* is absolutely or universally justified does not entail that no *dao* are pro tanto justified, contingently and contextually, for those who follow them. Nor does it entail that no *dao* can be better justified than another in a particular context for a particular agent. The Zhuangist "plurality" argument against universal norms implies we have good grounds for holding that, while sleeping in the damp is unjustified for humans, it is justified for fish (2/67). The problem is that since different *dao* may be justified for different agents, and since we lack universal standards of *shì-fēi*, it may seem that we lack grounds for criticizing a malevolent *dao* whose advocates claim it is justified from their perspective.

Let me work toward resolving this problem by first reconsidering a crucial paragraph in "Evening Things Out." If we consider how the text follows up on the contention that *shì-fēi* are perspectival and not absolute, we find the discussion directly indicates that not all *dao* are on equal footing. Precisely because the text questions our grounds for holding that any way of distinguishing *shì-fēi* is "ultimately" (*guo* 果), absolutely, or universally justified, it advocates that we *not* proceed by insisting that our way or any other is authoritative. Instead we are to proceed by "responsive" action-guiding distinctions (*yin shi* 因是), adjusting what we consider apt or inapt in response to the context. Responding to particular contexts, the adept agent provisionally "accommodates" things in what is "ordinarily useful" (*yong* 庸、*yong* 用), free-flowing (*tong* 通), and contextually successful (*de* 得) (2/36–37). The adept can see respects in which things are "the same" without insisting on deeming them "one" (2/37–38). Possessing "understanding" or "clarity" (*ming* 明) about the grounds for *shi-fei*, they can see both sides of any way of drawing distinctions. They understand that *dao* can be formed in various directions, and drawing distinctions to "form" or "complete" (*cheng* 成) one path simultaneously leads us to suffer "loss" or "deficiency" (*kui* 虧) with respect to other paths (2/35). The adept grasp that if we do not construct paths, things rejoin into an undifferentiated totality (2/36). In effect, having attained the "hinge" of *dao* (*dao shu* 道樞, 2/30), they see *dao* not as a definite, fixed path but as an indeterminate, unbounded field of paths one might provisionally take up for various contextually prompted purposes.[15]

Accordingly, when engaging with others who draw distinctions differently, the adept can "walk two ways" or "proceed along both sides" (*liang xing* 兩行, 2/40), adjusting action-guiding distinctions in such a way as to attain "harmony" (*he* 和) or eliminate conflict. They themselves do not invest wholly in drawing distinctions one way or another, instead resting in the "equality" or "evenness" of nature (2/40).[16] That is, the adept recognize that nature in itself does not draw specific distinctions

[15] I take this to be the implication of the remark 2/36 about setting aside "deeming *shi*" and instead "accommodating things in the ordinary."

[16] I read 天鈞 as a variant for 天均. "Resting in the equality of nature" I suggest refers to the same status as "recognizing how things connect as one [and so] not imposing *shì*" (2/36).

to act on but only presents various paths one might take up.[17] Only as a response to particular contexts can these paths be justified or unjustified.

Clearly, the text contends that there is a more justified *dao* than the *dao* of rigidly following any fixed set of *shi-fei* standards. Indeed, although the text is obscure and interpretation is necessarily tentative, one line appears to directly endorse a certain view of the appropriate *dao* to follow: "[Practice] responsive *shì*; doing so without knowing it's so is called *dao.*"[18] I interpret this line as indicating that the *dao* to follow is "responsive *shi*" (*yin shi* 因是), performed in such a way that we don't know in advance exactly how we will respond to particular contexts, because rather than imposing predetermined *shi-fei* distinctions, we will discover what is suitably responsive or adaptive as we proceed.

To sum up, we have a preliminary answer to question (2). For certain sections of "Evening Things Out," some *dao* are indeed more justified than others, because they are more "responsive" to particular contexts and so are more "ordinarily useful" and "free flowing." In the context of interacting with others, such *dao* are understood specifically as paths that take both sides into consideration and eliminate conflict.

From "Evening Things Out" alone, then, a Zhuangist already has strong grounds for criticizing malevolent *dao* as defective. The malevolent actor is a paradigmatic example of rigidly imposing one's own *shi-fei* distinctions on others instead of seeking a smoothly flowing path that responds to and avoids conflict with them, seeking to "walk two ways" or "proceed along both sides."

4. Harm, Respect, and *Dao*

Lam is concerned that my interpretation of Zhuangist ethics may be purely a skill model of *dao*, in which interpersonal relations are treated "solely as a field of skill." The worry is that the idea of skill alone cannot explain what's wrong with malevolent *dao.*

I indeed hold that the process of adapting our responses to others so as to find ways to interact with them harmoniously is in some ways similar to the performance of skills. However, the account I proposed does not reduce *dao* to skill. As Cook Ding says, *dao* goes beyond skill, a motif that I devote considerable space to exploring.[19] What I tried to suggest is not that *dao* simply lies in skill but that the performance of skills illustrates key features of the performance of *dao.* More specifically, in this context, skills exemplify the sort of responsive, continually self-

[17] That the natural world in itself does not determine a *dao* for us to follow is a thesis some *Zhuangzi* writings share with the *Xúnzǐ.* Xúnzian thought is instructive in explaining how one can acknowledge both that objects in the world are differentiated in various ways while also holding that action-guiding distinctions are constructed, not found in the world. For discussion, see Fraser (2016: 317–18).

[18] The line is: 因是已已而不知其然謂之道 (2/37). An alternative reading is to take 不知其然 as an abbreviation for 不知其所以然, yielding "without knowing how it is so."

[19] See Fraser (2021), section 3.

correcting activity needed to fulfill Zhuangist criteria of appropriate action. For this reason, skills are instructive regarding Zhuangist conceptions of *dao*-following.

As Lam points out, not all skills or all uses of skill are admirable *dao*. Some skills may be irrelevant, as in the story of Zhu Pingman, who spent three years learning the skill of slaughtering dragons only to find there was nowhere to apply his techniques (32/18). Some skills may be used for ignorant or malevolent ends, as when Duke Zhuang judged Dongye Ji's skilled chariot driving superlatively beautiful and ordered him to do one hundred laps, causing his horses to break down (19/59). Cook Ding might be a skilled butcher, but from some perspectives this skill may make him a cruel executioner of innocent animals. We can imagine a skilled serial killer or a skilled headhunter who is smooth and efficient at murder.

We also agree that prominent *Zhuangzi* passages disapprove of harm to others. The Lord of Lu's mistreatment of the seabird (18/33, 19/72) and the death of Chaos (7/33) are examples. Equally significant are two pericopes which suggest that we should not only avoid doing harm but intervene to prevent harm by others, at least in contexts when doing so is possible. The story of Yan Hui's project to reform the tyrant of Wey (4/1) and of Yan He's tutoring to improve the character of the cruel prince (4/54) envision an agent in a position to influence a malevolent actor so as to reduce the damage he does. Of course, we need to balance such stories against other stories about protecting oneself through uselessness, as Old Man Scatterlimb does (4/83), and about taking official service only when the timing is right, as in the story of Zhuangzi's poverty (20/45). One can intervene only when the context presents a feasible path to doing so.

Lam proposes that pericopes such as the seabird disapprove of harm because they are committed to a norm of equal respect for others. We can agree that the seabird and Chaos stories illustrate some form of empathetic consideration of others for their own sake. But I suggest that norms such as "respect others equally" and "avoid harm" are of limited help in explaining these stories, because the agents who commit ethical mistakes in them already respect and intend to benefit those they injure. The fundamental problem is not a lack of respect or a willingness to harm. It is blindness to contextual features—to the different treatment appropriate for Chaos and for the bird.

Even more important, given the deep contextualism of many *Zhuangzi* pericopes and the arguments against absolute moral norms in "Evening Things Out" and "Autumn Waters," we cannot simply observe that some stories disapprove of harm or endorse consideration of others and conclude that a Zhuangist ethics takes avoiding harm or equal respect as a basic norm. We need to explain *why* the stories take this stance in the contexts they depict.

My proposal is that this explanation should be grounded in a Zhuangist account of *dao* and the competent or excellent performance of *dao*, and thus also of *de*. When Lam raises the question of why, on my account, we should respect others or avoid harming them, my answer is: because doing so is the contextually appropriate *dao*, which the person of *de* would follow. On my interpretation, the

ethical ends of a Zhuangist agent are to follow *dao* well, with *de*. In most contexts, the apt *dao* will be to avoid or limit injury to others.

Why is this the apt *dao*? In Fraser (2022), I suggested that a key part of the answer lies in the concept of *li* 理, "pattern," which appears prominently in several pericopes bearing on *dao* and on human relations.[20] "Evening Things Out" emphasizes "responding" or "adjusting" (*yin* 因) as pivotal in finding apt *dao.* What is it that we are responding to? I suggest the answer is the features, grain, and flow of our circumstances, for which "pattern" (*li* 理) is an informative general label. According to the Cook Ding story, following *dao* involves proceeding according to "natural patterns" (*tian li* 天理) and "responding to what's inherently so" (*yi qi guran* 因其固然). These descriptions helpfully underscore how factual patterns guide and constrain *dao* in practice. *Zhuangzi* discussions indeed recognize a plurality of *dao* that may be formed by various practices, but not just any *dao* will actually work. Huizi's giant gourds were useless as ladles and jugs but useful as floats. They might be equally useful as drums or lanterns but would be useless as balloons. Factual patterns constrain what *dao* are feasible.

The application of these ideas to interpersonal ethics is simple and direct: other persons and creatures, along with their activities, are part of the "inherently so" patterns to which we must respond in order to find *dao* that "fit" (*shi* 適) and "flow smoothly" (*tong* 通) in particular contexts.[21] These patterns constrain what *dao* can be considered to meet Zhuangist criteria such as being "ordinarily useful," "fitting," "free-flowing," "harmonious," and so on. An apt *dao* must interact with other agents as the agents they are, acknowledging that like us they are self-directed, self-correcting performers of *dao.* If it does not, it fails to respond appropriately to the patterns of the context.

5. "Ordinary" Patterns

From "Evening Things Out," the seabird story, "Autumn Waters," and other pericopes, we can characterize a Zhuangist ethics as an approach to adjusting the *dao* we pursue to particular contexts, in light of the "ordinary" (*yong* 庸) values we find relevant, so as to seek a "fitting" (*shi* 適), smoothly flowing (*tong* 通) path forward that eliminates conflict with others by finding what "works" (*de* 得) or is "useful" (*yong* 用) for those on both sides of our interactions.

This characterization is primarily formal rather than substantive. But when we ask what counts as "ordinary" or "fitting," we can quickly fill in a richer substantive picture. We can draw, for instance, on pericopes such as the first section of "The Crux of Nurturing Life," which assumes we are generally concerned to "protect ourselves, fulfill life, nurture our parents, and live out our years" (3/2). The

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[20] Examples include the Cook Ding story, the "Autumn Waters" dialogue, the seabird story (which uses *tiao* 條, a synonym), and a passage that compares human relations to the patterns that relate fruit-bearing plants (22/37).

[21] See Fraser (2022: 571).

"pluralism" argument in "Evening Things Out" implies that creatures of all kinds are concerned to have a comfortable dwelling, eat a satisfying diet, and enjoy sexual companionship (2/66). The seabird story mentions "preserving welfare" (18/39). These examples offer a rough list of widely shared default values, to which we can add typical personal values—the importance we attach to our work or other activities, for example. We might even include leisure activities, such as floating on rivers and lakes or hanging out by the side of a "useless" tree (1/47). I suggest we take the "patterns" of human life to include agents' pro tanto commitments to pursue "ordinary" values along these lines.

A further feature of the factual patterns that shape *dao* for most of us is that following *dao* is a social, reciprocal process. The story of Zigao, the anxious diplomat, in "The World Among Humanity" depicts kinship relations and political relations as "inevitable" features of human life (4/40). Much of our *dao* takes place in social settings, proceeding alongside or in interaction with other agents whom we recognize as being like ourselves in pursuing *dao* and holding various expectations of each other. The perspectival account of *shi-fei* distinctions in "Evening Things Out" reminds us that we must deal with other parties' perspectives, which may be different from ours. As I tried to emphasize in the title of a previous discussion of Zhuangist ethics, following *dao* is typically not a solitary activity but a social one. We must seek to find a way *together*.[22]

The "patterns" that guide and impinge on agents as they proceed along their path in life are likely to form a complex, even tangled web. The complexity and particularity of these patterns provide reasons to think the skill stories helpfully illustrate how agents may navigate and negotiate their path forward. The idea is that finding a way through various personal, social, and environmental pressures is analogous in various respects to Cook Ding's feeling out the gaps, the whitewater swimmer's following the current, the woodcarver's aligning with the grain of the timber (19/59), and so on.

In my view, *Zhuangzi* political writings present further illustrations of interaction guided by patterns, to which Lam rightly calls attention.[23] However, in discussing the ethics of interacting with others, I temporarily set these aside, because the exercise of political authority is importantly different from interaction between individual persons. Political power can be applied through a wholly responsive approach, in which those in authority facilitate the ends of their subjects and community without taking initiative to pursue their own ends. In their role as leaders, they simply respond to the needs or ends of the community, taking this responsiveness to be their *dao.* (This approach corresponds to the advice given by the Nameless Man at *Zhuangzi* 7/10, for example.) Except in special cases, individual agents cannot similarly respond to others without also pursuing a path of

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[22] For a discussion that explicitly treats an appropriate interpersonal *dao* as social and interactive, see Fraser (2022: 572).

[23] These writings include the pericopes beginning at 7/4, 7/7, 7/11, 12/45, 12/69, and 25/43.

their own. To do so would be to give up the goal of “walking two ways” in favor of wholly subsuming one’s action as part of others’ *dao*.

6. Malevolent *Dao*

Let’s return to the issue of whether the conception of *dao* and responsiveness to patterns I have sketched provides strong enough normative constraints for us to explain what is wrong with malevolent *dao*.

The claim I need to defend is that, in dealing with others, malevolent *dao* are defective as *dao* in that they do not respond (*yin* 因) to contextual patterns (*li* 理) adeptly and so are insufficiently fitting (*shi* 適), useful (*yong* 用), free-flowing (*tong* 通), harmonious (*he* 和), and so forth. If we are dealing with other persons, among the relevant patterns we must respond to are that others are agents like ourselves, such that our interaction with them is a social, reciprocal activity. We can cooperate smoothly with each other, or we can prompt dissatisfaction, anger, protest, suffering, or resistance. I want to suggest, then, that smooth, unforced interaction—as implied by “harmony” and “walking two ways”—is a mark of proficient social *dao* following. A path that harms others and so fails to attain such interaction is an incompetent social *dao.* An ethics focusing on *dao* thus explains why we should avoid harm to others or show consideration for their capacities and dispositions: because when we do so, all sides follow *dao* better.

Skill analogies can help to clarify these points. The crude butcher who, unlike Cook Dīng, must change knives monthly still manages to hack through the meat. But he does the work badly, with wasted effort and messy results. The ferry pilot who capsizes is less competent in boat-handling than one who makes the crossing smoothly. The whitewater swimmer who finishes bruised and bloodied is less proficient than one who emerges unscathed. In each example, there is a respect in which the agent is getting something wrong and could perform better. The parallel claim for ethics is that a malicious *dao* gets something wrong about relations with others, just as treating the seabird as if it were a human guest was getting something wrong about the bird. There is a clear sense in which we can say the malevolent actor is making a mistake—treating others in a way that is “ill-fitting” (*bu shi* 不適) or “obstructed” (*bu tong* 不通) and proceeding in a clumsy (*zhuo* 拙) manner, falling short of the ideal of social interaction which proceeds so smoothly that people “forget each other in arts of *dao*” (6/73).[24] My proposal is that this conception of “getting something wrong” provides enough normative punch to ground a plausible Zhuangist approach to the ethics of social relations.

The thesis I am defending specifically concerns the defects of the malevolent *dao* as a *dao*—that is, how it fails to “fit,” “flow smoothly,” “proceed on both sides,” and so on. The claim is not that the malevolent *dao* will inevitably fail, in the sense of being self-defeating or leading to bad outcomes for the malicious actor. (The

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[24] I take it that, as in the ferryman story (19/24), “forgetting” here refers to an absence of anxious attention, which vanishes because of the facility and ease with which agents respond to each other.

contemporary scene presents many examples of malevolent *dao* that have not failed.) Nor is it the consequentialist claim that such *dao* are unjustified because they produce poor outcomes. Nor is it a claim about instrumental rationality, such as that such *dao* fail to maximize expected utility. Rather, the issue is that the malevolent *dao* clashes with relevant factual patterns presented by the context—what is "inherently so"—and so is an obstructed, clumsy performance of *dao.* A *dao* that acknowledges the agency of both sides such that they can jointly follow it harmoniously is a more fitting, smoothly flowing *dao* than one that harms or coerces others.

This approach also explains why the *dao* by which we interact with other persons will be different from those by which we interact with other creatures, such as seabirds, monkeys, cattle, or cicadas. In each case, the relevant patterns will be different. The appropriate *dao* in these cases is an open question, to be answered by reference to particular contexts. After examining the patterns, for example, perhaps we may conclude that, in our present context, it is a poor *dao* to keep monkeys or to butcher cattle but acceptable to eat cicadas.

Might the Zhuangist criteria of appropriate *dao* I have identified allow malevolent actors to claim that harming others actually is a fitting or smoothly flowing *dao* for them? Suppose the serial killer contends that only because our perspective blinds us to the beauty of killing do we doubt the excellence of his *dao*. Or suppose the headhunting tribe contend that we fail to appreciate how the glory of capturing enemy heads makes theirs a flourishing social *dao.* I doubt that even a prima facie persuasive case can be made that such *dao* fit the patterns of the relevant context, however, as they so clearly impose the malevolent actors' *dao* on others rather than adaptively responding to them, "walking two ways," or "nurturing" them with what actually "nurtures" them (19/35).

We might also worry that harmony or cooperation can be forced. If there is a power differential between the interacting parties, one side might be able to coerce the other into accepting a path that it dictates, rather than genuinely taking both sides into account and "walking two ways." Merely in sketching this scenario, however, we can see that on the *dao* approach it counts as an inferior dao, as there are patterns involved—the actual preferences or values of the oppressed group—that are ignored or forcibly suppressed rather than addressed.[25]

7. Conclusion

Circling back to the issue in my title, then, I contend that the *Zhuangzi* writings provide the resources to develop a distinctive, plausible approach to ethics

[25] Suppose the power differential allows the dominant side to non-coercively induce cooperation in its favor, through ideological indoctrination, for example. I suggest that this scenario falls under the scope of Zhuangist political thought rather than interpersonal ethics. The extensive, continuing, one-sided effort needed to ensure subjugation shows that this cannot be the most fitting or freely flowing *dao*, and it clearly violates the minimalist, responsive approach presented in *Zhuangzi* pericopes addressing political relations.

grounded in the paired concepts of *dao* and *de.* A Zhuangist conception of competence or proficiency in *dao* as marked by fitting responses to the patterns that shape the context of our activity is substantive enough to underwrite normative judgments regarding better or worse courses of action. Arguably, the grounding of such judgments in the interaction between agents' *dao* and contextual patterns provides the fundamental basis for normativity more generally. The conception of *de* as an agentive power or capacity fulfilled through excellence in performing *dao* underscores the connection between the flourishing individual life and the proficient performance of *dao*, thus reinforcing the agent's reasons for pursuing a fitting, smoothly flowing *dao*.[26]

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[26] An earlier version of this essay was presented at "Dialogues on the States of the Field: Ethics in the *Zhuangzi*," Department of Philosophy, Chinese University of Hong Kong, June 16–17, 2023. I thank Hong-ki Lam, Yong Huang, Herbert Hu, Jung Lee, Eske Mollgaard, and Waldemar Brys for helpful comments.

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