

## “Worldmodels & Ontologies: Visions of Reality in Chinese Thought”

### Unit 5 — Classical Chinese Texts & Their Worldmodels: *Zhuāngzǐ* 莊子

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### Introduction

What is the world of the *Zhuāngzǐ* 莊子 like?

Let’s begin with the material collected in book 1 of the *Zhuāngzǐ*, which some unknown editor placed at the beginning of this compilation of ancient writings, perhaps to represent or to set the tone for the rest of the material.

Book 1 is entitled 逍遙遊, or “Freely Wandering About.” What kind of world do we find in it?

The text begins with a story about an unknowably huge fish living under the waters of a vast, dark ocean at the northern end of the world. This ocean vastness is an obscure, murky source from which the giant fish emerges by transforming into a giant bird—again of such a huge scale we’re unable to know its size—which rouses itself from the water, rises thousands of miles into the sky, and flies off to the southern end of the world.

The very first lines of the very first story thus disorient us, subverting any mundane conception of scale and of causality. A mysterious creature we can barely imagine emerges from a source we cannot fathom and undergoes an uncanny transformation

into yet another incredible creature, engaged in an activity we struggle to imagine, directed toward yet another mysterious, remote destination.

The world, then, is of an unintelligibly vast scale and includes mysterious sources, destinations, and forms of life beyond our ken, between which sudden, surprising transformations can occur, for causes we do not understand.

Moreover, the story already gives us three perspectives on this world—that of the giant fish, the giant bird, and us, the human audience hearing about these creatures.

The narrative carefully makes the point that no form of life is independent of the conditions around it. The giant bird can fly impressively high and far, but only if enough wind has built up to bear its great weight. All activity depends on associated conditions. Moreover, all perspectives come with their respective limitations. Just as the limit of the sky is so far off that we can't be sure what color it is, the giant bird flies so high that it can't clearly see how things are down where we are.

The perspectives and forms of life then proliferate. Two small creatures, a cicada and a dove, observe the giant bird and laugh it, dismissing forms of life grounded in perspectives other than their own. The text mocks the ignorance of these small creatures, pointing out that activities of different duration and scale have different requirements. Those who live in one perspective may be unaware of the requirements of others. Whether we speak of size, of lifespan, or of how much we know, there are a range of spatial and temporal perspectives—from giant birds to small insects, summer crickets to ancient trees—each of which has conditions appropriate to it, and none of which are unique or authoritative.

One implication is that much of the world may be beyond our ken. The scope and duration of human life seem somewhere in the middle of the range depicted. The text mocks people for the blinkered view that Péngzǔ—who supposedly lived several hundred years—qualifies as long-lived. There could be things that live much longer. Much of the world could be outside the scope of our lives and knowledge.

Why does any of this matter? After all, we are neither giant birds nor summer crickets. That there are other forms of life and other perspectives on the world that we cannot access does not undermine the grounds for our own form of life, does it?

It matters because some traditions of thought seek to ground the authority of their *dào*—their normative view of the appropriate path of personal and social life—in the relation between their proposed *dào* and the world. A particularly clear example is

Mohist thought. The Mohists held that the *dào* they advocated for human life—that of promoting the benefit of all the world—was in fact the *dào* of nature itself, as personified in *Tiān*, the sky or nature deity. In the Mohist worldview, then, the appropriate *dào* is singular or unique; universal, or shared by all of nature; and we can discover this *dào* because we can know about the actions of *Tiān*, which created the world. The *dào* follows a constant direction—promoting the “benefit of all the world”—which the Mohists claim can be marked out by applying clear, reliable standards (*fǎ* 法).

Contrast this clear, determinate picture with what we’ve extracted from “Freely Wandering About.” Here we have a world in which obscure, murky processes bring about mysterious transformations, which may place things in a plurality of perspectives, each with its own conditions and limitations. Whatever conditions might mark out an appropriate *dào*, they seem obscure, variable, and perspectival, not clear, constant, and universal.

Some of the implications of this conception of reality are illustrated in the plurality of forms of life presented in the concluding passage of the first long section of “Freely Wandering.” It claims that people who live what we would think of as a mundane but moderately successful human life—those holding a local administrative office, for example—complacently regard themselves as having attained a high level of achievement, much as the small creatures who laugh at the giant bird do. They are ignorant of other perspectives, and their form of life depends heavily on the approval and disapproval of human society. By contrast, *Sòng Róngzǐ* lived from a different perspective, by which he was largely unaffected by others’ opinions. Even more different was *Lièzǐ*, who transcended mundane human life and could ride about on the wind—analogueous to the giant bird—yet, like the bird, still depended something, namely the wind.

Different agents thus follow different paths, depending on different conditions. Given the variable, plural, perspectival nature of the world, is there any genuinely “ultimate” path one could follow, by which we could transcend all perspectives and find a constant, rather than variable path?

The text suggests one, but the suggestion is ironic: the “transcendent” path is to stop seeking to follow any single path. Instead of marching in a fixed direction along a bounded, well-demarcated path, the text suggests that we could “ride along with” the fluctuations in natural conditions and so “wander in the limitless.” That is, we could proceed without any fixed direction through an unbounded, fluid, indeterminate field of paths. Such a way of life “depends on” nothing in particular. Of course, at any one

instant, it depends on conditions that hold in that instant. But the “wandering” path will shift and adapt to whatever changes occur in those conditions.

As this summary suggests, in much of the *Zhuāngzǐ*, and indeed through much of Chinese thought more generally, questions about the organization of the world or reality are intertwined with ethical themes—with questions about the basis, nature, and content of *dào*, or the apt way of life.

### **What Is the *Zhuāngzǐ* and How Should We Read It?**

Next, let’s circle back to talk about just what the *Zhuāngzǐ* is, how we should interpret its content, and the range of worldviews it presents.

A key point in working with the *Zhuāngzǐ* is to understand that the material is not a “book,” by an “author.” It is an archive or a library of hundreds of short writings presenting diverse standpoints on a range of topics. The *Zhuāngzǐ* is not “a text.” It is a collection of hundreds of texts, by unknown writers, produced over a period of perhaps one hundred years or more. Almost all of its 33 individual “books,” or *piān* 篇, are themselves also collections of short writings, in effect file folders within the larger archive. Some of these, such as book 1, which we have just been discussing, could be composite works assembled by an editor as a kind of bricolage. Others, such as book 6, appear to be at least a partly random collection of material.

Many of the constituent texts are likely from different hands, as they express very different positions in different styles. Some disagree with each other. Some could have been written by the same person; a few share similar ideas and phrasing. But there is insufficient evidence to reach any well-justified conclusions about the shared authorship of even very similar parts of the material. Moreover, all the writings were produced in a literary culture in which texts did not come badged with a claim of authorship.

The Guō Xiàng edition of the *Zhuāngzǐ*—the third century CE version we read today—is divided into three major parts: the “inner,” “outer,” and “miscellaneous” “books.” In some of the secondary literature, you will encounter the claim that the seven “inner” books are the work of a man named Zhuāng Zhōu 莊周. This claim is an artifact of scholarly inertia, shaped by misunderstandings of pre-Hàn literary culture. No cogent argument supports it. The “inner” books are as diverse as much of the other material.

For practical purposes, the texts have roughly the status of anonymous posts to an open, shared internet discussion board, on which different contributors can post and comment on each other's posts.

So the *Zhuāngzǐ* material is highly diverse and is unlikely to be the work of a single author or a committee of authors aiming to present a systematic set of doctrines. Might the material nevertheless present a unified doctrinal orientation?

The individual short texts, or pericopes, treat overlapping issues and present overlapping clusters of themes and assertions. So some—although by no means all—of the material has a roughly overlapping doctrinal orientation or at least presents views that are related by various family resemblances.

But it is also important to recall that the notion of a “Daoist” (*dào jiā* 道家) “school of thought,” “lineage,” or movement was invented only after the *Zhuāngzǐ* writings already existed. So whoever produced these writings would not have identified with a “Daoist” “school of thought.” Some of them may have identified with Ruism, since they use the literary figure of Confucius as a mouthpiece for their ideas. Others may have had no general label for their views. A few labels are mentioned in the texts themselves—for example, section 17.1 refers to “followers of the Great Approach” (大方之家)—but these are not used frequently or across different texts.

Traditionally, the thought of the *Zhuāngzǐ* is considered to follow in some way on that of the *Dàodéjīng*. In fact, much of the *Zhuāngzǐ* material has a very different orientation from parts of the *Dàodéjīng*, and views characteristic of the *Dàodéjīng* would probably fall squarely among those targeted for criticism in book 2, “Discourse on Evening Things Out.” Typically, writings in the *Zhuāngzǐ* that do develop ideas from the *Dàodéjīng* will make this doctrinal affiliation clear by quoting phrasing from the *Dàodéjīng*.

If the *Zhuāngzǐ* is such an unwieldy, diverse, even contradictory corpus of material, how should we proceed to interpret and discuss it? All interpretation proceeds by seeing how parts of the object of interpretation fit into a broader context. Usually the immediate context is that of the work as a whole, but here we are looking an archive of short works, rather than one larger work. So how do we proceed?

I suggest we apply what I call a discourse-centered approach. We cannot assume that the *Zhuāngzǐ* is a unified work, expressing a unified standpoint. We cannot assume in advance of interpretation that any particular selection of *Zhuāngzǐ* material will share the same general outlook or agree on the same specific views or assertions. But we can assume that portions of the material are contributions to shared discourses of their time, addressing shared topics or issues, using at least partly shared concepts and

terminology, and drawing on at least partly shared background beliefs. We can use these discourses—including topics, issues, concepts, terminology, and belief frameworks—as a coherent context within which to interpret individual pericopes. So we can identify prominent topics or questions addressed by some of the material and look for threads of “discourse” or “conversation” that relate different pericopes as treatments of these topics or questions. We can also examine various ways in which contributions to such discourses tie various topics together and explore how these topics are related to one another. One obvious example that we will touch in a moment is the topic of practical use versus uselessness, which is explored from different angles in a number of *Zhuāngzǐ* writings, one of which is clearly reflecting on and criticizing several of the others.

### **The Plural Worldviews of the *Zhuāngzǐ***

Unsurprisingly, given the diversity of material collected into the *Zhuāngzǐ*, we find a variety of worldviews or ontologies in the texts depending on which parts of the anthology we focus on. A few pericopes, such as 6.3a, posit a “cosmic *dào*” similar to that of *Dàodéjīng* section 25. This *dào* existed “before there were heaven and earth, since antiquity it has inherently been present. It gives spirit to ghosts and gods; it produces heaven and earth” (未有天地，自古以固存；神鬼神帝，生天生地). By contrast, some pericopes, such as 13.3, depict “heaven and earth” as ontologically prior to *dào* (“those in antiquity who understood the Great Way first understood heaven, and the Way and Virtue were next” 古之明大道者，先明天而道德次之). A number of pericopes present things in the world as produced by natural processes that issue forth from a mysterious origin, sometimes referred to as the “ancestor” (祖) or “ancestral source” (*zōng* 宗). This concept combines the idea that we are all “descendants” of this source with the idea that it is our teacher or guide, as our human ancestors are. Two cognate dialogues, “Autumn Waters” (17.1) and “Know-Little” (25.10), show a special interest in metaphysical questions such as the source and scale of the world as a whole. However, both contend that because of the limitations of our perspective, we lack any reliable way to answer such questions.

Because of limitations on time, instead of attempting to survey the diverse range of ontological views in the *Zhuāngzǐ*, in this session I suggest we focus on a select set of interrelated questions of special philosophical interest. These questions include the nature of the *dào* that we follow, how such *dào* affect the things we recognize, and how the Zhuangist outlook we’ll sketch affects how we navigate our way through the world. We will focus on one interrelated approach to these issues that emerges from the first few books of the *Zhuāngzǐ*. (Of course, this is not the only approach we can find in the materials.)

## Metaphysical Issues in Pre-Hàn Thought and the *Zhuāngzǐ*

As my remarks above about Mohism imply, a central metaphysical question in classical Chinese thought concerns the basis for *dào*, or the way. On some doctrinal outlooks, such as the Mohists' and that expressed in certain sections of the *Dàodéjīng*, a sound metaphysical account of the natural world directly provides an explanation of the *dào* for humanity to follow. On others, such as the outlook we find in *Xúnzǐ*, the natural world does not provide a *dào* for humanity, but the justification of a human *dào* rests on practical success in responding uncontrollable natural conditions. Moreover, an apt understanding of nature actually derives from the correct human *dào*, because *dào* includes the cognitive and linguistic practices on the basis of which we identify things and make assertions about them.

As we will see, the line of thought in *Zhuāngzǐ* that I want to explore overlaps considerably with the Xunzian position on these points. The major difference is that the Zhuangist view allows for an indeterminate plurality of defensible ways of conducting ourselves and identifying things and expands the conception of successfully responding to uncontrollable natural conditions.

Let's sketch a few points that make up the background to discussions in *Zhuāngzǐ*. A widely shared feature of early Chinese thought is a mereological or part-whole ontology, in which the world as a totality is understood to be a concrete whole of which various individual objects are parts. Discrete "things," or *wù* 物, are formed by being divided out of the aggregate whole. This background view is reflected in *Dàodéjīng* 25, which describes a primordial "thing" that is formed of a chaotic mixture (有物混成), in passages in *Xúnzǐ* stating that, prior to the activity of the sage-kings, nature in itself is undivided (分) and unorganized (不理), and in the line in section 2.7 of the *Zhuāngzǐ* "Discourse on Evening Things Out" (齊物論) that depicts ancient people of far-reaching knowledge as holding that "there have never been things" (未始有物), while others hold that there are, but without fixed boundaries, and still others recognize boundaries, but without insisting on fixed norms for drawing the action guiding distinctions of *shì* 是 ("this," "right") and *fēi* 非 (not).

This mereological picture complements early Chinese views about perception, according to which perception is a matter of drawing distinctions by which we recognize patterns of similarity and difference, not of processing inward mental representations of an outer world. The conjunction of these views in early Chinese thought produces a stance on which there is no problem of appearance versus reality, nor any epistemic worries about

being “in touch with” reality. Reality just is the world as we interact with it—not something hidden behind a veil of appearances—and we are always in touch with it, for we are as much a part of the cosmic totality as anything else is. The pertinent issue is not whether we perceive reality rather than mere appearance but whether we follow the right *dào*—the appropriate practices—in distinguishing the various parts of the world from each other.

It is by drawing distinctions between similar and different parts of reality that we recognize various kinds of things. In drawing such distinctions, we follow norms for recognizing similarities and differences, and such norms are part of our way of life, or our *dào*. Cognition is a practical performance, and the *dào* we follow determines how we perceive and understand things in the world.

The basic question, then, is not what is the structure of reality and how do we know it but what *dào* should we follow and how do we follow it? It is our answer to the latter question that explains our views about the former question. In response, some thinkers, writers, or communities would have argued that a uniquely correct *dào* is fixed by the world and it’s up to us to discover it. Others might have argued that *dào* is wholly arbitrary; anything goes. And still others would have defended a number of views that fall somewhere between these extremes.

Another implication of the mereological picture that’s important to mention is how it affects our conception of *dào*. For *dào* too may have a part-whole structure. We can speak of the *dào* of the totality—the process or flow of the world as a whole. Some pericopes reify this “totality-*dào*” or “Great *Dào*” (大道) so that it refers to the underlying or original source—the “ancestor”—from which things arise. It can also refer to the totality of patterns by which things proceed, something roughly like the “laws of nature.” But *dào* can also refer to the narrower ways of life manifested by individual parts of the whole. In this regard, you and I could follow different “small” *dào*, both of which are parts of the “great” or “whole” *dào* (大道). As parts of the totality-*dào* of the world, then, there can be a plurality of “small” *dào* pursued by various creatures.

A related point is that, in parts of the *Zhuāngzǐ* it is helpful to think of *dào* not only as a path—the usual, partly metaphorical understanding—but as a field, within which we might find a plurality of paths. The shape of the field—including whatever rocks, streams, trees, or other obstacles it contains—provides a structure that affects what specific paths are more or less suitable for our purposes. It presents us with openings for paths, but it does not fix a unique or privileged path for us to follow. We could say that the world as agents encounter it presents a vast *dào*-field, within which we can find various “small” *dào*.

## The Worldview of the “Discourse on Evening Things Out” 齊物論

The themes we extracted earlier from *Zhuāngzǐ* book 1, “Freely Wandering About,” already suggest at least one Zhuangist outlook on the questions we’ve raised about what *dào* to follow and how to follow it. The material we looked at present a picture in which *dào*—and thus reality as we engage with it—may be plural, perspectival, and contingent on variable, contextual factors.

So it is unsurprising to find pericopes in *Zhuāngzǐ* book 2, “Discourse on Evening Things Out” presenting what we might call a pluralist, constructivist view of *dào*—that is, a view on which *dào* are formed through interaction between our practices and the material world as we engage with it in our practices.

道行之而成，物謂之而然。...物固有所然，物固有所可。無物不然，無物不可。  
*Dào* are formed by proceeding along them; things are so because they are called so.... Things indeed have respects in which they’re so; things indeed have respects in which they’re allowable. No thing is not so; no thing is not allowable. (2.6)

This brief passage appears to claim that things are the things they are because of how we refer to them, as part of the process of proceeding along some *dào*. A direct consequence is that, since we might refer to things according to different practices of naming, there could be a plurality of *dào*. These plural *dào* are not arbitrary, nor merely “up to us.” According to the text, there are indeed features that we pick out in deeming things “this” or “not.” But features can be taken to be similar or different in a plurality of ways, and different agents can pick out different features of things to respond to. So in principle a *dào* could be formed on which any thing might be “so.”

This view is not a form of idealism. The text is not claiming that the existence of the world depends on human activity or that our activity creates things. Rather, the text’s claims concern *dào*, or the way that we conduct ourselves and interact with the world, and thus what things we take there to be.

Of course, many *Zhuāngzǐ* pericopes imply that that the cosmos functions and develops according to natural patterns (理). Things and events arise from various causal chains, which ultimately trace back to primordial sources, such as the “ancestral source” (宗) or “the beginning of things” (物之初). The problem is that such patterns and causal relations determine no unique, regular, stable *dào* for us to follow on a human scale. Perhaps in principle the root causes behind things could provide a basis for our *dào*, but

although we can contemplate them meditatively, we are unable to identify or understand them clearly enough to take them as a standard to follow.

The “pipes of heaven,” the mysterious opening story in “Evening Things Out,” illustrates this point. The “pipes of humanity” are musical instruments played by people. The “pipes of earth” are the “music” produced by natural phenomena, such as the wind blowing through hollows in the trees. Analogously, according to the story, it seems there is an unknown something that “plays” or “blows” the “pipes of heaven,” or nature, causing the myriad things to act as they do. Yet we can’t pin down what that something is:

子游曰：地籟則眾竅是已，人籟則比竹是已。敢問天籟。子綦曰：夫吹萬不同，而使其自己也，咸其自取，怒者其誰邪？

Zǐyóu said, ‘The pipes of earth, these are the various hollows; the pipes of humanity, these are the bamboo panpipes. May I ask about the pipes of heaven?’  
Zǐqí said, ‘Blowing the myriad different things, making them as they are, constraining what they choose for themselves—who could it be that stirs them up?’

There may well be something which “plays” the “pipes” that represent the activity of all the myriad things. But the passage is inconclusive, even agnostic about this—at least, it offers no answer to what the “player” might be. So even if there is something that plays the pipes of heaven—and even if, like Zǐqí, we can let go of ourselves and “listen” to the “pipes”—this aspect of reality does not determine how to follow *dào*. It merely reminds us that the “piping” of heaven or nature exists and we are part of it.

Section 2.2 of “Evening Things Out” makes a parallel point about appealing to a conception of a genuine or authoritative “self” within us as an authoritative source of guidance in following *dào*. A widely shared view at the time was that the *xīn* 心—the heart or mind—was the “ruler” or “lord” of the body and other organs. Section 2.2 mocks this view, asking whether the various parts of the body are really unable to govern each other or take turns being in charge:

百骸、九竅、六藏、賅而存焉，吾誰與為親？汝皆說之乎？其有私焉？如是皆有為臣妾乎？其臣妾不足以相治乎？其有真君存焉？如求得其情與不得，無益損乎其真。

The hundred bones, nine orifices, and six viscera all present in us, which should we hold closest? Do you delight in them all? Or do you have a favourite among them? If so, are the others all its servants? Are the servants unable to govern each other? Might they take turns being ruler and servant? Might there be a genuine

ruler present among them? If we seek to get the facts about it without success, that makes no difference to its genuineness. (2.2c)

The tone is similar to that of the “pipes” story. There could be a “genuine ruler,” but it’s unclear whether there is or not. In any case, we cannot draw on knowledge of an underlying, genuine “self” or “ruler” for guidance in *dào*.

The human predicament is like that of the shadow in section 2.16 that asks what its movement depends on.

景曰：「吾有待而然者邪？吾所待又有待而然者邪？吾待蛇蚺蜩翼邪？惡識所以然？惡識所以不然？」

Shadow said, ‘Is there something I depend on that makes me like this? Does what I depend on in turn have something else it depends on that makes it like this? Do I depend on a snake’s scales or a cicada’s wings? How would I know why I’m this way? How would I know why I’m not some other way?’ (2.16)

We know the shadow’s movement depends on that of the three-dimensional object of which it is a shadow. But the shadow dwells in a two-dimensional environment and cannot access this knowledge, just as the creatures with limited perspectives or lifespans in “Freely Wandering About” cannot understand ways of life beyond theirs.

Indeed, because of the possibility of transformation, even our own identity may seem unstable, an unsuitable basis for settling on a fixed worldview. Perhaps the world is the sort of place in which, like the giant fish that turns into a bird, we might find ourselves suddenly transformed into a creature with a very different perspective, living a different lifestyle:

昔者莊周夢為胡蝶，栩栩然胡蝶也。自喻適志與！不知周也。俄然覺，則蘧蘧然周也。不知周之夢為胡蝶與？胡蝶之夢為周與？周與胡蝶則必有分矣。此之謂物化。  
Once Zhuāng Zhōu dreamed of being a butterfly—vividly, vibrantly a butterfly, delightedly doing as it pleased. He wasn’t aware of Zhōu. Suddenly he awoke and was plainly, palpably Zhōu. He doesn’t know whether Zhōu dreamed of being a butterfly or the butterfly dreams of being Zhōu. Yet surely there’s a difference between Zhōu and the butterfly. This is a case of what’s called ‘things transforming’. (2.17)

The point of the famous butterfly dream is not to question our access to reality. It is that reality is such that even our identity is subject to transformation. We could find

ourselves radically transformed as abruptly as waking from a dream and be left without a clear answer as to which is our “base” identity.

These collected stories jointly complement the view that the world as we encounter it does not present resources by which we can settle on some unique, authoritative set of *dào* practices. As the dialogue between Wang Ni and Gaptooth suggests, what we encounter is a de facto, irreducible plurality of apparently successful ways of taking things to be *shì* or *fēi*, which render the idea of picking out just a single, universally authoritative way preposterous.

齧缺問於王倪曰：「子知物之所同是乎？」曰：「吾惡乎知之！」...  
 且吾嘗試問乎女：民溼寢則腰疾偏死，鰥然乎哉？木處則惴慄恟懼，猿猴然乎哉？  
 三者孰知正處？...自我觀之，仁義之端，是非之塗，樊然殽亂，吾惡能知其辯！」  
 Gaptooth asked Wáng Ní, ‘Do you know what all things agree in deeming *shì*?’  
 ‘How would I know that?’  
 ‘...let me ask you: if people sleep in the damp, their waist aches like it’s killing them, but is that so of a loach? If people live in a tree, they shake with fright, but is that so of a monkey? Of the three, which knows the correct place to live? ...As I see it, the bases of benevolence and righteousness and the paths of *shì* and *fēi* are all tangled and jumbled. How could I know how to distinguish them?’ (2.13)

Why is this the case? One pericope in “Evening Things Out” suggests that distinctions between “this” and “not” simply don’t exist prior to our *xīn*—our mind or heart—“forming” or “completing” them as such in our practices.

未成乎心而有是非，是今日適越而昔至也。是以無有為有。  
 For there to be ‘this’ and ‘not’ without first being formed in the mind, this is to go to Yuè today and arrive yesterday. This is to take what doesn’t exist to exist. (2.3)

In fact, *dào* as a field or a totality is always present—and thus a potential multiplicity of paths are always available—unless it is “hidden” by blind, sclerotic fixation on a single, “small” way of proceeding. Similarly, a range of ways of dividing things up for the purposes of speech—communication—is always available.

道惡乎隱而有真偽？言惡乎隱而有是非？道惡乎往而不存？言惡乎存而不可？道隱於小成，言隱於榮華。  
 How is *dào* obscured, such that there are genuine and fake? How is speech obscured, such there are ‘this’ and ‘not’? How can *dào* depart and not be present? How can speech be present yet not be allowable? *Dào* is obscured by small *chéng* 成 (formation, achievement); speech is obscured by elaborate rhetoric. (2.4)

In many early Chinese texts bearing on epistemology, error or misjudgment is explained as a kind of incompetence, in which the person draws distinctions on the basis of only part of the circumstances, rather than the whole. An agent may perform a *dào* incompetently or follow the wrong *dào* because of how they take certain factors into account while neglecting others. Some *Zhuāngzǐ* pericopes extend this basic part-whole idea to suggest that, since no practicable *dào* can capture the totality of ways of proceeding, all *dào* we can actually follow (except for the totality-*dào*) are “well formed,” “successful,” or “achievements” (*chéng* 成) in at best only some respects, while simultaneously being “lacking,” “at a loss,” or “deficient” in others (*kuī* 虧, *huǐ* 毀).

夫道未始有封，言未始有常，為是而有畛也。

*Dào* has never had boundaries; speech has never been constant. Because we deem ‘this’, there are borders. (2.10)

是非之彰也，道之所以虧也。道之所以虧，愛之所之成。

The emergence of ‘this’ and ‘not’ is how *dào* suffers loss; how *dào* suffers loss is how cares form. (2.7)

故分也者，有不分也；辯也者，有不辯也。

So in dividing, something is not divided; in distinction-drawing disputation, something is not distinguished. (2.10)

This is why section 2.4 refers to “small,” “minor,” or “petty” completion or achievement. Mastering one set of *dào* practices is indeed an achievement, but it is a “partial” or “small” one, which can blind practitioners to the many other practices and achievements available. The range, variety, and omnipresence of *dào* as a whole can be obscured by a fixation on just one small part of *dào*. The relation is analogous to a speaker of one language dismissing other languages as gibberish or a devotee of one genre of music dismissing others as mere noise.

Of course, in pursuing our own *dào*, we are forced to proceed in one direction or another. We cannot proceed in all directions at once. What we need to understand is that just as our standpoint or perspective leads us to distinguish “this” and “not” in one way, other standpoints or perspectives lead others to distinguishing them differently, and insofar as all of these standpoints are part of the *dào*-field, they may all legitimately be *dào* (although some may be smoother or more efficient *dào* than others).

The awareness of and the practical ability to apply these points about the basis for action-guiding distinctions are what “Evening Things Out” calls *míng* 明, “understanding” or “clarity.” Section 2.4 draws a parallel between the action-guiding distinctions by which we recognize *dào* and demonstrative pronouns, whose reference changes with our standpoint. Just as what is “this” or “that” depends on where we stand, “this” and “not” can vary with our standpoint.

是亦彼也，彼亦是也。彼亦一是非，此亦一是非。

‘This’ is also ‘that’, ‘that’ is also ‘this’. That there is one ‘this’ and ‘not’; this here is also one ‘this’ and ‘not’. (2.4d)

The resulting worldview, then, is of a vast, undifferentiated “totality-*dào*” of the world as a whole that proceeds in a plurality of ways simultaneously, while offering various “openings” offering potential courses that agents can take as *dào* to follow. These narrower, particular *dào* are in effect parts of the overall *dào*—or, alternatively, aspects of what we might call the “pathfulness” of the world—that the world presents to us depending on our powers of agency and how we engage with features of our circumstances. We respond to these openings by drawing action-guiding distinctions through which we “form” the actual *dào* we follow from among the various paths open to us. The *dào* we follow will in turn affect the further openings available to us. For example, the *dào* open to an expert rock climber or wingsuit jumper is different from that open to me, as are the *dào* open to a hawk, a monkey, or an octopus.

### **Finding Our Way Through a Field of Contingent, Variable Circumstances**

Different *Zhuāngzǐ* pericopes present different views regarding what amounts to an appropriate or excellent way to navigate the perspectively framed, contingent, variable field of *dào* in which we find ourselves. Some texts suggest we abide by what is “genuine” (真) for us, features of our lives bestowed by heaven/nature. Some advocate a life grounded in our inherent dispositions, or *xìng*. Some advocate relinquishing agency in order to merge with “nature’s power” (天德). One particularly striking view, attributed in *Zhuāngzǐ* book 33 to Shèn Dào 慎到, advocates becoming an “unaware thing” like a clump of earth, for “a clump never errs from *dào*” (至於若無知之物而已…夫塊不失道).

An approach presented prominently in “Evening Things Out” is to “adapt” or “responsively adjust” our path to the particular context. This approach is sometimes expressed using the term *yīn* 因, the phrase *yīn shì* 因是, or the term *yìng* 應. The gist is that instead of insisting on one specific way of distinguish “this” and “not” (*shì-fēi*), or

insisting on one specific path or another, we are to adapt how we draw distinctions and pick out a path in response to particular, contextual, probably variable conditions. What criteria guide these adaptive responses? One passage in “Evening Things Out” is especially informative:

唯達者知通為一，為是不用而寓諸庸。庸也者，用也；用也者，通也；通也者，得也；適得而幾矣。因是已。已而不知其然，謂之道。

Only the adept understand how things connect as one [when we cease imposing distinctions on them]. Rather than insistently deeming things ‘this’, they lodge them in the ‘ordinary’. (The ‘ordinary’ is the useful; the useful flows through; what flows through is successful; arrive at what’s successful and you’ve about got it.) Simply adjust ‘this’ in response to the situation; doing so without knowing it’s so is called ‘the Way’. (2.6)

Our guide, then, is to find what seems “ordinary and useful” in the context, understood as what “works” or enables us to continue “flowing along” *dào*. Intriguingly, this all-too-brief passage seems to endorse a *dào* by which we flexibly discover contextual responses to particular contexts without knowing exactly how we do so.

Such responses are by no means wholly up to us. Every situation will be at least partly contingent (待) on features we cannot control, which *Zhuāngzǐ* writings refer to by terms such as “the inevitable” (不得已), “fate” (命), “what we can do nothing about” (無可奈何), and sometimes “heaven/nature” (天) or “the facts” (情). The crux is to find creative ways of capitalizing on opportunities presented by the uncontrollable shape of our circumstances. Let’s wrap up this discussion by considering two especially colorful and instructive examples of this sort of adaptive, responsive agency.

One is section 1.5, the story of Huìzǐ’s giant gourds. Huìzǐ grew some enormous bottle gourds, but when he tried to use them found himself frustrated. He followed a fixed *dào* according to which there were exactly two conventional uses for gourds—either containers for liquids or dippers for handling liquids. But the giant gourds were too big to make dippers and too unwieldy when filled with liquid. Huìzǐ concluded they were useless and smashed them. His *dào*-of-gourds was inflexible and unresponsive to the novel context presented by giant gourds. His *dào* failed to “flow freely” or be “useful” or “successful” because he failed to adapt to the changing, uncontrollable facts presented by what for him were a novel, unknown kind of gourd that physically just could not be used in the two familiar ways.

In the story, his friend *Zhuāngzǐ* rebukes him for being “clumsy” or “stupid” in using big things. This is a key *Zhuangist* criticism: following *dào* poorly is not a matter of being

wrong or immoral but unskilled and awkward. Zhuāngzǐ adapts his *dào*-of-gourds to the special case of the giant gourds by proposing a creative new use: why not make them into swimming floats? We cannot control what the giant gourds are useful for—they would be useless as balloons or vehicles, for example—but clearly there are numerous potential uses for them—they might work well as drums, planters, or perhaps lanterns, for example. Finding new “uses” in novel contexts is one good illustration of an “adaptive” or “responsive” *dào*.

A second good example is Cook Ding the butcher—庖丁解牛, section 3.2. Ding explains the process of following *dào* as one of letting himself be “guided by natural patterns” (依乎天理) and “responding to what’s inherently so” (因其固然). That is, he finds naturally occurring openings or paths to move along, in the process adapting or responding to features he cannot control. In doing so, he explains, he regularly encounters difficult junctures in which he does not know how to proceed. He slows down, concentrates, and by moving the knife delicately is able to find a way through that initially he did not know about. Paraphrasing “Evening Things Out,” we can say that he adjusts how he proceeds in response to the situation without quite knowing what he is doing until after he’s already “flowed through.” The outcome is a fine example of admirable *dào*-following and, as the story itself concludes, of how to “nurture life” or live well. So Cook Ding too aptly demonstrates an “adaptive *dào*” while illustrating the interplay between the Zhuangist concern with *dào*-following and the ontological features that sustain and constrain the practice of *dào*.

Sources:

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Web: [cjfraser.net](http://cjfraser.net)