How Can Death Be Good?
A Zhuangist Outlook

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1. Introduction

A number of *Zhuāngzǐ* pericopes depict exemplary agents as psychologically unaffected by the prospect of their own death. As one story puts it, "although life and death are indeed great matters," such persons "don't allow themselves to alter with them" (5/5). They are "untroubled" (17/18) or "undisturbed" (21/33) by death, such that the question of whether they live or die "brings about no change in them" (2/73, 21/76).

Two pericopes in book 6 of the *Zhuāngzǐ*, "The Great Ancestral Master," go beyond this stance about equanimity toward death to make a striking, even shocking claim. Using identical phrasing, the pericopes first contextualize death as the final stage in a series of natural processes—following birth, growth, and aging—and then assert that "what makes my life good is the very thing that makes my death good" (6/24–5).[1] How can death be good—and, specifically, how can it be good on the same grounds that make life good? *Zhuāngzǐ* writings offer a number of reasons for attaining equanimity concerning death, but none of these directly or obviously support the assertion that death is good.

Since one of the two versions places these words into the mouth of a dying man named Zǐlái, let me call the assertion that death is good on the same grounds that life is "Zǐlái's claim." I will propose an explanation of Zǐlái's claim grounded in two features of Zhuangist thought: a relational view of agency and an ecological view of the person. I'll suggest that these features indeed form an outlook in which, in cases when death is an appropriate response to one's circumstances, the agent stands in a relation to their context by which they can justifiably consider death good on grounds parallel to those by which they consider life good.

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[1] An alternative interpretation of this line is, "that I deem my life good is the grounds for deeming my death good." The account I will propose concerning the import and justification of this assertion applies to either formulation.

2. Three Views on Death

To help clarify the significance of Zǐlái’s claim, let me briefly distinguish several different, potentially complementary views about death in *Zhuāngzǐ*.

Perspectival uncertainty. The first view reflects the epistemic perspectivalism expressed in some *Zhuāngzǐ* writings. The “Discourse on Evening Things Out” suggests we cannot know that death is a disvalue, since from their perspective, the dead may regret their previous longing for life (2/79–81). Since we are unable to access the perspective of the dead, we cannot be certain that life really is preferable to death. Perhaps, as the dried-out skull that appears to Zhuāngzǐ in a dream asserts, death brings with it “a happiness beyond that of a king on his throne” (18/27).

Natural course. Another view, presented in numerous *Zhuāngzǐ* passages, is that death is an inevitable part of the course of nature that bestows life on us. Anything that lives must also die—life and death are “a single thread” (5/30) or “a single whole” (6/46), two parts of the inexorable process of fate or destiny (5/44, 6/21), stages in a natural cycle akin to the alternation of night and day (6/21, 18/22, 21/33) or the four seasons (18/18). Since death is inescapable, to avoid psychological distress and as an expression of “competence” in dealing with fate (18/19), we must learn to accept it.

Equanimity. The Zhuangist adept is described as equanimous regarding whether their path leads to life or death. This equanimity toward death seems to be one aspect of a broader equanimity toward what are conventionally considered positive or negative outcomes—“death and life, survival and loss, failure and success, poverty and wealth, worthiness and unworthiness, slander and praise, hunger and thirst, cold and heat,” as one passage puts it (5/43). The agent with exemplary *dé* 德 or whose “capacities” (*cái* 才) are “whole” (5/46) is unmoved by such “fluctuations in affairs” or “the march of fate” (5/44), because they focus wholly on the wider project of living well by constantly adapting to variable circumstances.[2] As another passage suggests, they maintain equanimity by “acting on the facts of the matter while forgetting about themselves,” such that they “have no time for delighting in life or hating death” (4/43).[3]

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[2] For discussion, see pp. 79–81 in Fraser, *Zhuāngzǐ: Ways of Wandering the Way* (Oxford, 2024).

[3] For further discussion of Zhuangist equanimity, see Fraser, “Deviations from the Way, Failures of Virtue,” in D. Cairns and C. Virag, eds., *In the mind, in the body, and in the world: Emotions in early*

Although these views might in various ways complement or contribute to the stance that death is good just as life is, all three fall short of justifying Zǐlái's claim.

The perspectival view might help to mitigate anxiety over death. If we think death might indeed not leave us any worse off, we might be less disturbed by the prospect of dying. It might make us wonder whether life is indeed better than death, but it provides no positive grounds for thinking the two are similarly good. For just as we can't be certain that life is preferable to death, we also can't be certain that death is as good as or better than life.

The natural course view could complement the claim that death is good. For example, someone who already holds that all aspects of the natural course are good might hold that, insofar as death is part of that course, it too is good. But the mere fact that death is an inevitable part of the same natural process as life provides little reason for thinking life and death have similar value. Indeed, construed uncharitably, an attempt to justify the goodness of death on the grounds that life and death form "a single thread" (5/30) seems fallacious, a version of the fallacy of composition. That I consider one part of a process—my life—to be good need not entail either that the entire process or that other parts of the process are similarly good. Further grounds are needed.

Someone who is equanimous about the prospect of death might hold this outlook partly from the conviction that life and death are of equal value, and so if death is good, so is life. But this attitude assumes the goodness of death; it doesn't justify it. Moreover, as suggested above, equanimity could be based on grounds unrelated to the goodness of life or death. If equanimity follows from a conception of admirable agency or of the excellent performance of *dào*, it need not reflect the view that death is in some way good. (We will return to this point in section 5.)

To sum up, the claim that death is good is distinct from other prominent views about death in *Zhuāngzǐ,* none of which directly supports it. If the claim can be sustained, the grounds for it must lie elsewhere.

3. Relational Agency

To understand a conception of death, we need to understand the reciprocal conception of life. On the line of thought I am extracting from the *Zhuāngzǐ* writings, to be a living person is to be an agent, who inevitably finds themself in circumstances

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China and ancient Greece (Oxford, 2024).

that present one or more potential *dào* 道—paths or courses—along which they proceed by exercising their *dé* 德, agentive powers or capacities. Agency is the capacity to employ one's *dé* to perform *dào*. Action is inherently relational, arising from the interrelations between an agent with a certain *dé* and the features that shape the possible *dào* open to them.

In this conceptual framework, to act is to perform *dào*, which have the conceptual structure of a path. What we think of as discrete actions are implicitly understood as parts of paths that agents follow. The word "*dào*" can refer descriptively to the various paths open to an agent or to the actual path an agent follows. It can also refer normatively to the path that would be most fitting or admirable for the agent to follow. In all of these uses, a path is constituted in part by the agent's relation to the layout of the world. Moreover, a path is a path only relative to the *dé*—the powers or capacities—of the agents who will travel it. A suitable path for a human being may be different from one for a monkey or a cat, for example.

This relational conception of agency contrasts with an agent-centered view in which an autonomous, rational agent applies an inherent capacity for reasoning to select ends based on their beliefs and desires. The metaphor that informs the Zhuangist framework is not autonomy or rationality but skillful responsiveness in the face of variable, uncontrollable circumstances. The adept agent is someone who responds adroitly to shifting, unpredictable situations, as a sailor responds to shifts in the wind and tide or a cyclist responds to curves, hills, and potholes in the road. The agent's actions—the *dào* they travel as they move through life—are a product of how their *dé*—their agentive powers, their propensities toward action—interacts with various potential paths presented by their circumstances.

The Zhuangist relational conception of agency is illustrated by Cook Ding (3/2), who guides his practice of *dào* by following natural patterns (天理), responding to what is inherently so (固然) in the circumstances presented to him. Another illustration is the story of Zǐgāo (4/34), an aristocratic diplomat for whom kinship relations and political relations shape a career direction he has no choice but to follow, which presents challenges he cannot avoid and must simply learn to manage. Zǐgāo's actions and the development of his character are moulded by his relation to his circumstances, including the unpredictable actions of the foreign states he is dispatched to negotiate with.

4. The Ecological View of the Person

If to be a Zhuangist person is to be an agent, exercising *dé* to follow *dào*, then the Zhuangist conception of the person is inherently relational. Our identities as persons are constituted by the interrelations between our *dé,* the *dào* on which we find ourselves, our natural and social circumstances, and our ongoing responses to those circumstances.

All Zhuangist agents are concerned with how well they follow *dào*. But within the totality of *dào* that make up the path of the natural world, one can focus on different particular *dào* to follow, shaped by circumstances of different scope. Our relation to such *dào* affects our understanding of our selves and what it is to be human. There are the everyday *dào* we perform in work or leisure, such as Cook Ding's, and the sociopolitical *dào* in which we find ourselves, such as that of the diplomat Zǐgāo. The features that shape such *dào* and provide the immediate context to which agents respond are everyday concerns such as managing one's household, doing one's work, dealing with the persons around us, and, in Zǐgāo's case, managing relations between political entities.

Beyond such everyday concerns, there are also what several *Zhuāngzǐ* passages call "great matters," such as life and death, which affect the framing of our lives as a whole. These matters turn our attention to our relation to the natural processes that bring about our birth and eventually lead us to death. A signal feature of several exemplary agents depicted prominently in the *Zhuāngzǐ* is that they contextualize their lives in relation to the overall *dào* of nature. Such agents understand their identity not only through the narrow context of everyday concerns but also through the wider context of their place in the totality of nature. This outlook is what I call an "ecological" view of the person.[4] The agent understands themself and their life in relation to and as part of the natural environment and natural processes that created them and that shape their circumstances. In light of the relational conception of agency, on this outlook, persons are partly constituted by their relation to the natural world—the "ecosystem"—from which we originate and of which we are a part. This natural world, the patterns (理) and energies (氣) by which it functions, and the unknowable origins that drive it along are what various *Zhuāngzǐ* writings refer to metaphorically by terms such as our "ancestral source" (*zōng* 宗), the "Great Clump" (*dà kuài* 大塊), "creation and transformation" (*zào huà* 造化), "nature" or "heaven"

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[4] I thank Li Kingwai for suggesting this label.

(*tiān* 天), and “the world” (天下).

The ecological view of the person can be regarded as an extension or implication of the natural course view sketched in section 2. Consider a paradigmatic expression of the view that death is simply part of the process of nature, Zhuāngzǐ’s reflections after his wife passes away:

> All mixed up amidst the indistinct vagueness, something altered and there was vital energy. The energy altered and there was physical form. The form altered and there was life. Now there’s been yet another alteration and she’s arrived at death. These alterations follow each other just as spring, summer, autumn, and winter do in the march of the four seasons. (18/17)

On the ecological view, the implication of this and similar descriptions is not simply that death follows life as autumn and winter follow spring and summer. It is that our identity as persons is relational, deriving partly from our place in naturally occurring processes of change, including those that produce life and then eventually bring about death. One consequence of this view is that our lives do not “belong” to us but are only “entrusted” to us by nature:

> Your own body isn’t your possession….It’s a physical form entrusted to you by heaven and earth. Life isn’t your possession; it’s a harmony entrusted to you by heaven and earth. Your nature and fate aren’t your possession; they are parts of the flow entrusted by heaven and earth. (22/25)

Another consequence is that a view of ourselves as constituents of the ecological totality fosters an attitude of “constancy” toward our circumstances.

5. Constancy

The importance of the relational conception of agency and the ecological view of the person emerge when we closely examine the explanations given in *Zhuāngzǐ* pericopes that describe exemplary agents who are unaltered by the prospect of death. One such agent who has attained a “constant mind” is Wáng Tái, a judicial amputee—sentenced to lose a foot—whose mysterious charisma attracts half the state of Lǔ to learn from him. Confucius himself calls Wáng a sage and declares he will lead others to follow him. Asked to explain how Wáng “applies his mind,” Confucius says:

> Life and death are indeed great matters, but he doesn't allow himself to alter with them. Though heaven collapse and earth subside, he wouldn't be lost with them. Discerning what is non-contingent, he doesn't shift along with things. Treating the transformations of things as fate, he abides by his ancestral source. (5/5–6)

According to the text, the key to Wáng's equanimity and resilience is that he treats variable circumstances as "fate," or uncontrollable, factual conditions, and focuses on the non-contingent, or what remains the same throughout change. Wáng "holds to" or "abides by" his "ancestral source" (*zōng* 宗), a name either for the ecological process of nature or for whatever drives this process along. (The label "ancestor," *zōng*, suggests that we are "descendents" of this source, so in effect we relate to it as kin, and, as with our human ancestors, we owe it filial reverence.) He thus adopts the ecological view: he contextualizes his life primarily through his relation to the constant, continuing flow of the cosmic ecosystem. This orientation enables him to attain a "constant mind" (常心), a psychophysiological equilibrium undisturbed by changing circumstances.

Asked to elaborate, Confucius says:

> Looking at them in terms of their differences, liver and gall are as distinct as the countries of Chǔ and Yuè. Looking at them in terms of what's the same about them, the myriad things are all one. Someone like this doesn't know what suits his eyes and ears, instead letting his mind wander in the harmony of Virtue. He looks at how things are one, not seeing how something's been lost. He looks at losing his foot as like leaving behind a clump of mud. (5/7–8)

Wáng attains "the harmony of *dé*" by attending to that by which all things form a unity. Just as different countries, such as Chǔ and Yuè, can be regarded as joining together to form a totality—the world—the "myriad things" can be regarded as forming a single unity. Regarding oneself as part of this unity, I suggest, corresponds to adopting the ecological view of the person. Because Wáng adopts this view, he does not see loss—including the loss of his amputated foot—as misfortune but only as a rearrangement of parts within the whole.

This "constant," ecological outlook is echoed in a pericope in which Lǎo Dān explains how one can come to "wander" in the "beginning of things," the "ancestral source" (*zōng* 宗) from which life sprouts and to which death returns (21/26–29).

> Grass-eating beasts do not fret over a change of pasture; water-born creatures do not fret over a change of waters. They proceed through minor changes without losing their overall constancy, and delight and anger, sorrow and joy do not enter their chests. Now the world is that in which the myriad things are one. If you attain that in which they are one and assimilate to it, your four limbs and hundred parts will be as dust and dirt, and death and life, ending and beginning will be as day and night, nothing being able to disturb you—least of all the distinctions between gain and loss or good and bad fortune! Discarding a menial is like discarding a clump of mud, as you know your self is more valuable than a menial. Value lies in oneself and is not lost in change. (21/31–34)

The passage draws an analogy between the adept agent and grazing creatures or water-born creatures whose large-scale activity continues unchanged despite small-scale changes in their environment. By identifying with the world as an all-encompassing unity—that in which everything coheres as "one"—human agents can attain an analogously unchanging or "constant" orientation toward life. "Assimilating" or "identifying" (*tóng* 同) with this unity amounts to adopting what I have been calling the ecological view of one's person. That is, we regard ourselves as, like everything else, part of a vast totality, a stream of natural processes issuing forth from what the text calls "the ancestral source." Despite any rearrangement of "dust and dirt," or our "four limbs and hundred parts," the "overall constancy" of our activity within the flow of this totality continues without interruption, just as the lives of aquatic creatures continue uninterrupted despite the flow of water in and out of the lake in which they live. If we attain such constancy, according to the passage, we find that what is "valuable" or "noble" (貴) for us is not lost in the "minor changes" we encounter in life.

The grazing and water analogies indicate that value lies in oneself specifically in the sense that the "overall constancy" of one's activity continues despite changing circumstances. The locus of value is this "constancy," which we attain by adopting the ecological view of our place in the world. The point is not that an atomic, individual self constitutes a constant source of value. It is that by adjusting our understanding of our relation to the world, we can find enduring value in the continuing, adaptive exercise of agency. The ecological view provides a context that—via the relational conception of agency—infuses our activity with value. The self becomes a source of constant value by virtue of our relation to the ecosystem.

In previous work, I suggested that the Zhuangist sage attains equanimity because they understand themselves to be engaged in a "constant" activity of employing *dé* to "wander" along a shifting, varying way.[5] The ecological outlook provides a way of contextualizing one's life such that this project is intelligible and perhaps attractive. Drawing on the picture I've presented so far, the grounds we have for equanimity toward death are that, in pursuit of excellence in wandering the way, the Zhuangist adept maintains equanimity in all contexts, focusing on the fittingness of their responses to their circumstances without allowing disruptive emotions to distract from their performance. Such an agent approaches the prospect of death with the same calm, steady attentiveness they do everything else.

This account may explain how an agent might attain equanimity toward death. However, it stops short of explaining how an agent might come to regard death as good. Indeed, the claim that value lies in the "overall constancy" of our activity presents a potential problem for that claim. For surely such constancy terminates with death. In that case, it seems that, contrary to Zǐlái's claim, death cannot be good on the same grounds that life is good. On the "constancy" view, what is good in life ends with death, and so death must be a disvalue after all.

Perhaps someone might suggest that even when I die, the "overall constancy" continues, because the ecosystem of which I was a part continues to function. My role as an individual ends, as I disintegrate and return to the "ancestral source." But perhaps the continued constancy of the totality sustains the claim that my death is good, even if it is not good for me as an individual part of the totality.

However, Zǐlái's claim is not that the totality or the constancy is good. He asserts that from my own perspective, my death can be regarded as good on grounds parallel to those by which my life is considered good. The grounds for this claim become clearer, I suggest, if we consider more carefully our relation as agents to the ecological wellspring, the "ancestral source" or "Great Clump."

6. Relational Agency and the Goodness of Death

The assertion that death is good in the same way life is good appears in two pericopes in "The Great Ancestral Master." Reading these passages in light of the relational conception of agency and the ecological view of the person reveals facets of their content that can deepen our understanding of the stance they present and clarify how a Zhuangist adept might justifiably consider death good.

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[5] See Fraser, *Ways of Wandering the Way* (Oxford, 2024), pp. 79–80, and "Xunzi Versus Zhuangzi: Two Approaches to Death in Classical Chinese Thought," Frontiers of Philosophy in China 8.3 (2013), 410–427.

Let's consider first the pericope in which Zǐlái asserts the claim. Zǐlái is one of a group of four friends who bond together over their shared stance that "life and death, existence and nonexistence" are "one whole" (6/46). The second of the group to fall ill from a terminal disease, he contextualizes his plight this way:

> Parents' relation to their children is such that, whether north, south, east, or west, the children only follow their commands. The relation of *yīn* and *yáng* to people is even more important than that of our parents to us. They having brought me near death, I'd be impudent indeed were I to disobey. (6/56–7)

The reference to *yīn* and *yáng*—the primal energies of nature—makes it clear that Zǐlái holds an ecological conception of the person. He understands himself as relating to natural forces and patterns in a manner analogous to how we relate to our parents. This analogy resonates with our earlier observation that *Zhuāngzǐ* texts sometimes refer to the ecological source of everything as our "ancestor" (*zōng*), to which we stand in a kinship relation. The implications of the kinship analogy extend beyond a simple "natural course" view. The point is not merely that we are caught up in processes of nature that eventually bring us to death. It is that, just as our identity is partly constituted by kinship relations—and, we could add, other social relations—it is also partly constituted by our ecological role, our place in nature. Given the relational conception of agency, all these sorts of relations affect what courses of action qualify as appropriate or fitting. Our relation to our parents and other persons shapes the direction of much of our activity; given our special relation to our parents, in many contexts we must obey or care for them. Analogously, according to this passage, our relation to natural processes too shapes the apt course, making it only appropriate that we be prepared to die when they bring us near death.

Zǐlái continues:

> The Great Clump burdens me with bodily form, labours me with life, eases me with old age, and rests me with death. So what makes my life good is the very thing that makes my death good. (6/57–8)

The reference to the "Great Clump"—the natural world as a totality—reinforces the relevance of the ecological view. My life and death both issue from the system of natural processes and relations of which I am a part. Whatever makes my life good—

whatever is good in it—arises from how my activity stands in a fitting relation to my circumstances. When circumstances bring my life to its end, the fitting response is to embrace death, as Zǐlái is prepared to do. Insofar as my life—my activity as an agent—can be said to be good, its goodness arises from how well it fits into my personal, social, and natural context. If my death follows fittingly from my relation to my circumstances, then it is similarly good. To be sure, death will terminate my *dé* (agentive power), such that what is good in my life will end. But my death itself will be good in the sense of fitting the circumstances. Indeed, insofar as continued life would fail to fit the circumstances, it would not be good.

The relation of the agent to the context is pivotal to the cogency of this view. Zǐlái is not asserting that death is good, simpliciter. His claim is that *if* natural forces bring me to the threshold of death, such that dying is the fitting path in the circumstances, then death is good on the same grounds that life is—namely because of its fitting relation to the circumstances. Just as my kinship relation to my parents makes it good to assist them when needed, my ecological relation to the natural world makes it good to die when the course of nature brings me to death.

The other pericope that mentions the goodness of death—a collection of disjoint notes that repeats Zǐlái's remarks about the "Great Clump" and the shared grounds for the goodness of life and death—also invokes an ecological view of the person, again drawing analogies between social relations and our relation to the grounds of our existence. The text points out that people treat "heaven" (*tiān* 天, nature) as a "father," devoting themselves to it, and they treat their ruler as greater than themselves, laying down their lives for him. How much more important, it suggests, is their relation to what "surpasses" heaven and what is "genuine" (*zhēn* 真) for us (6/20–2). What surpasses heaven is most likely an allusion to the ancestral source (*zōng* 宗) from which everything originates, while what is "genuine" for us is the identity or capacities the ancestral source bestows on us. The passage highlights the concept of "fleeing" or "escaping" (*dùn* 遯, 遁) from the facts, which appears in several *Zhuāngzǐ* pericopes referring to a refusal to accept the facts about our relation to nature. "Fleeing" is in effect the converse of the ecological view. In another passage addressing death, people who grieve death excessively are described as "fleeing" (*dùn* 遯, 遁) nature and denying the facts (*qíng* 情) of their life circumstances (3/17; see too 25/41, 32/16). They "forget what they have received" (3/17)—that is, they neglect that life is something we receive from nature and thus enjoy only by virtue of our relation to our ecological context. By contrast, in the "Great Ancestral Master" passage, those who adopt the ecological view of their identity are valorized as "storing the world in the world," such that "there is nowhere to flee," for they accept the "overall facts" of how "things always are" (6/26). Such a sage "wanders" where "nothing can escape," treating both early death and long life as "good," insofar as both issue from the mysterious source that "ties the myriad things together, upon which the totality of transformation depends" (6/27–9).

To sum up, the Zhuangist adept understands human agency relationally, as the employment of our capacity (*dé* 德, or agentive power) for finding fitting paths (the *dào* we follow) in relation to our circumstances. The goodness of our lives lies in how fittingly we relate to our context. The adept also understands our circumstances ecologically, in light of our relation to natural processes. When the fitting relation to natural processes is death, the adept can justifiably see death as good in a manner parallel to how life is good.

7. Nature, Humanity, and Nihilism

By highlighting our relation to the widest possible context—the cosmic ecosystem as a whole—the ecological view of the person helps to explain how a Zhuangist adept attains equanimity toward gain or loss and life or death and can even regard death as "good." We might worry, however, that expanding the scope of the relational context that shapes our self-understanding to such a vast scale may rob our lives of significance. Rather than relations to family, community, or political society, the salient relation becomes that of the agent to the world as a whole. In section 5, I cited a passage in which Lǎo Dān explains that, for the "ultimate person" (至人) who identifies with the world as a totality, one's own body and its parts become mere "dust and dirt," while "death and life, endings and beginnings" become like transitions between "day and night," none of which disturb them in the least (21/30–3). Such people, the text indicates, are utterly unconcerned about success or failure in everyday affairs (21/33). A critical worry might be that the agent who adopts this Zhuangist outlook comes to look upon their own and others' lives and projects as no more than "dust and dirt." If the agent identifies with nature as a whole in this way, it seems they may cease to be concerned with the sorts of relations and activities that constitute a normal human life, conducted on a human scale. Might the Zhuangist adept alienate themself from what it is to be human or from much of what is of value in a normal human life?

Building on this worry, we might wonder whether the ecological view of the person could induce a slide into nihilism, at least as viewed from the perspective of everyday human life. Contemplating our minute place in the vast course of nature might seem to reduce the significance of our lives to that of similarly minute things such as insects, grass, and pebbles. Confucius's description of Wáng Tái and Lǎo Dān's of the "ultimate person" both reduce what we normally consider terrible human losses—such as amputation of one's foot—to the status of "discarding a clump of mud" (5/8, 21/34). If everything we do is in some sense on a par with moving around "a clump of mud," why bother pursuing any ends at all?

These concerns echo an important ancient criticism of Zhuangist thought. The *Xúnzǐ* famously complains that many rival views of *dào* are one-sided, fixating on "one corner of the *dào*" while failing to grasp how the apt *dào* balances different considerations and handles different cases flexibly (21/24). One example of this one-sidedness, according to the *Xúnzǐ*, is that "Zhuāngzǐ is fixated on nature (*tiān* 天, also "heaven") while failing to understand humanity" (21/22). That is, the Zhuangist approach to *dào* attends to our relation to nature or heaven—in effect, the ecological view—while neglecting our relation to humanity and the characteristic features of human life. If a Zhuangist *dào* is indeed one-sided in this way, then, as the *Xúnzǐ* contends, the value of a distinctively human way of life is likely to go missing.

In fact, the relation between heaven or nature and humanity is a contested topic within the *Zhuāngzǐ* corpus. A prominent motif across pericopes that discuss this relation is that heaven or nature endows what is "genuine" (*zhēn* 真) in us—what is "self-so and cannot be changed," according to one passage (31/38)—and so the most fitting *dào* is to preserve this natural endowment, not allowing human customs to "extinguish" it (17/52). Within this discourse, some *Zhuāngzǐ* writings may be guilty of the one-sidedness the *Xúnzǐ* criticizes. One passage scorns "the human" as "tiny and trivial" compared to "the natural with us" (5/53–5), while others urge us to wholly "merge with the power of heaven" (15/13–14, 15/20). However, other passages suggest that "genuineness" lies in finding an equilibrium between "the natural" and "the human." One associates "genuineness" with "neither nature nor humanity overcoming each other" (6/20). Another contends that the "complete person" is skilled at both what is natural and what is human (23/73). Still another reminds us that insofar as humanity is part of nature, ultimately "nature and humanity are one" (20/60).

I suggest we should acknowledge that a few *Zhuāngzǐ* writings probably cross the line into the antihumanism targeted by the Xúnzian critique. At the same time, we should notice that this antihumanism is espoused only in some *Zhuāngzǐ* pericopes. In numerous others, the ecological view contributes to an outlook the texts present as enhancing our sense of agency, not diminishing it or alienating us from familiar human life. Indeed, rather than undermining the significance of mundane human *dào*, the ecological outlook may enrich it by placing such ways of life into a "big picture" that gives them a broader, deeper significance.

A common Zhuangist stance seems to be that psychologically the "overall constancy" engendered by adopting the ecological view enhances the agent's ability to find novel, creative opportunities for contextually fitting courses of action. By accepting our place in nature rather than "fleeing" from it, we "free" ourselves from "ties" to ephemeral things, so that when such things pass away, we remain "at ease with the moment, dwelling in the flow" (3/17–9, 6/52–3). The result is that our "capacities" remain "whole" (5/46), or unimpaired by changing conditions, such that "in encountering things" we can "generate the opportune moment from [our] mind" (5/45–6). This outlook is illustrated by Zǐyú, a friend of Zǐlái who is stricken with a crippling, disfiguring disease (6/47–53). Rather than allow his twisted body to deprive him of agency, Zǐyú resiliently adapts his course of activity to whatever capacities his disease thrusts on him. Zǐyú exemplifies Lǎo Dān's claim—discussed in section 5—that "value lies in oneself and is not lost in change" (21/34), as he treats the fluctuations of his disease as "minor changes" that do not disrupt his "overall constancy."

The contextual responsiveness that Zǐyú embodies also explains why, in practice, the ecological outlook is unlikely to lead to neglect of ordinary human values or to a slide into nihilism. In the Zhuangist framework, the exercise of agency is inherently relational: it is a particular agent's response to a particular context. But the agent's relation to the ecological context does not nullify their relation to the everyday context. Rather, the wider relation includes the narrower one as a constituent. The agent still finds themself on a *dào* shaped by the features of their proximal, human circumstances, and to follow such a *dào* well, manifesting admirable *dé*, they must respond to the needs, concerns, and ends of ordinary human life as encountered in their concrete context. The pressures and demands of the immediate circumstances—caring for family, earning a living, participating in society, and so on—provide a direction for and constraints on action that can be expected to overcome any tendency toward nihilistic paralysis. Only in exigent predicaments, as when responding to disease, accident, or natural disaster, might the apt course be to give up ordinary human life to wholly immerse oneself in the process of nature as a whole. In such contexts, adopting the ecological view and regarding one's own death as a minor alternation in the course of nature may be entirely appropriate.