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ZHUANGZI, XUNZI, AND THE PARADOXICAL NATURE OF EDUCATION

Introduction

Education is paradoxical in two respects, one negative, one positive. The negative respect is that in a very real way, learning limits learning. Just as education opens up new ways of experiencing, understanding, and acting, it also closes them off. Education brings the world into view for us. It produces the cultured “second nature” that makes us the creatures we are, by shaping the cognitive and physiological capacities and dispositions through which we experience, understand, and cope with the world.¹ But the process of molding these capacities and dispositions inevitably also closes off other ways of grasping and responding to things.

Partly this is just a practical issue: We do not have time to learn everything there is to learn, and learning one thing—say, a foreign language—may demand a level of commitment that rules out learning another, at least temporarily. But there is a deeper tension here as well. The spontaneity and automaticity characteristic of mastery of a practice or skill may mean that to the extent we truly master one, we eliminate others as real options. With the closing off of these options go entire networks of choices. The basketball player with an opening for a shot, the pianist in mid-performance, and the emergency room doctor scrambling to save a patient act so automatically that they experience only a highly restricted range of options as genuinely open to them. Thus while education enlightens and enables, it also limits. In principle, the limitations may be temporary. But in practice they can easily harden into inflexibility and close-mindedness.

The positive or constructive respect in which education is paradoxical is that a

chief aim of an effective education should be to ameliorate the limitations imposed by education itself, by training us to remain open to new ways of understanding and responding to the world. The best education is thus one that teaches us to remain perpetually incompletely educated, and thereby open to further learning.

[p. 530 begins here]

Zhuangist Daoism,² I will argue, recognizes the limitations and potential dangers of education, offers a theoretical diagnosis, and incorporates the constructive response just sketched into its normative vision—its conception of the good life and of how to live with others. The Zhuangist stance on education is largely compelling, I suggest, and it captures aspects of practical wisdom essential to human flourishing.

This paper is not a work of textual exegesis, and so I will not argue in detail for my interpretation of various *Zhuangzi* passages. In fact, what the text has to say about some of the issues I will discuss is not always clear. My aim is not to establish a definitive interpretation so much as to develop, in what I hope is a plausible way, several ideas the *Zhuangzi* inarguably does present.

In the first half of the paper, I offer a few generalizations about early Chinese views of education and then look more closely at Xunzi's philosophy of education. Xunzi makes an interesting foil for the Zhuangist view, because education plays a central role in his ethics, and he recognizes and seeks to cope with its limitations, yet ultimately he succumbs to just the sort of bias and dogmatism he decries in others. In the second half of the paper, I outline a Zhuangist diagnosis of the paradoxically limiting nature of education. I then explore how Zhuangist ethics embodies the constructively paradoxical feature of education.

Education in Early Chinese Thought

Education plays an important role in virtually all strains of early Chinese thought.

Thinkers in the classical period focused overwhelmingly on the practical issue of how to realize the good life, typically reflected in a comprehensive conception of ethical and political “order (*zhi*).” Most pre-Han texts regard education as a crucial element in achieving this aim, for both the individual and the polity. Individuals are to seek to educate themselves, the political elite to transform the people through education.

Education plays a salient role all of the “moral activist” texts of the period (by this I mean mainly the Confucian and Mohist texts). References to *xue* (study), *xiu* (practice), *xi* (rehearsing), *shi* (teacher), *jiao* (teaching), and *hua* (transformation) are common.

Thematically, education figures prominently in the *Lunyu* and *Mozi* and is the subject of extended essays in the *Xunzi* and *Lushi Chunqiu*. It is less prominent in the *Mengzi* and *Zhuangzi* but still significant. Interestingly, it is a noteworthy theme even in the *Daodejing*, which takes the contrarian view that the good personal and political life is achieved by *eliminating* the influence of conventional education.

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Education in the early Chinese context must be understood broadly, as a process not merely of acquiring information, but of training and shaping the whole person, including her know-how, abilities, dispositions, and habits. This project of comprehensive “person-making” is more similar to the training at a military academy or finishing school than to the service-economy model of education that dominates universities today. Education is seen as making us the people we are—as Xunzi emphasizes, had we a different education, we would be a different person (64/4.9).³

Indeed, the significance of education in the Chinese context is better captured by the Chinese expression *jiaohua* (transformation-through-education) or the German *Bildung* than by the English word “education.” *Jiaohua* emphasizes that education effects a transformation, producing a person who literally experiences and responds to the world differently. Such a transformation is fundamentally a sort of enabling. The capacities it produces are what enable us to live as humans—to act, think, and experience in ways that go beyond our merely animal capacities and drives. Think, for instance, of how our mastery of our native language enables us to perform activities and appreciate things that we would otherwise be blind to, as when we communicate and act on complex instructions or enjoy a story or joke.

Education in the *Xunzi*

This process of personal transformation is a major theme of the *Xunzi*, the pre-Qin text in which, along with the *Lunyu*, education figures most prominently. For Xunzi, education is what makes us human, the means by which our character is transformed (*hua*) from the raw dispositions of our bare animal nature (*xing*) into those of a refined, cultured person. Through *xue* (study), we manifest the potential that separates us from animals; to abandon study is to revert to being an animal (10/1.8). People are born the same, with a nature that, if left uneducated, motivates them to seek little more than sensual gratification. Education is what brings about the differences in their later achievement and moral character (64–65/4.9). For Xunzi, the scope of education includes all aspects of the person’s activity and character (14/1.9). Training in ritual propriety (*li*), for instance, covers all use of “the blood and *qi*, will and intention, knowing and deliberation” and all aspects of life, including “eating and drinking, clothing, residing, movement and

stillness” and “expression, demeanor, advance and retreat, and conduct” (24/2.2).

The keys to education are habituation, concentration, having a teacher and model, and perseverance (65/4.9, 152ff./8.11, 552/23.5a). [p. 532 begins here] Study is life-long (10/1.8), and the gentlemen studies broadly, examining himself daily to gauge his progress (2/1.1). In this way, he “builds up” or “accumulates” abilities, modifying his will and character until he feels completely aligned and connected with the world. At the highest stage of mastery—sagehood—the practitioner’s cognitive, conative, and practical capacities are so spontaneously reliable that action becomes an unending flow of skilled responses to particular situations. The Xunzian sage carries out complex policies and rituals in changing circumstances as easily and efficaciously as we distinguish black from white or move our limbs and as naturally as the changes of the seasons (140/8.7). He is utterly at home in the rituals and norms, to the extent that he comes to perceive the world as in effect already divided into action-guiding kinds (*lei*). For him, these directly trigger appropriate responses to situations, “as easily as counting one, two” (140/8.7).

Two aspects of Xunzi’s view of education contrast prominently with the Zhuangist ideas to be explored below. First, though Xunzi takes “study” to require unending refinement and application of one’s skills, he specifies that education is not open-ended in content. It is not a matter of seeking new experiences or new ways of understanding the world, for instance. Study and character transformation have an explicitly defined end, in both aim and subject matter: With the aid of a teacher and models, we are to undertake training in the way of the sage kings, specifically rituals and duties, until we become deferent, conform to the proper patterns, and thus achieve “order (*zhi*)” (10/1.8, 498/21.9, 538f./23.1).

Second, Xunzi explicitly sees education as a process of “completion” or “formation (*cheng*)” and becoming “whole (*quan*)” (19/1.14, 152ff./8.11). The end of education is to become a “completed person (*cheng ren*),” through a single-minded focus on practicing the teachings of the sage kings, excluding all improper influences, until one has fully internalized the *Dao* (the Way) and thereby developed “strength of virtue” (19/1.14). This view contrasts intriguingly with that of the *Zhuangzi*, for which the terms *hua* (transformation) and *cheng* (completion) play strikingly different roles. *Hua* in the *Zhuangzi* refers to natural, open-ended processes of change with no predetermined outcome, which often disrupt settled practices or judgments. *Cheng* is precisely that aspect of education that limits or closes off possibilities, thus leading to social conflict and individual frustration. As we will see, these two basic contrasts already capture much of the difference between the Xunzian and Zhuangist views of education.

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Xunzi and the Limitations of Education

Xunzi is well aware of how education can both open up and close off possibilities. Indeed, this aspect of education is one of the cornerstones of his theory of cognitive error, for it is among the chief sources of what he calls *bi*, “blind spots,” “blinkering,” or “one-sidedness.” A primary cause of error in judgment and action, he suggests, is that even those who sincerely seek to do what is right may be “blinkered by one corner and in the dark as to the overall pattern.” This blinkering is often due to their being “partial to what they have built up....They view other arts with a bias in favor of their partial stance” (472/21.1). For Xunzi, “building up” or “accumulating (*ji*)” is a term of art for the process of habituation and training by which we develop virtue and know-how. So Xunzi

is here attributing error and bias to one-sided education and injudicious application of what one has learned.

How can we avoid one-sidedness or “blinkering”? Xunzi claims that the sage does so by eliminating bias and evaluating everything by an objective standard, which gives the correct “grading” of things (482/21.5a). The objective standard is *Dao* (482/21.5b), which we can learn by keeping the heart-mind (*xin*) “empty, focused, and calm” (484/21.5d). Xunzi’s discussion provides useful hints for coping with the limitations of education by maintaining an attitude of open-mindedness and readiness to learn. But his doctrine of “empty, focused, and calm,” along with his conception of “blinkering,” shows that he himself does not fully grasp the crux of the limitation paradox, namely that *any* form of learning limits other learning. Xunzi’s disparaging word choice—“blinkered” or “obscured”—and his conception of error as an incomplete grasp of the Way imply that blinkering can be avoided. At least some talented people, he believes—such as Confucius—can achieve a comprehensive understanding. But the point of the paradox is that the limitations of education *cannot* be avoided, but only acknowledged and coped with. The paradox concerns the relation between alternative practices or *dao* (ways). At this level, there is no such thing as a view free of blinkering or one-sidedness, since to adopt one practice is necessarily to pass over others. In this context, so-called “one-sidedness” is not a sign of cognitive failure, but an inevitable consequence of thought and action.

Xunzi’s own theory of cognition helps to clarify the problem with his view. For him, as for other classical Chinese thinkers, thought and action operate by means of our ability to draw distinctions, to discriminate different kinds of things from each other. To

apply any scheme of distinctions, we must focus on some similarities and differences between things and overlook others. (Xunzi himself gestures [p. 534 begins here] toward this and similar facts when he observes that the two sides of any distinction tend to “obscure” each other [474/21.2].) But this means that merely to think or act—no matter how clearly or carefully—is to be subject to the limitation paradox. Applying one scheme of distinctions—in effect, one *dao*, or way—forecloses the practical possibility of applying others, at least simultaneously. Yet it would be misleading to label this foreclosure an instance of “blinking” or “one-sidedness,” since mastery of a scheme of distinctions is what gives us a view of the world in the first place. To think or act, we must apply *some* scheme of distinctions, and in doing so we exclude others. This is the inevitable price of exercising our cognitive capacities. Complete cognitive openness, with no discrimination or exclusion whatsoever, is an incoherent idea.

The notion of blinkeredness of course makes perfect sense when applied in the context of some accepted scheme, practice, or *dao*, rather than at the level of alternative schemes or practices themselves. That is, against a background of consensus on basic concepts, values, and ends, we can legitimately contend that someone is blinkered, just as I can say, given the rules of chess, that you lost a game because you paid insufficient attention to your opponent’s knight. In that case, you may be guilty of a cognitive failure as determined by the norms of the practice in which you are engaged. But at the level of alternative *dao* (ways), it is question-begging to criticize followers of a rival way for blinkeredness, since what is at stake between us and them is precisely the norms that determine what counts as blinkered and what not. This level of following one *dao* or another is the level at which the paradoxical features of education obtain.

That Xunzi operates at a lower level, on which he presupposes the authoritative status of his own *dao*, explains the dogmatic tone of his criticisms of rival thinkers. Xunzi is in effect blind to the value of other *dao* besides his own: he himself falls victim to the limitation paradox. His mastery of the *dao* of his beloved sage kings leaves him unable to acknowledge any alternative *dao* as legitimate. Indeed, the dogmatism, intolerance, and incuriousness found in many parts of the *Xunzi* illustrate the worst excesses of fixed-ended, doctrinaire education. The anthology may begin by urging that “study must not cease” (2/1.1), but the object of this unceasing study is narrowly and rigidly specified: Xunzi insists that the gentleman ignore any speech that does not conform to the former kings or to ritual and duty, no matter how discerning it may be (85/5.6). Attention to alternative *dao* or forms of social organization is unnecessary, because the conditions that justify the *dao* of the sage kings do not change. “Reckless (*wang*)” people mislead the “foolish (*yu*),” “vulgar (*lou*)” masses by suggesting that since “conditions today are different from ancient times” (82/5.5), [p. 525 begins here] the appropriate sociopolitical *dao* will be different. Against this, Xunzi insists that “the kinds do not contradict themselves; though time passes, the patterns are the same” (82/5.5). Most astonishingly, for Xunzi the gentleman engages in public debate and persuasion only because in an dissolute age he lacks the political power to silence his political or philosophical opponents through violence (521/22.3e). It is hard to imagine a more chilling expression of arrogance, intolerance, and narrow-mindedness.

The Zhuangist Diagnosis

Elements of the Zhuangist diagnosis of, and constructive response to, the limitations of education are familiar to anyone who recalls the stories in “Free and Easy Wandering”

(*Xiaoyao You*), the first book of the anthology. Several illustrate the theme that habituation—and, by extension, education—into one practice or way of life can result in fixed, inflexible patterns of behavior that blind us to alternative ways. These include the tale of the massive Peng bird mocked by the cicada and the sparrow, the traveler who bought the formula for a silk bleacher’s hand ointment and used it to win a fiefdom, and Hui Shi’s ineptitude in using his giant gourd and tree. The lesson is that habituation and education create limitations that can generate misunderstanding or frustration, particularly when different ways of life intersect or when in novel circumstances habits lose their efficacy. A salient part of the Zhuangist normative vision is that we live more flourishing lives if we possess a kind of practical wisdom about the potential limitations of our *dao*—or any *dao*—and a readiness for change and adaptation in the face of obstacles and novelty. This readiness—in effect a second-order readiness for the first-order readiesses established by culture, education, and habit to break down occasionally—is a core aspect of the Daoist conception of an educated or enlightened character.

This rough picture is shared by many *Zhuangzi* passages, I suggest. Its theoretical underpinning—and the Zhuangist diagnosis of the inherently limiting nature of education—is furnished by an intriguing theory presented in Book 2, the “Discourse on Equalizing Things.” The theory is based on two theses. The first involves the paired, contrasting concepts of *cheng* (completion) and *kui* (damage) or *hui* (destruction) (68/53).⁴ *Cheng* refers to the completion or formation of something, and by extension to any form of achievement. *Kui* refers to injury, loss, or damage; *hui*, in this context probably a synonym for *kui*, to destruction or ruin. The Zhuangist thesis here is that the

process or state of *cheng* is always at the same time one of *kui*.

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As I mentioned in discussing Xunzi, for early Chinese theorists the fundamental cognitive operation is distinguishing things into kinds, or *lei*. On the Zhuangist view, prior to the distinction-drawing activity of agents, the world is cognitively and normatively an undifferentiated unity or whole. The idea is not that ontologically the world forms a sort of homogenous mass, like some huge glob of protoplasm, but that things do not come pre-divided into the cognitive and evaluative kinds that guide thought and action. Thus, apart from our distinction-drawing activity, the cosmos is in effect an undifferentiated “one” (68ff./53–54), just as a body is an undifferentiated “one” until we demarcate its parts. Strictly speaking, this “one” is nameless, because naming requires distinguishing the bearer of a name from other things, and an all-encompassing whole obviously cannot be marked off from anything without ceasing to be a whole. Still, the “one” is conventionally named *Dao*, probably to emphasize that it is the all-embracing way or course of the cosmos itself.

Whenever we form a judgment or undertake an action, the distinction-drawing practices that ground our judgment or action divide the world into distinct things or kinds of things to which we respond. In early Chinese thought, the general label for the resultant guiding distinctions is *shi fei*, typically rendered into English as “right vs. wrong” or “this vs. not-this.” This dividing is a process of *cheng*, for it “completes” or “forms” things out of the original, indeterminate *Dao*. At the same time, however, this completion or formation “damages (*kui*)” or “ruins (*hui*)” the primordial, undifferentiated unity of *Dao* (74/54). “Completion” is thus always accompanied by “damage,” which

typically takes two forms. First, judgment or action divides things out of the unity and thus damages or injures it. The damage is especially serious in the case of dogmatic judgments affirming the unchanging correctness of some *shi fei* distinction (74/54). Second, distinction drawing proceeds by identifying a pattern of similarities or differences. But in identifying and committing to one pattern, we necessarily pass over other potential patterns. So *kui* is also “damage” or “loss” in the sense of sacrificing possible alternative ways of drawing distinctions and thus ways of knowing and acting.

Any process of completion is thus at the same time a process of damage, and anything that is complete in some respect is damaged in others. Nothing can be genuinely or entirely complete, whole, or undamaged, with the exception only of a state of total inactivity, which alone can preserve the original, undivided wholeness of *Dao* (74/54). Completion and wholeness are of course just Xunzi’s metaphors for the outcome of a thorough education. Applied to education, then, these Zhuangist theses yield a powerful critique of the Xunzian ideal, [p. 537 begins here] one that renders it inherently unattainable. For though education “forms” and “completes” us, it is at the same time a process of damage. Mastery of one *dao* tends to exclude mastery, and sometimes even recognition, of others.

A grasp of the second Zhuangist thesis constitutes part of the distinctive form of practical wisdom that “Equalizing Things” calls “understanding (*ming*).” The idea is that since the world does not come prepackaged into *shi fei* distinctions, *shi fei* can be distinguished in indefinitely many ways for different purposes. In some context or another, by some criterion or other, anything can be deemed *shi* or *fei*, “of a kind” or not “of a kind” with some other thing. Things in themselves are neither *shi* nor *fei*, but in the

context of our practices anything is potentially either (61/53).

The relation between the two theses and education is that the particular scheme of *shi fei* distinctions an agent employs is determined through a psychological process of *cheng* (completion, formation, achievement)—specifically, a process by which the distinctions are formed in the agent’s heart, the organ that guides action and cognition (56/51). In forming one scheme of distinctions, the heart rules out other potential schemes. Education into any one scheme is thus simultaneously a process of completion or achievement and one of damage or limitation. In itself, this limitation is not a problem to be resolved, but a basic, unavoidable feature of action and thought. It can *become* a problem, however, if it hardens into cognitive sclerosis, blinding us to alternative schemes of guiding distinctions. For these other schemes may be just as much a part of the all-embracing *Dao* as the distinctions we presently apply, and in particular situations they may be more appropriate or efficacious.

In the Zhuangist view, this blindness to alternatives is due to “petty completion” or “minor achievement (*xiao cheng*)” (56/52). Originally, as an undifferentiated whole, *Dao* in itself fixes no single scheme of action-guiding distinctions. The agent who grasps this point will be aware of the plurality of potential schemes open to her. In effect, she stands at an axis or hub of *Dao* (*dao shu*), from which she could adopt any of indefinitely many ways of responding to a particular situation (61/53). In practice, however, an agent may be blocked from appreciating the variety of paths open to her, of which her own practices are only one. What blocks her—or, as the text says, what “conceals” *Dao* (56/52)—is “petty” or “minor” mastery or achievement in one set of practices, without the overarching awareness of the relation between, and contingency of, alternative

practices that is characteristic of *ming*. Petty completion produces the dogmatic *shi fei* of the Confucians and Mohists, along with interminable disputes in which each side, following different *dao*, with different forms of [p. 538 begins here] completion and corresponding blind spots, denies what the other affirms and affirms what the other denies.⁵

To sum up the Zhuangist diagnosis, then, education is a process of completion, yet also one of damage. It initiates the agent into a way of understanding and acting in the world, but at the same time limits her from employing, and sometimes even seeing, other possible ways. To remain limited in this way—blind to the possibilities of alternative schemes—is to remain trapped at the level of “petty completion.”

Coping with the Limitations of Education

The Zhuangist response to the limitations of education is based on a metaethical thesis and a set of normative arguments. The metaethical thesis is that there in fact exist a plurality of schemes of distinctions by which we can guide thought and action in different situations. The normative arguments call attention to the ethical and prudential grounds for valuing the capacity to shift among such schemes, applying now one, now another. Such shifts may be prudentially justified, for instance, by their effectiveness in reducing frustration and satisfying the agent’s needs. Or they might be ethically justified because they enable us to find ways to live in harmony with others. If we are to act at all, we cannot avoid completion and damage, but we can in effect minimize the damage by judiciously shifting among a plurality of *shi fei* schemes when appropriate.

The ability to recognize and apply these points constitutes the Daoist form of practical wisdom that “Equalizing Things” calls *ming*. Cognitively, the agent with *ming*

understands that *Dao* in itself fixes no uniquely correct scheme of distinctions, and so she is aware of the plurality of potential alternative schemes and the possibility of responding to situations in indefinitely many ways. Practically, the agent with *ming* still draws *shi fei* distinctions, but in an open-ended, adaptive way grounded in a loose, flexible set of ethical and prudential ends, not in a doctrinaire fashion that assumes there is only a single “genuine (*zhen*)” way to proceed, all others being “false (*wei*)” (56/52). The text calls this context-sensitive distinction drawing “adaptive *shi* (*yin shi*)” (69/54), and the ability to employ it wisely is the major practical component of *ming*.

Adaptive *shi* contrasts with “deeming *shi* (*wei shi*),” the attitude that certain distinctions are fixed or “constant (*chang*)” and thus unconditionally correct. Deeming *shi* creates rigid divisions between things, and thus completion and damage. In contrast, adaptive *shi* enables flexible, contextual responses that “accommodate things in [p. 539 begins here] the ordinary” (69/54)—perhaps, one passage hints, even without the agent consciously knowing what she is doing (69/54). The text offers little explanation of what exactly “the ordinary (*yong*)” is, unfortunately. An ancient interpolation links it to pragmatic efficacy, in effect equating it with “the useful” and with practical success (71, n.7/54). The single example given is the story of the monkey keeper who announces a practice of distributing three nuts in the morning, four in the evening, and then, when the monkeys object, switches to four in the morning and three in the evening, thus placating the monkeys at no loss to himself. The keeper sees no real difference either way—the monkeys receive the same seven nuts per day—and by adjusting his practice he is able to satisfy all sides. The text thus seems to indicate that adaptive *shi* aims at adjusting *shi fei* distinctions so as to “harmonize (*he*)” the values and practices of interacting parties. This

harmonization is called “proceeding in two ways (*liang xing*)” (69/54), in effect simultaneously carrying out both one’s own practice or aims and others’. (The example is of course too simple, and it is unlikely that even a sage could resolve most clashes between different *dao* so easily.) When not pursuing practical harmony in this way, the text suggests, the sage draws no *shi fei* distinctions at all, but rests on the “wheel of heaven” (69/54). This is a metaphor for remaining uncommitted to any one scheme of *shi fei*, yet ready to turn freely in any direction, drawing distinctions as needed in response to particular situations.

The flexibility and openness to new ways embodied in *ming* and its application in adaptive *shi* are reflected in several of the *Zhuangzi*’s other salient normative themes. We have just touched on values such as *yong* (prudential success) and *he* (harmony or compromise). Beyond these, *ming* is probably also a crucial component of “free wandering (*you, xiaoyao*),” perhaps the anthology’s central ethical ideal. Indeed, the Zhuangist stance on education is in effect just the view that the highest state of ethical and psychological cultivation is a form of “free wandering,” in which the agent remains open and ready to adopt new ways and practices in response to changing circumstances.

This adaptability and freedom are probably also components of psychological attitudes essential to the Zhuangist conception of well-being. These include peacefulness or ease (*an*), calm (*jing*), and flowing along (*shun*) in the face of disruptive, unpredictable change and “the inevitable (*bu de yi*),” or circumstances beyond our control. Adaptability is also an indispensable means to prominent Zhuangist values such as preserving one’s health and living out one’s years (102/62). Adaptive *shi* clearly is crucial to the Zhuangist psychological and political value of impartiality (*wu si*). And the psychological [p. 540

begins here] “emptiness (*xu*)” that some passages (e.g., 126/68) treat as essential to practical success entails a readiness for an open-ended range of responses, akin to resting at the “hub of *Dao*” or the “wheel of heaven.”

This sort of readiness is likewise a pivotal part of the agent’s capacity for the flexible, responsive exercise of skills. It thus dovetails with the well-known Zhuangist theme of skill mastery. Consider, for instance, how the story of the marvelously expert butcher Cook Ding emphasizes his response to obstacles, thus highlighting the adaptable, open-ended nature of his skill (104–05/63–64). Skill mastery involves an ongoing process of training, refinement, and extension that constitutes a fitting paradigm of the *Zhuangzi*’s constructive view of education. The cook’s skilled practice is offered as a lesson in “nurturing life” (105/64), partly because it exemplifies a continuing process of growth, self-education, and adaptation to new circumstances. Indeed, the exercise of skills illustrates how fixed, inflexible *shi fei* standards may actually prevent us from performing effectively. Cook Ding does not overcome obstacles by following fixed rules. He just lets his skill flow, guided by an educated yet open-ended responsiveness to the exigencies of each new situation.⁶

Conclusion

Among the fascinating features of the *Zhuangzi* anthology is that the very process of reading the text can contribute to the cognitive and affective education needed to develop Daoist practical wisdom. Through a range of rhetorical techniques—including argument, parable, presentation of role models, and humor—the text induces us to recognize that our way, complete though it may seem to us, is also inherently “damaged” or incomplete, and alternative schemes of guiding distinctions also lie open to us. The text guides us to

see that just as our *dao* is part of nature, grounded in world-guided, efficacious skills, so too may be others'. There is more than one way to divide seven nuts, and any *dao* that can actually be practiced is thereby in touch with the world. The Zhuangist stance thus tends to motivate a pluralist respect for other *dao* as, like ours, part of nature—part of the *Dao*.

There is no guarantee, of course, that the Zhuangist approach will succeed in persuading the dogmatist. The close-minded, “completed heart (*cheng xin*)” (56/51) can be difficult to overcome. The text attempts to shake its audience out of complacent or sclerotic opinion and habit, but failure is a real possibility. All too often, we and those around us live in the muddled, pathetic state described early on in [p. 541 begins here] “Equalizing Things,” clinging stubbornly to our prejudices (52/51). One passage there links our “policing” *shi fei* and obsessively guarding our ground to how plant life dries and withers as winter approaches, remarking that as the heart nears death, nothing can return it to the light (46/50). Educating ourselves to remain open to further learning is a difficult, unending task, one that runs against our natural tendency toward cognitive inertia. Yet, as this passage hints, it is very much a key to a vigorous, flourishing life.⁷

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Endnotes

¹ Compare the discussion of second nature, culture, and *Bildung* in John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

² I will use “Zhuangist Daoism” and “Zhuangism” as labels for the loose family of views presented in the anthology *Zhuangzi*. Not all of these views cohere as a unified philosophical position, though many are linked by family resemblances. I will attempt to articulate one set of ideas found in the *Zhuangzi*, without claiming that these in fact represent the stance of the writer of any particular part of the anthology.

³ Citations to *Xunzi* comprise two parts, separated by a slash: the page number in Li Disheng, *Xunzi Jishi* (Taipei: Xuesheng Shuju, 1979), followed by the section number in John Knoblock, *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works*, 3 vols. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988–94). Any translations from the Chinese are my own.

⁴ Citations to *Zhuangzi* comprise two parts: a page reference to Chen Guying, *Zhuangzi Jinzhu Jinyi* (Taipei: Shangwu Yinshuguan, 1999), followed by one to A. C. Graham, *Chuang-tzu: The Inner Chapters* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2001). All translations are my own.

⁵ The text does not indicate precisely whether these debates are between the Confucians and the Mohists, or between the Confucians and Mohists, on one side, and other views, on the other. The latter interpretation is defensible, since elsewhere in the *Zhuangzi*, the phrase “*Ru Mo*” (Confucian-Mohist) refers to the Confucians and Mohists as a bloc, a usage that became common in the Han dynasty.

⁶ At least one fixed, general rule is assumed in the story, of course: Cook Ding remains committed to carving up oxen and does not consider switching to some other activity. But the story’s lesson can easily be generalized to more extreme cases, in which the appropriate adaptive response to a situation may be to revise one’s original ends.

⁷ This article is a condensed version of a paper presented at “Educations and Their Purposes: A Philosophical Dialogue Among Cultures,” the Ninth East-West Philosophers’ Conference, May 29–June 11, 2005, University of Hawai’i. I am grateful to the conference audience for thoughtful comments, and I thank Professors Cheng Chung-ying and Xinyan Jiang for including the paper in this special issue.

Glossary

an 安

bi 蔽

bu de yi 不得已

chang 常

Chen Guying 陳鼓應

cheng 成

cheng ren 成人

dao 道

Daodejing 《道德經》

dao shu 道樞

fei 非

he 和

hua 化

hui 毀

ji 積

jiao 教

jiaohua 教化

jing 靜

kui 虧

lei 類

li 禮

Li Disheng 李滌生

liang xing 兩行

lou 陋

Lunyu 《論語》

Lushi Chunqiu 《呂氏春秋》

Mengzi 《孟子》

ming 明
Mozi 《墨子》
qi 氣
quan 全
Ru Mo 儒墨
shi 師
shi 是
shi-fei 是非
shun 順
wei shi 為是
wu si 無私
xi 習
xiao cheng 小成
wang 妄
wei 偽
xiaoyao 逍遙
Xiaoyao You 〈逍遙遊〉
xin 心
xing 性
xiu 修
xu 虛
xue 學
Xunzi 《荀子》
Xunzi Jishi 《荀子集釋》
yin shi 因是
yong 庸
you 遊
yu 愚
zhen 真
zhi 治
Zhuangzi 《莊子》
Zhuangzi Jinzhu Jinyi 《莊子今註今譯》