

Dao Companion to *Xuanxue*

Metaphysics and Agency in GUO Xiang's Commentary on the *Zhuangzi*

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1. Introduction

An intriguing, instructive puzzle about GUO Xiang's 郭象 (252-312 CE) philosophy arises simply from considering his brief comments on the titles of the "inner" books of the *Zhuangzi* 莊子—the first seven books of the thirty-three book recension he produced. For readers unfamiliar with Guo, in just these brief remarks what might look like a fundamental tension at the heart of his thought emerges.

Guo's philosophy comes down to us only through his commentary on the *Zhuangzi*.¹ He appears to have regarded the inner books as presenting the core of a Zhuangist worldview with which he identified and around which he structured his own thought. These being the only books with thematic titles reflecting their content, he began his remarks on each with a summary comment inspired by its title. His general comment for book 1, "Free and Easy Wandering," indicates that all creatures can achieve easy, aimless freedom (*xiaoyao* 逍遙) through activity that conforms to their inherent character (*xing* 性), corresponds to their abilities, and suits their endowed allotment (*fen* 分).² Guo refers to such freedom as a "field of self-fulfillment." Self-fulfillment would seem to imply the successful, satisfying exercise of agency, pursuing and achieving the values, ideals, and dreams we hold in our heart-mind (*xin* 心), usually understood to be the locus of cognitive, affective, and conative functions. One untutored way to understand free-and-easy wandering might be that it implies the freedom to do as the heart-mind directs. For what else could freedom be? A freedom to act merely by instinct or reflex hardly seems free or fulfilling.

Yet GUO Xiang's summary comments for three of the other inner books stress an idea that might seem to conflict with such apparently commonsensical assumptions (see Guo 1961: 131, 224, 287). According to these remarks, the key to appropriate action is "non-mindedness" (*wuxin* 無心)—to have no "mind," here apparently referring to motivating attitudes such as intentions, aims, desires, and values.³ The absence of mind sounds like a recipe for relinquishing

¹ Historical sources mention works by Guo on the *Daodejing* and the Confucian *Analects*, but these are no longer extant. Throughout this chapter, I assume, for the sake of discussion, that Guo's commentary forms a coherent body of writing that aims to present a consistent philosophical stance.

² See the Guo commentary (indicated by the heading "注") to book 1 in Guo Qingfan 1961: 1. References to GUO Xiang's commentary cite page numbers in Guo Qingfan's edited text. All translations of Guo's commentary are my own. Throughout the chapter, I interpret *xing* as the inherent, dispositional character of a thing at any one time, avoiding the common translation of *xing* as "nature" in order to distinguish it from *tian* 天, which I render as "nature" or "natural."

³ Because the word *xin* 心 also refers to the physical heart and the concept of *xin* covers cognitive, affective, and conative functions, it is often interpreted as "heart-mind." For brevity, I will refer to it as "mind," with the proviso that "mind" covers all three areas of psychological activity.

agency—the capacity for independent, self-determined thought and action—and for setting aside anything we value, pursue, or strive for. For readers new to Guo’s thought, advocating non-mindedness might seem to clash with the ideal of free-and-easy activity in which we fulfill our inherent character, abilities, and endowed potential. For what is the self-fulfillment associated with free wandering, if not the fulfilling, self-directed pursuit of values, intentions, and aims we affirm in our minds? How does non-mindedness fit together with a conception of agency on which we can enjoy the free-and-easy mode of life Guo valorizes?

This chapter presents an interpretation of GUO Xiang’s thought that seeks to resolve these and related questions. I will explore how Guo’s views emerge from his approach to the metaphysics of *dao* 道 (way) and the place of human activity and agency in *dao*. Once we understand his views on these points, we can see that he holds a distinctive conception of the self and agency—and, accordingly, normatively appropriate action—on which self-fulfillment and easy, aimless freedom are consistent with his doctrine of non-mindedness, which in fact presents a precondition for attaining them. As I will show, GUO Xiang uses key terms such as *zi* 自 (self), *xin* (heart-mind), *zhi* 知 (know), and *xing* (inherent character) in distinctive, specialized ways that diverge both from common uses of these words in Chinese and from familiar categories in contemporary philosophical psychology yet are coherent, intelligible, and defensible. The normative conception of agency and the well-lived life that emerges from his *Zhuangzi* commentary can at first sight seem puzzling and counterintuitive. But I will contend that it is plausible and presents a fascinating, profound, and potentially correct view of the nature of human agency and the sources of normativity.

2. *Dao* as “Independent Transformation”

In the context of Wei-Jin 魏晉 philosophical debate, GUO Xiang’s account of *dao* is probably the most prominent feature of his thought. Famously, he rejects HE Yan’s 何晏 (193-249 CE) and WANG Bi’s 王弼 (226-249 CE) influential conception of *dao* as *wu* 無 (nothing, non-existence), instead identifying *dao* with the spontaneous, individual “self-production” or “autogeneration” (*zisheng* 自生) of the myriad things, an idea he develops from XIANG Xiu 向秀 (ca. 227-277 CE). HE Yan had contended that *dao* is “that which has nothing it possesses” and implied that *dao* is *wu* (nothing), specifically in the sense that it is not any one thing, with determinate, distinguishable features, but an unnameable, unspecifiable fullness or completeness (*quan* 全) from which all things are produced.⁴ For He, then, to understand *dao* as *wu* is to regard it not as an utter absence or non-presence but as “no-thing” or “not any determinate thing.” WANG Bi disagreed with this characterization, contending that *dao* is in fact simply a designation for *wu* (nothing, non-existence), which is the source from which all things proceed. For Wang, *wu* is the ground or origin of all existence (*you* 有). He understands this origin not as an undifferentiated whole

⁴ For discussion, see Alan K.L. Chan 2009: sect. 2. For a translation of relevant passages, see Wing-Tsit Chan 1963: 324-325.

about which nothing can be said but as the absence of existence. On Wang's view, if we interpret *wu* as HE Yan does, we fail to explain the source of existent things; instead, we merely gesture toward a further aspect of existence. The source of things must be something other than and beyond existence, and hence it must be non-existence.⁵

GUO Xiang rejects both WANG Bi's and HE Yan's views. Like Wang and against He, Guo holds that *wu* simply is nothing or non-existence. But against Wang, he contends that *wu* cannot be the source of anything. Since *wu* is non-existence, by its very nature it cannot generate existence.⁶ *Wu* does not produce things, nor is it *dao*. From what, then, do things arise?

Since non-existence is indeed non-existence, it cannot generate existence. [But] before existence is generated, neither can it generate anything either. So then that which generates generation, what is it? Alone, [things] simply are generated of themselves ... Being so of themselves, they are called "naturally so." Being naturally so is not [the result of] taking action, so it's spoken of as "natural." ... So "nature" is a general name for the myriad things; no one thing filling the role of nature, who is the master that things obey? So things are each generated of themselves, without anything they issue from—this is the *dao* of nature.

無既無矣，則不能生有；有之未生，又不能為生。然則生生者誰哉？塊然而自生耳。.....自己而然，則謂之天然。天然耳，非為也，故以天言之。.....故天者，萬物之總名也，莫適為天，誰主役物乎？故物各自生而無所出焉，此天道也。(Guo 1961: 50)

So the maker-of-things having no master, things each make themselves. Things each make themselves without anything they depend on—this is the norm of the natural world.

故造物者無主，而物各自造，物各自造而無所待焉，此天地之正也。(Guo 1961: 112)

The generation or formation of things proceeds from factors inherent in each thing, without been driven or directed by any "master," whether a deity, a first cause or source, or a unifying pattern or process. Indeed, for GUO Xiang, the whole idea of *dao* as a unified source—whether an entity, a causal process, or an abstract pattern—that produces things is a mistake. The "*dao* of nature" is simply a label for how things each arise of themselves.

Hence *dao* cannot make [something] exist, and what exists is always so-of-itself.

道故不能使有，而有者常自然也。(Guo 1961: 919)

⁵ Again, see Alan K.L. Chan 2009: sect. 2, and Wing-Tsit Chan 1963: 321-324. For further discussion, see Brook Ziporyn 2015: 399-401.

⁶ Guo's younger contemporary PEI Wei 裴頠 (267-300 CE) similarly argued that utter non-existence lacks any means by which it could generate anything. Hence what originates generation must self-generate, and in doing so it must have existence as its basis. See MOU Zongsan 1997: 368, and TANG Yijie 2000: 57. TAI Lianchang argues that Pei's conception of self-generation is distinct from Guo's, as Pei holds that things rely on resources outside themselves for their generation. See Tai 1995: 51-55.

Nature is what is so-of-itself. What is so-of-itself being manifest, things fulfill their *dao*.

天者，自然也。自然既明，則物得其道也。（Guo 1961: 471）

Dao itself—apart from the myriad things in nature—does nothing and has no capacities.

Dao has no capacities. When [the *Zhuangzi*] speaks of getting [an achievement] from *dao*, this is just a means of explaining that [things] get it of themselves. Since they get it of themselves, *dao* cannot make them get it; nor, before we get it, can we take action to get it. That being the case, then all those who get it neither draw on *dao* as a source outside themselves nor have it come from a self within themselves, [but instead] suddenly independently transform in and of themselves ... Hence taking action to generate [something] is ultimately inadequate to complete its generation, because its generation does not come from the self taking action. To the contrary, taking action injures its genuine generation.

道，無能也。此言得之於道，乃所以明其自得耳。自得耳，道不能使之得也；我之未得，又不能為得也。然則凡得之者，外不資於道，內不由於己，掘然自得而獨化也。.....故夫為生果不足以全生，以其生之不由於己為也，而為之則傷其真生也。（Guo 1961: 251）

This passage introduces several concepts pivotal to Guo Xiang's metaphysics and ethics. First, *dao* simply refers to how the myriad things “independently transform in and of themselves.” It is not an entity, force, process, or pattern apart from or outside of things that makes them what they are or that they draw on or follow to grow and develop as they do. Instead, it is just the various ways all things are generated and live or develop in themselves. Arguably, we should not refer to *dao* in the singular or as a totality at all, but to the extent it makes sense to do so, *dao* is wholly immanent in things.

The processes by which things arise and develop Guo dubs “independent transformation” (*du hua* 獨化).⁷ Independent transformation refers to how, on Guo's view, the *sheng* 生 of each individual thing—its birth, production, or generation, its growth or development, and its life—issues from itself, rather than being driven or controlled by something else. This same basic idea Guo also refers to as *zisheng* (self-generation) or *zihua* 自化 (self-transformation), which along with independent transformation are part of a prominent cluster of overlapping notions that also includes *ziran* 自然 (self-so), *zi'er* 自爾 (so-in-itself), and *zide* 自得 (self-fulfillment, obtaining in and of itself). The passage underscores a crucial feature of Guo's doctrine of independent transformation. Obviously, for transformation to be “independent,” things must in some respect arise and develop independently of any source outside of them. But Guo's view is that they also do so independently of any self (*ji* 己) within them that controls them or makes them as they are. *Dao* does not drive our activity, but nor do we self-consciously drive it ourselves. When Guo speaks of “self-generation” or “self-transformation,” then, he is not referring to things

⁷ *Duhua* is sometimes interpreted as “lone transformation,” but the connotation of “lone” may be misleading, since *duhua* often involves interaction with other things.

acting on themselves to generate, produce, or transform themselves. In his usage, the connotation of the word *zi* is not analogous to the connotation of “self-” in compounds such as “self-employed,” “self-absorbed,” or “self-governing.” It is more similar to the connotation of “auto-.” *Zisheng* is not a thing’s somehow acting to generate itself, but the “autogeneration” of that thing and its activity out of its inherent character and capacities.⁸

The passage contrasts such autogenerated activity with “taking action” (*wei* 為). GUO Xiang contends that what does not come about by independent transformation, in and of itself, cannot be obtained by taking action. Indeed, taking action may actually obstruct or harm the independent generation of things, he claims. The passage thus also introduces the basis for Guo’s ethical stance: what is produced by independent transformation is “genuine” (*zhen* 真); taking action may interfere with independent transformation and so should be avoided.

For GUO Xiang, the nature of autogeneration explains why we cannot know the origins of things or how they are produced. Things and their activity arise through autogeneration or independent transformation, which take place in a manner that is so-of-itself, without any explicit, self-aware undertaking (*wei*). Precisely because things are so-of-themselves, they are “so without [anyone’s] knowing that by which they are so 不知其所以然而然” (Guo 1961: 61; cf. 10, 55, 495, 960). Why or how they are so can’t be known, simply because there is nothing that is “that by which they are so.” Since they are autogenerated, no process or cause brings them about, thereby explaining why they are as they are. There is nothing to know, identify, or clarify. The most we can do by way of explanation is simply point out the manner in which things indeed arise. This sphere of what is beyond explanation or clarification Guo calls *ming* 冥 (dark, obscure, indeterminate).⁹

No thing things things; rather, things simply thing themselves.¹⁰ Things simply thing themselves, so they are obscure.

無物而物自物耳。物自物耳，故冥也。（Guo 1961: 753）

It would be preposterous to deny that any causal relations obtain between things or that we can know at least something about why or how things happen as they do. If this were Guo’s stance, the doctrine of independent transformation would be untenable. But this is not his view, as we can see from his comments on the well-known *Zhuangzi* passage depicting a conversation between a shadow and its penumbra about what determines the shadow’s movement. These comments underscore two points about causality. First, all causal explanations come to an end somewhere. When they do, they bottom out in descriptions of how things simply happen as they do, of themselves, because of the inherent features or character of things.

⁸ Brook Ziporyn aptly remarks that “what Guo means by ‘self-so’ [is] not done by me, nor by anyone or anything else.” See Ziporyn 2015: 404.

⁹ As Brook Ziporyn says, *ming* in this sense is “a word for the unknowability of how things create themselves.” Ziporyn 2003: 35.

¹⁰ That is, there is no thing outside of things that makes them the things they are; rather, things simply arise in-and-of-themselves as the things they are.

If we seek what they depend on and search for where they come from, then the searching and seeking have no end, until we come to what is non-dependent, and then the patterns of independent transformation become clear.

若責其所待而尋其所由，則尋責無極，而至於無待，而獨化之理明矣。
(Guo 1961: 111)

If we ask why a body casts a shadow, the explanation is that it blocks light. If we ask why it blocks light, we can explain how it is formed of opaque material. But at some point, the answer to the question of why something opaque casts a shadow will be that it just does—it is a brute fact that some things inherently possess this sort of causal power. This bedrock level of explanation I suggest corresponds to Guo's notion of what is so-in-itself of things (*zi'er*).

Second, GUO Xiang acknowledges that things may interact causally, referring to such interaction as *xiang yin* 相因 (being a basis for each other) or *xiang shi* 相使 (causing each other) (Guo 1961: 112, 241, 917). Indeed, he holds that “all generation of things follows from something” (Guo 1961: 943). But he sees such causal interaction as compatible with and indeed explained by independent transformation. The fundamental ontological explanation of causal relations, he holds, lies in the “source” (*zong* 宗) of each individual thing within itself (Guo 1961: 112). For simplicity, instead of the complex relation between a penumbra, shadow, body, and light source, consider the textbook example of one billiard ball striking another, causing it to roll away. Guo would call the first billiard ball the “proximal cause” (*jin yin* 近因) of the movement of the second. It is a mistake, he thinks, to “seek this proximal cause while forgetting what is so-of-itself of things, locating their source outside of them and overlooking the master within 責此近因而忘其自爾，宗物於外，喪主於內” (Guo 1961: 112). It is only because of the inherent features of billiard balls—that they have a certain mass, elasticity, smooth surface, and so forth—that the causal effect can obtain. The movement of the second ball is not “made” or “directed” by the first but rather, given the features of the second ball, is a so-of-itself (*zi'er*) reaction to being struck (see Guo 1961: 112). The causal relations that may affect things are determined by their inherent character or causal powers. In this respect, their path of transformation or development is still determined by them, of themselves, and not by something outside of them. Independent transformation entails not that things arise and develop without interaction but that how they interact is determined by what is so-of-itself for each thing.¹¹

GUO Xiang distinguishes these everyday causal relations, which issue from inherent features of things in themselves, from two other sorts of relations that he regards as indeed inconsistent with autogeneration and independent

¹¹ Here my reading diverges from Brook Ziporyn's, on which Guo denies that interaction between things is a matter of causality. See Ziporyn 2003: 103, 105. I also differ from TANG Yijie, who sees Guo as denying that things have any power to affect each other and indeed rendering the existence of things unintelligible. See Tang 2000: 267, 278. Like TAI Lianchang 1995: 60-61, I suggest that the doctrine of independent transformation is compatible with ordinary talk about causal relations. GUO Xiang can coherently claim that things are autogenerated while also holding that, through autogenerated reactions, their current status is partly a result of causal interaction with other things. (On this complex issue, see also the chapter by Yuet-Keung Lo in this volume.)

transformation. One is the relation of “dependence” (*dai* 待), through which the existence or activity of things is determined by something outside of them. Guo rejects such a dependence relation when he rebuts the idea that there is any “master” or first cause outside of things that makes them what they are. Autogeneration and independent transformation are clearly inconsistent with such a dependence relation. The other—introduced above—is “taking action” (*wei*), through which things are interfered with or manipulated in a way that diverges from their inherent, autogenerated character. In contexts other than human agency, Guo denies that the relations of dependence or taking action exist; natural functioning is non-dependent and nature takes no action (Guo 1961: 111, 383). In contexts pertaining to agency, as we will see, he holds the normative stance that we should avoid dependence on anything outside of ourselves while refraining from taking action on things, including ourselves.

3. Non-Action and Inherent Character

The activity of things in accordance with *dao* and independent transformation Guo calls *wuwei* 無為 (non-action), a term referring to the absence of *wei* 為. *Wei* is action undertaken from motives we explicitly adopt without regard for the inherent character or so-in-themselves patterns of things. It is thus contrived or forced (*qiang* 強) rather than responsive (*ying* 應) to the inherent tendencies or independent transformation of things. Since *wei* is action that one self-consciously takes or initiates rather than finds, allows, or is guided into, I will refer to it as “taking action.” The absence of *wei* I will call “non-action.”

In everyday Chinese usage, *wei* refers generally to conduct, action, or behavior, and so *wuwei* might seem to connote the absence of any activity, or doing nothing at all. Guo is explicit, however, that in his view *wuwei* is not literally doing nothing. “Non-action does not refer to folding one’s hands and remaining silent 無為者，非拱默之謂也” (Guo 1961: 369). Rather, it refers to activity that fulfills certain criteria associated with autogeneration, independent transformation, and related notions. Non-action is activity that follows from one’s inherent character (*xing*) and “natural mechanisms” (*tianji* 天機).

One who employs the realm indeed performs the action of employing it. Yet this action comes of itself, being movement that follows from inherent character (*xing*), and so we call it “non-action.” ... If [things] each apply their inherent character, their natural mechanisms profoundly issuing forth, then both ancient and modern, high rank and low, take no action.

夫用天下者，亦有用之為耳。然自得此為，率性而動，故謂之無為也。今之為天下用者，亦自得耳。但居下者親事，故雖舜禹為臣，猶稱有為。.....然各用其性而天機玄發，則古今上下無為。(Guo 1961: 466)

Examples of non-action include indispensable activities such as feeding and clothing ourselves.

By our inherent character (*xing*), we cannot do away with food and clothing; in our work, we cannot dispense with ploughing and weaving....Maintaining this *dao* is the utmost in non-action.

故性之不可去者，衣食也；事之不可廢者，耕織也.....守斯道者，無為之至也。（Guo 1961: 334）

Non-action accords with one's actual abilities (*neng* 能) and endowed allotment (*fen*) and hence brings about fulfillment or completion of one's inherent character (*xing*) and life circumstances (*ming* 命). These terms collectively refer to the specific dispositions, capacities, and limitations we happen to possess at any one time.¹² Non-action lies in letting them operate so-of-themselves, without self-conscious direction.

The feet being able to walk, let them; the hands being able to grip, allow them. Listen to what the ears hear; look at what the eyes see. Let knowing stop at what it doesn't know and ability stop at what it's unable to do. Apply what applies itself; do what does itself. Follow what's within one's inherent character (*xing*) without going beyond one's allotment in the slightest—this is the utter ease of non-action. No one has ever practiced non-action without thereby making their inherent character and life circumstances whole.

足能行而放之，手能執而任之，聽耳之所聞，視目之所見。知止其所不知，能止其所不能。用其自用，為其自為。恣其性內而無纖芥於分外，此無為之至易也。無為而性命不全者，未之有也。（Guo 1961: 184）

Although non-action is “easy” in the sense that it suits our abilities, it may involve invention, training, and effort. For example, driving or riding horses may count as non-action if done with due heed for the horses' abilities.

Now a good driver of horses will fulfill their abilities. Fulfilling their abilities lies in allowing them to be themselves ... If one accords with the strength of a nag or a racehorse and suits their endowment as slow or quick, then though their footprints may reach the most remote lands, the inherent character of all the horses will be complete. Yet the confused hear about following horses' inherent character and assert this means setting them free and not riding them; they hear about non-action and claim that walking is not as good as lying down.

夫善御者，將以盡其能也。盡能在於自任.....若乃任駑驥之力，適遲疾之分，雖則足跡接乎八荒之表，而眾馬之性全矣。而惑者聞任馬之性，乃謂放而不乘；聞無為之風，遂云行不如臥。（Guo 1961: 333）

Non-action accords with the dynamic patterns (*li* 理) immanent in things, by which autogenerated activity proceeds. These patterns are not an abstract norm or ideal external to things that determines action—such a role would contradict the doctrine of independent transformation—but simply a general label for how things in fact work. For Guo—as for most Chinese thinkers—the patterns are not purely descriptive but infused with normative significance, which provides grounds for his ethical stance.

¹² WANG Deyou makes this point well, calling *xing*, for example “the various specifications that things possess.” See Wang 1987: 32. Brook Ziporyn accordingly interprets *xing* as “determinacy,” with the understanding that what is determinate for any one thing will change from moment to moment. See Ziporyn 2003: 89. TAI Lianchang points out that for Guo *xing* is in effect a thing's natural endowment and thus what is self-so for it, requiring no action. See Tai 1995: 52.

Human life is autogenerated by the patterns [of things]. Simply take no action but allow [things] to autogenerate; this is valuing one's person and recognizing one's task.

人之生也，理自生矣，直莫之為而任其自生，斯重其身而知務者也。
(Guo 1961: 202)

The crux of the distinction between non-action and taking action is thus that non-action responds and conforms to the patterns that shape our circumstances, including the inherent character of things, their endowed allotment, and their independent transformation. To take action is to disregard or oppose these.

4. The Ethical Ideal: Freedom from Dependence

In the context of Wei-Jin discourse, Guo Xiang's discussion of *dao* is significant for its bearing on ontological issues, but our interest here is mainly in its normative import. Guo's account of *dao* as the autogeneration or independent transformation of all things can be directly extended into an account of the good life, namely the normatively appropriate *dao* for human agents. As he sees it, *dao* lies simply in conforming to the autogeneration of things, including ourselves, according to our inherent character and the patterns of things. To follow *dao*, then, is to practice non-action, following along with what is self-so both for ourselves and for the various things around us. The self-so constitutes the "norms of the natural world":

The myriad things are the body of the natural world, and the myriad things surely take what is self-so as their norm. The self-so is what is so-of-itself without taking action. So the giant Peng-bird's ability to fly high, the quail's ability to fly low, the Chun tree's ability to be long-lived, and the morning mushroom's ability to be short-lived—these are all what they are able to do so-of-themselves, not by taking action....To "mount the norms of the natural world" is to follow along with the inherent character of the myriad things....

天地以萬物為體，而萬物必以自然為正。自然者，不為而自然者也。故大鵬之能高，斥鷃之能下，椿木之能長，朝菌之能短，凡此皆自然之所能，非為之所能也。.....故乘天地之正者，即是順萬物之性也。(Guo 1961: 20)

To follow our inherent character, allowing our autogeneration to proceed of itself, is to attain the good life. From the first book of the *Zhuangzi*, Guo Xiang borrows the concept of *xiaoyao*—freely wandering about at ease, without any fixed destination or direction—to express his ethical vision of a world in which all creatures live in a self-fulfilling manner well-suited to their particular character and abilities, without artifice or interference.

The self-so is not taking action. This is the main point of easy, aimless freedom.

自然耳，不為也。此逍遙之大意。(Guo 1961: 10)

Although small and large are different, if set loose in the field of self-fulfillment, things follow their inherent character, pursue affairs that

match their abilities, and each align with their endowed allotment—the easy, aimless freedom is one and the same.

夫小大雖殊，而放於自得之場，則物任其性，事稱其能，各當其分，逍遙一也。（Guo 1961: 1）

Zhuangzi's main point lies in free and easy wandering about, achieving self-fulfillment through non-action. So [the text] takes the small and large to extremes to clarify [the idea of] fitting [various creatures'] inherent character and endowed allotment.

夫莊子之大意，在乎逍遙遊放，無為而自得，故極小大之致，以明性分之適。（Guo 1961: 3）

Just as each creature is equally part of *dao*, undergoing its own independent transformation, each can attain easy, aimless freedom in its own way by allowing its inherent character to proceed with self-so non-action. Self-fulfillment in free, easy wandering for Guo Xiang simply is doing what comes so-of-itself to each of us, given our inherent character, abilities, and so forth. Different agents may thus realize the free-and-easy life through a plurality of diverse activities without any necessarily being superior or inferior to each other. The giant Peng bird may soar miles above the clouds while the quail merely flits from tree to tree, but if both are genuinely doing what comes so-of-itself to them, both can achieve what Guo regards as the good life of easy, aimless freedom.

As Guo Xiang understands such freedom and fulfillment, attaining it requires that one's autogenerated activity be “non-dependent” (*wudai* 無待) on anything outside itself. We saw in section 2 that this point follows conceptually from his understanding of *dao* as independent transformation. The details of Guo's understanding of non-dependence are informative, as they lead into his account of non-mindedness. Any particular activity we engage in will indeed depend on certain contingent conditions; no matter how light the sage Liezi 列子 makes himself, for example, he can ride the wind only when it blows (Guo 1961: 20). Since circumstances are constantly changing, the concrete conditions our activity happens to depend on may cease to obtain. To attain non-dependence, then, our reliance on any particular conditions must be strictly provisional, leaving us continually ready to adapt to new conditions through our own independent transformation. If we are bound to any one direction, we cannot achieve non-dependence (Guo 1961: 11). But to achieve this adaptiveness—to “follow along with the inherent character of the myriad things 順萬物之性” and “wander along the path of change and transformation 遊變化之途” says Guo, we must achieve a “profound assimilation” of self and other, such that we “join together in obscurity (*ming* 冥) with things” (Guo 1961: 20). By this curious phrase, he seems to refer to a psychological state in which the various differences and distinctions between things, including that between oneself and others, fade into an indeterminate darkness (Guo 1961: 11). In this vague, unformed state, we have no fixed identity or commitments, and accordingly nothing burdens or entangles us, leaving us free to wander about through autogeneration without depending on anything in particular.

5. Obscurity and Non-Mindedness

Ming 冥 is among the most distinctive concepts in GUO Xiang's thought. The word connotes what is dark and obscure and hence indistinct and indeterminate. We first encountered it in section 2 as a label for the brute autogeneration of things, the bedrock against which causal explanations come to an end. Guo uses *ming* to refer to the unspecifiable, ongoing actuality (*shi* 實) of things, which he considers unknowable insofar as it is unfixed, indeterminate, and constantly transforming. This obscure aspect of reality he contrasts with the explicit, determinate, lasting tracks (*ji* 跡, also "traces") that things leave and the names (*ming* 名) we use to identify and refer to them (Guo 1961: 34).¹³ Tracks and names, not the obscure reality that leaves the tracks or that the names refer to, are the objects of what I will call "explicit" thought and knowledge. *Ming* is what is not explicit; the explicit is the "manifest," which Guo associates with what is artificial or contrived (*wei* 偽) (Guo 1961: 519).

Another prominent use of *ming*, introduced at the end of the preceding section, is as a verb referring to a psychological outlook on which differences (*yi* 異) and boundaries (*ji* 際) dim and fade, the dichotomy between self and other is "left behind" or "forgotten," and the agent unites with things in an obscure, indeterminate vagueness (Guo 1961: 11).¹⁴ GUO Xiang sees *ming* 冥 in this sense as a precondition for non-dependence: only those who "join with things in obscurity" and follow along with the fluctuations of things can achieve free-flowing non-dependence (Guo 1961: 20).

Both senses of *ming* are intertwined with a third use. *Ming* also refers to what is attained without issuing from "knowing" (*zhi* 知) (Guo 1961: 757).¹⁵ Since the obscure actuality of things and their autogeneration are *ming* and thus beyond knowing, so too is anything attained through them without mediation by knowing. As I will explain below, I suggest that what Guo is referring to here by "knowing" is a reflectively self-conscious state. The joint implication of the three uses of *ming* 冥, then, is that by setting aside reflectively self-conscious attitudes, an agent can engage with things in a mode of interaction—"joining in obscurity"—that leaves the identities, capacities, and ends of both sides vague and indeterminate. In this way, the agent remains open and responsive to the autogenerated activity of both oneself and other things, preserving the potential

¹³ GUO Xiang's point is not that tracks are mere appearances, not reality. The distinction between tracks and actuality does not correlate with that between appearance and reality. For example, the tracks of the sages are real and indeed record the sages' path at some time in the past. The problem is that static, fixed tracks and names do not embody the sages' dynamic, autogenerative activity (see, for instance, Guo 1961: 344). They thus cannot serve as guides to emulate in following *dao*.

¹⁴ To cite just a few of the many examples of such uses of *ming*, see Guo 1961: 99, 129, 185, 195, 269, and 754. WANG Deyou emphasizes this aspect of *ming*, marshaling persuasive textual support for interpreting it as a "harmonious joining" with things. See Wang 1987: 33-34. TAI Lianchang also calls attention to this aspect. See Tai 1995:65-66, while clarifying that it is but one part of Guo's complex conception of *ming*. See Tai 1995: 62-68. As Brook Ziporyn stresses, the connotation of being dark, obscure, and hence unknowable is also crucial. See Ziporyn 2003: 66.

¹⁵ ZHU Hanmin helpfully explores this aspect of *ming* and its links to non-mindedness in Zhu 2011: 91-94.

for autotransformation in any number of directions. Activity issuing from such interaction Guo also considers *ming*.¹⁶

Any fixed attitude—any explicit thought that represents things in a way expressible by names (*ming* 名)—can pertain only to the tracks of things rather than to their ongoing activity. Hence we can become responsive to the actual, ongoing autogeneration of things only through *ming* 冥, by letting such attitudes fall away and engaging with things in indeterminate obscurity. Crucially, this point applies not only to our relations with other agents and things but to ourselves. We can act according to our own self-so independent transformation, and hence wander freely without dependence, only by attaining what Guo Xiang calls “a state of profound obscurity,” in which we fully absorb ourselves in the flow of autogeneration, “simply following along with life-circumstances” (Guo 1961: 241). Our own thoughts, attitudes, and any explicit sense of self interfere with immersion in this flow, so to fulfill Guo’s ethical ideal we must set them aside and attain what he calls “non-mindedness.” “Those who attain non-mindedness,” he says, “join in obscurity with things and are never opposed to anything 無心者與物冥而未嘗有對於天下也,” as they are ready to follow along with (*shun* 順) both sides of any distinction (Guo 1961: 68). To be non-minded is to have nothing one does not conform to (Guo 1961: 96). Non-mindedness is a precondition for *ming*, and thus free-and-easy wandering, because it enables one “to conform to the full allotment of things without adding anything in the slightest 任其至分而無毫銖之加” (Guo 1961: 115).¹⁷ Through *ming*, one can “profoundly respond through non-mindedness, following along purely by feel, drifting like an unmoored boat, going east or west without it being from the self” (Guo 1961: 24).

As these remarks suggest, non-mindedness—and the associated state of “non-knowing” (*wuzhi* 無知)—is crucial for *ming* and wandering because of how it facilitates responsiveness to one’s circumstances. It enables the agent to follow along with autotransformation, finding fitting responses to changing circumstances without forcing things.

Those who respond with non-mindedness go along with other things without forced responses.

夫無心而應者，任彼耳，不強應也。（Guo 1961: 149）

¹⁶ Since I interpret *ming* here as a mode of engagement with things that ultimately grounds a distinctive conception of agency (see section 6), I have reservations about Ziporyn’s construal of *ming* as “vanishing (into) things.” See Ziporyn 2003: 66-67. To be sure, the agent who attains *ming* with things forgets any reflectively self-conscious sense of self. Still, the agent remains a discrete entity undergoing independent transformation, whose activity arises self-so from inherent character (*xing*). As I will explain in section 6, for Guo agency is inherently relational, issuing from interaction between the agent’s inherent character and things. But this relation seems better characterized as a matter of engaging, joining, or merging than of vanishing. In a later essay, Ziporyn revises this label to “vanishing merging,” referring to a “pre-reflexive coming-together” or “comfortably uncognized encounter,” two descriptions that largely converge with my own. See Ziporyn 2015: 412.

¹⁷ TAI Lianchang emphasizes this aspect of *ming*, depicting it as a practice (*gongfu* 工夫) of attaining “non-minded unmediated responsiveness,” through which we forget ourselves and follow the self-so patterns of our inherent character, thus merging with *dao* and allowing independent transformation to proceed. See Tai 1995: 59, 67.

Only those who are non-minded and do not use themselves can follow along with what fits changing circumstances and not be burdened by entanglements.

唯無心而不自用者，為能隨變所適而不荷其累也。（Guo 1961: 131）

Because [the perfected person] has no knowing but only goes along with the auto-activity of the world, he rides along with the myriad things without limit.

夫唯無其知而任天下之自為，故馳萬物而不窮也。（Guo 1961: 97）

Since one is non-minded toward things, one does not deprive them of their fittingness.

無心於物，故不奪物宜。（Guo 1961: 232）

By contrast, “having mind” (*youxin* 有心) is associated with taking action and with encumbering the self-so (Guo 1961: 407, 813). It implies obstinately proceeding in one’s own way rather than responding to circumstances in a manner that “comes of itself” (Guo 1961: 137). Employing the mind to direct action runs counter to *dao*:

The genuine man knows that to apply mind is contrary to *dao* and to help nature along is to injure life-generation, so he does not do so.

真人知用心則背道，助天則傷生，故不為也。（Guo 1961: 230）

In rejecting knowing and endorsing non-mindedness, what exactly is GUO Xiang advocating? The links between non-mindedness or non-knowing and responsiveness or fittingness suggest that, like “non-action,” these are terms of art, with a specialized import pertaining to how we interact with things. As we saw, Guo holds that “non-action” does not refer literally to doing nothing but to the absence of imposed or forced action that runs contrary to *dao*. Similarly, I suggest, “non-mindedness” and “non-knowing” do not refer literally to lacking all psychological attributes or lacking all awareness or cognition. Guo explicitly indicates as much by drawing parallels between acting and knowing:

“Nature” refers to what is self-so. Those who undertake to take action are unable to act, while [natural] acting simply acts-of-itself. Those who undertake to know are unable to know, while [natural] knowing simply knows-of-itself. Knowing-of-itself is non-knowing; non-knowing is when knowing issues from not knowing. Acting-of-itself is non-acting; non-acting is when acting issues from not taking action.

天者，自然之謂也。夫為為者不能為，而為自為耳；為知者不能知，而知自知耳。自知耳，不知也，不知也則知出於不知矣；自為耳，不為也，不為也則為出於不為矣。（Guo 1961: 224）

As this passage makes clear, GUO Xiang does not reject all knowing. Just as his conception of non-action affirms the value of action that is a so-of-itself response to the situation, rather than something we impose on it, his conception of non-knowing affirms the legitimacy of knowing that occurs so-of-itself rather than as the outcome of undertaking to know. Elsewhere Guo draws an analogy between such knowing and vision. Just as seeing things does not require us to

take any action—we simply open our eyes—the mode of knowing he endorses comes of itself without our taking any action (Guo 1961: 152).

Since non-knowing is not literally the absence of knowing, non-mindedness cannot literally be the absence of any psychological attitudes. Nor is it likely that non-mindedness entails relinquishing the basis for self-directed agency, in some appropriately qualified sense of “self.” Despite Guo’s rhetoric about following along with things and drifting like an unmoored boat, our own independent transformation and autogeneration are as much as part of *dao* as anything else is. Hence his conception of *dao* can be expected to leave room for action that arises so-of-itself from the independent transformation of our inherent character. A likely hypothesis is that, because it facilitates free-and-easy wandering and contrasts with taking action, non-mindedness refers to the psychological dimension of non-action: it is the absence of psychological attitudes that would lead one to take action (*wei*), rather than acting from inherent character (*xing*) in line with one’s abilities (*neng*) and endowed allotment (*fen*).¹⁸

These conjectures are supported by GUO Xiang’s descriptions of exemplary action. Commenting on a famous *Zhuangzi* passage about how efficacious action requires “fasting the mind,” or emptying it of explicit, predetermined plans, Guo associates “having mind” with taking action (*wei*) and contrasts this with “applying emptiness in dealing with things” by “leaving the ears and eyes behind and eliminating the mind’s intention, instead conforming to what comes-of-itself to one’s life-breath and inherent character 遺耳目，去心意，而符氣性之自得” (Guo 1961: 147). The implication is that once explicit, reflectively self-conscious attitudes of the mind are set aside, another, implicit source of agency emerges: one’s life-breath and inherent character. Non-mindedness thus lies not in relinquishing agency or embracing passivity, but in acting from implicit capacities of our inherent character rather than explicit attitudes of the mind. Guo repeatedly emphasizes that as living creatures we should each act by what fits our inherent character and endowed allotment—to do so is to “nurture life-generation” (*yang sheng* 養生) and to fulfil the appropriate patterns (see, for instance, Guo 1961: 631, 666). In his view, acting from our inherent character contrasts sharply with acting from “knowing” (*zhi*). What brings out the natural in us, he says, is “the movement of inherent character,” while what brings out the human, or artificial, and associated troubles, is the use of knowing (Guo 1961: 638-639). Non-minded activity simply springs from us of itself, without our self-consciously undertaking to act and without knowing exactly how we do so.

Having a mind to undertake virtuosity is not genuine virtuosity. Those with genuine virtuosity suddenly get-it-of-themselves without knowing how they get it.

有心於為德，非真德也。夫真德者，忽然自得而不知所以得也。（Guo 1961: 1057）

¹⁸ This hypothesis dovetails with TAI Lianchang’s suggestion that for GUO Xiang non-mindedness lies in setting aside preferences, biases, and explicit judgments of right or wrong and good or bad. See Tai 1995: 68.

Adept agents “respond without initiating,” “forgetting themselves” and finding what “works-of-itself.” They do not first know a certain response is good and only then respond. Rather, the response comes of itself “without their knowing how they respond.” Precisely this sort of response is *dao* (Guo 1961: 72).

Insofar as such non-knowing, so-of-itself activity comes of itself, it is not ultimately within explicit, reflective control. What is autogenerated or arises of itself is not something a self-conscious “I” produces (Guo 1961: 50). What we can or cannot do issues from our “natural mechanisms” and the patterns of things as we encounter them, not from an “I” explicitly taking action:

As to the life (*sheng*, also birth or generation) of things, it’s not that they know to live and thereby live. So as to how life proceeds, how could it be that [we] know to proceed and thereby proceed? So the feet don’t know how they walk, the eyes don’t know how they see, and the mind doesn’t know how it knows—compliantly [these things] come of themselves. How quick or slow we are, how discerning our intelligence, whether we are capable or not—all of these are not “I.”

物之生也，非知生而生也。則生之行也，豈知行而行哉！故足不知所以行，目不知所以見，心不知所以知，俛然而自得矣。遲速之節，聰明之鑒，或能或否，皆非我也。（Guo 1961: 593; cf. 219.）

Guo Xiang’s claim that we do not know how we walk, see, or know and that our abilities are not under explicit self-direction—they are not something “I” do—reflects a pivotal feature of his conception of non-mindedness. Awareness of how we do what we do and use of the first-person pronoun to refer to our own abilities and actions are paradigmatic illustrations of reflective self-consciousness—that is, explicit, self-conscious awareness of one’s own self-conscious states or actions.¹⁹ Guo’s doctrine of non-mindedness, I suggest, is concerned largely with advocating that we cease to rely on reflectively self-conscious attitudes or states to guide action. Consider his example of “the feet not knowing how they walk.” In normal circumstances, we walk simply by engaging what Guo would call our “natural mechanisms,” without attending to what we are doing or at each step being aware that “I” am taking a step. To walk, we must have an implicit, subject-reflexive awareness of the movement of our body, our location relative to objects in our environment, the direction in which we are moving, and so forth.²⁰ This implicit, first-order awareness of being engaged in walking can itself be the object of explicit, second-order awareness, but it need not be. While walking, for example, we can attend to and hence be explicitly conscious of the feeling of moving our legs and feet. We can employ the explicitly self-referential concept of “I” to think about and direct each step we take. But normally we do neither of these things. As the example of walking illustrates, much or even most of our activity in daily life is performed without reflective self-consciousness.

¹⁹ For a discussion, see Gallagher and Zahavi 2005: sect. 3. In this context, “reflective” refers to the property of certain higher-order, self-conscious states of taking our own lower-order self-conscious states as their objects.

²⁰ This implicit awareness is commonly referred to as pre-reflective self-consciousness. See Gallagher and Zahavi 2005: sect. 1, and Smith 2017: sect. 3.2.

When GUO Xiang speaks of knowing how our mind knows or knowing how our feet walk, clearly he is alluding to a second-order, reflective awareness of our own first-order thought or activity. What may be less obvious is that his views on non-action and letting things occur so-of-themselves also imply a normative stance about the role of reflective self-consciousness in action. To take action (*wei*) or “have a mind” (*youxin*) to do something entails a second-order, reflectively self-conscious attitude of adopting some course of action and undertaking to pursue it.²¹ By contrast, actions that arise “of themselves” do not require that we adopt second-order attitudes toward those courses of action themselves. We can simply act. Such immediate actions are still directed toward some implicit end, but this end need not be the object of reflective self-consciousness.

We can illustrate these points by considering two contrasting examples. Suppose that, engrossed in writing this chapter, I become thirsty and without pausing to think about it take a sip from the glass of water on my desk. Although GUO Xiang does not use the terminology of intentions, we can say that I have acted on the implicit, self-so intention to drink water. I need not be reflectively self-conscious of this intention. Now suppose that, noticing I am thirsty, I pause to explicitly consider what to drink, decide to have milk instead of water, and accordingly form the explicit intention to walk to the kitchen to pour a glass of milk. Perhaps I even explicitly think to myself, “I’ll have a glass of milk.” Both examples are instances of intentional action, but only in the second case do I have reflective self-consciousness of my intention, since to form an explicit intention in thought, we must be conscious of that intention itself.

As an interpretive hypothesis, then, I propose that for GUO Xiang non-mindedness entails the absence of explicit, reflectively self-conscious thought, specifically thought concerned with directing action. Conversely, “having mind” refers broadly to holding any explicit, determinate psychological attitude by which we self-consciously direct or purport to direct action. Such attitudes might include explicit intentions, volitions, desires, goals, plans, judgments, or evaluations. “Having mind” is similar to the colloquial English notions of having made up one’s mind or having a mind to do something. To “have mind” is to act or think on the basis of fixed attitudes adopted and expressed by means of tracks, such as names, rather than to let thought and action issue dynamically from our inherent, autogenerating character and capacities as they “join in obscurity” with our practical circumstances. Action from “having mind” is inclined to run contrary to *dao* because fixed, predetermined attitudes can easily fail to fit changing, concrete situations.

6. GUO Xiang’s Normative Conception of Agency

GUO Xiang thus presents a normative conception of genuine or nature-guided agency that issues from and aligns with *dao*. Normatively appropriate agency operates through non-action, which is autogenerated from our inherent

²¹ Taking action or “having a mind” to do something may, but need not, also involve reflectively self-conscious monitoring and direction of one’s activity. Minimally, however, it entails the second-order attitude of adopting some first-order end or course of action.

character as it responds to and fits with (*shi* 適) our circumstances. It issues from implicit, indeterminate obscurity and so is non-minded, non-knowing, and associated with a blurring of the self-other distinction and forgetting of the self. This sort of activity arises from independent transformation and so conforms to *dao*. Given the inferential relations between different concepts in Guo's theoretical framework, this normative stance follows directly from his metaphysical view of *dao* as immanent in the independent transformation of things.

Guo contrasts such autogenerated non-action with a deprecated mode of agency that involves taking action, "having mind," and knowing. In this mode of agency, reflectively self-conscious thought and attitudes determine action, often by reference to explicit tracks, such as conventional ethical norms. Such thought and attitudes impose our ends on circumstances and so tend to oppose or force things rather than flow along with them. In Guo's view, this mode of agency runs contrary to *dao*. Because of how reflectively self-conscious attitudes can turn back on and interfere with the workings of our inherent character and natural mechanisms, reflective self-consciousness by its very nature tends to obstruct the process of independent transformation.

GUO Xiang's descriptions of this disvalued mode of action evoke a familiar pretheoretical conception on which agency lies primarily in the reflectively self-conscious process of reaching decisions about what to do, typically represented by an inner monologue in which we employ the first-person pronoun. On this conception, agency lies in acting as an inward "I" explicitly directs in light of its desires, values, commitments, and so forth. Guo associates such explicit, reflectively self-conscious decision-making with taking action, rather than with activity that comes of itself through independent transformation. Hence he sees it as interfering with *dao* and free-and-easy wandering. To follow *dao* we need to set explicit decision-making aside and act on non-minded, autogenerated responses arising from interaction with our circumstances.

If we conceive of agency in terms of explicit decision-making, GUO Xiang's rhetoric of non-mindedness and non-action may seem tantamount to a rejection of agency itself. In fact, however, I suggest he is not rejecting agency but presenting a distinctive conception of normatively appropriate agency as contextually responsive activity that issues from our autogenerated inherent character. This conception may be unfamiliar, but I will argue that it is plausible and insightful, illuminating the nature of agency and the sources of value or normative grounds for action.

It can be difficult to pin down exactly how GUO Xiang's views relate to more familiar conceptions of action and agency, because the concepts and distinctions he employs—taking action versus non-action, having mind versus being non-minded, the "dark obscurity" of the actuality of things versus their explicit tracks, our mind versus our inherent character—correspond to no notions commonly employed in contemporary philosophy of mind and action. His descriptions of "taking action" or "having mind," for example, do not map easily onto concepts such as volition, will, effort, cognition, deliberation, or intention,

and hence it would be inaccurate to describe his stance specifically as a rejection of any of these.²² The crux of his view is not to repudiate thought, agency, or selfhood, but to identify their normatively appropriate expression with the flow of autogenerated independent transformation, which he takes to lie in the implicit, immediate responses of our inherent character rather than the explicit, reflectively self-conscious attitudes of the mind. In effect, he advocates a shift in our understanding of appropriate agency from “having a mind” to take various actions, in light of an explicit conception of an “I” that acts, to an indeterminate, non-minded responsiveness that is continually formed and reformed by the interplay between our inherent character and our circumstances. The nexus of genuine agency is not mind but inherent character, a view that, while clearly drawing on ideas present in the *Zhuangzi* (e.g., Guo 1961: 432, 552), Guo develops in a distinctive, original way, reshaping the concept of inherent character in the process.

For Guo, then, the locus of agency lies in the autogenerated responses of our inherent character to our circumstances. The normatively appropriate exercise of agency has two dimensions: our inherent character, including our abilities and endowed allotment—our talents, limitations, physical and mental features, and so forth—and the responsiveness to and “good fit” of our activity with our situation. Guo advocates setting aside explicit, second-order action-guiding attitudes on the grounds that they are insufficiently responsive to our character and situation. However, on his picture, we still implicitly determine our own actions through the self-so, situational responses of our inherent character.

To understand his stance, it helps to think through what is involved in acting according to *dao*—that is, proceeding along a suitable path of activity for the kind of agents we are, given our physical, psychological, social, and historical circumstances. For Guo, agency just is *dao*-performance, which can be responsive and fitting or oblivious and inept. To follow *dao* well is to flow along with the process of independent transformation, in which each of the myriad things—including ourselves—undergoes continuous development and transformation. Since both agents themselves and their social and physical environment are unfixed and changing, *dao* is indeterminate and open-ended, a matter of continually applying our own evolving dispositions and abilities to find a fitting path through circumstances that are themselves evolving. To carry out such a *dao* effectively, GUO Xiang maintains, we must act from immediate, non-minded responses of our inherent character.

Consider the *dao* of a specific, concrete activity such as sailing a small boat. To sail well, one must constantly respond to fluctuations in the direction and strength of the wind, waves, and current while avoiding obstacles such as rocks, islands, and other boat traffic. The sailor continuously adjusts the mainsheet

²² For this reason, I resist Brook Ziporyn’s characterization of Guo as presenting a “polemic against cognition in general” (Ziporyn 2003: 19) or as repudiating “consciousness, valuation, and volition” (Ziporyn 2003: 149). In my view, Ziporyn is on firmer ground when he speaks of Guo’s rejecting “reflective consciousness” and “reflective awareness” while allowing that there could be “deliberate volition” that is nonetheless spontaneous. See Ziporyn 2003: 38-40. Action that springs immediately and spontaneously from one’s inherent character can be purposive, conscious, and deliberate or intentional. What it cannot be, according to GUO Xiang, is grounded in or directed by explicit, reflectively self-aware attitudes.

and tiller on the basis of an implicit feel for how smoothly and efficiently the boat is moving. Rules of thumb can be formulated about how to respond to various conditions, but explicit guidelines are at best only rough pointers—tracks, Guo would say—toward the actual activity. The activity itself is obscure, in Guo’s terms, for exactly how expert sailors respond in different circumstances cannot be specified explicitly. To learn to sail well is to master an art of constant adaptation, guided by feel. Such adaptation is non-minded, in that expert sailors empty themselves of any mind—any desire, plan, intention, or other action-directing attitude—to do anything in particular other than sail to the mark efficiently, letting the conditions they encounter determine the course they take. The finest sailors are those with the best feel for and keenest responses to the conditions, for whom the natural circumstances they encounter bear normative significance, presenting better or worse paths to follow. Of course, these paths and their normative valence emerge as such only against the background of the sailors’ underlying, implicit end of reaching the mark. But for GUO Xiang such implicit, contextualizing ends will always be present, arising from our inherent character, abilities, and endowed roles.

The interplay between sailors’ actions and their circumstances illustrates how for Guo the normatively appropriate exercise of agency is inherently relational. To be sure, as we saw in section 2, GUO Xiang holds that *dao* lies in the independent transformation of each thing. Nothing extrinsic to things, nor a controlling self within, drives or generates them; their activity proceeds spontaneously from their own inherent, autogenerated character and abilities. Nevertheless, on his view, the course of action that comes so-of-itself for each of us will be a product of how our autogenerated, inherent dispositions and abilities respond to our circumstances. Our immediate ends and the particular course of action we follow take shape through an “obscure joining” of our capacities with our environment, including other persons with whom we interact.²³ Each step in our own ongoing autogeneration remains indeterminate until we interact with the myriad things around us whose autotransformation also constitutes *dao*. The realization of our inherent character in self-so activity thus emerges from interaction with other agents and things. The interactive nature of agency is one reason Guo sees non-mindedness as crucial, for holding a predetermined course of action in mind interferes with open-ended responsiveness to circumstances.

The relational, interactive nature of GUO Xiang’s normative conception of agency explains why he is unworried that allowing our inherent character to guide action might drive us to act purely for our own selfish interests, ignoring others’ needs. As he understands it, appropriate action can never involve imposing ourselves on other persons or ignoring their interests, since it requires that we apply our character and abilities to find fitting responses to circumstances, which include our relations to others. Indeed, his notion of “joining in obscurity” represents a profound conception of consideration for others, insofar as it grounds agency in attitudes that blur the boundaries

²³ Brook Ziporyn aptly depicts *ming* as a label for how the adept agent interacts with things, in contrast to interacting with them on the basis of determinate, self-conscious “knowing.” See Ziporyn 2003: 65.

between self and other, seeking what is self-so both for ourselves and for those whom our actions affect, whose autogenerated activity is as much part of *dao* as our own is.

GUO Xiang's emphasis on non-minded responses grounded in our inherent character might raise the worry that his stance entails a life of blind instinct, like that of lower-order animals who simply follow their fixed, innate character. His doctrine of non-action and of following a course that fits our endowed allotment may seem to imply passive acceptance of our lot in life, merely playing our preassigned role while relinquishing the initiative to reform or improve our situation.²⁴ In fact, however, Guo's conception of our inherent character, abilities, and endowed allotment clearly allows for change and development.²⁵ It neither restricts us to instinctive behavior nor confines us to a predetermined course in life. Contrary to the typical assumption that people's inherent character is innate and fixed, he expressly states that it can change and can be shaped through learning, provided the person has the wherewithal to absorb what is taught (Guo 1961: 518-519). Indeed, precisely because our inherent character can change, he thinks, we need to find *dao* through what is implicit, indeterminate, and obscure, rather than by fixed, explicit tracks—such as traditional norms of benevolence and righteousness—since tracks that suited others in the past may not fit our character today (Guo 1961: 518-519). Nor is inherent character limited to what we do instinctively or automatically. Abilities grounded in it may require repeated practice before they become manifest, and acquired activities such as swimming or boat-handling can become part of it through practice, thus becoming activity that is “so of itself” (Guo 1961: 642). Things do not always achieve “self-so patterns” by themselves; fulfilling these patterns may require “smelting and refining” or accumulative practice (Guo 1961: 257, 280).

GUO Xiang thus valorizes non-minded action from one's inherent character while also allowing that inherent character can be shaped, developed, or reformed. In response, a critic might object that such development or reform requires psychological resources that Guo denies us. A key to full-fledged agency, the objection might run, is the ability to self-consciously step back and think about one's actions and ends, evaluating and revising them if needed. Unless the changes to our inherent character Guo envisions are purely a product of external influences—in which case his conception of agency would indeed be blind and passive, as well as “dependent” on factors outside the agent—the capacity to modify or reform our attitudes and conduct seems to require some form of explicit, critical self-examination. But GUO Xiang's stance implies that justified changes could occur only through implicit, immediate responses of our inherent character, not explicit thought. Indeed, he insists that we not act

²⁴ For the criticism that GUO Xiang advocates passively accepting existing conditions and one's fixed role in life, see Wang 2007: 160, 168-169. For a detailed rebuttal of this interpretation, see Chen 2014: 358-360, 362-364. See, too, Brook Ziporyn's discussion of charges of fatalism against Guo in Ziporyn 2003: 145; 2015: 413.

²⁵ On this point, see Ziporyn 2003: 59, 143; 2015: 410-411, and Chen 2014: 363. On the controversy over whether GUO Xiang posits a fixed nature of things, see Ziporyn 2015: 407. Despite the textual evidence to the contrary, TANG Yijie, for instance, states that for Guo *xing* cannot be changed. See Tang 2000: 230.

contrary to our inherent character or attempt to “enhance” it by emulating what is not part of it (Guo 1961: 496, 523). It seems, then, that any changes to our inherent character must come from within it.

In response to this critical worry, let me suggest that GUO Xiang can in fact offer a coherent, plausible explanation of justified, agent-directed character change, albeit one that rejects the premise that explicit, second-order self-examination is essential to our capacity for modifying our character and actions. Indeed, he could argue that even when we do explicitly evaluate our actions, ends, or character, any justified changes that follow are actually grounded in the implicit responses of our inherent character. For on his view, any grounds for action that are genuinely fitting expressions of our agency—that reflect our actual dispositions, abilities, and so forth and that are fitting responses to the patterns of our circumstances—must arise of themselves through autogeneration. Such grounds issue from indeterminate obscurity and so cannot be the objects of explicit thought. Hence to be genuinely responsive to our own autogenerated grounds for action—and thus to *dao*—we must act from the implicit responses of our inherent character. GUO Xiang could allow that such responses might sometimes be prompted by explicit, reflectively self-conscious evaluation. For example, he could acknowledge a role for explicit thought in clarifying problems, to which our inherent character then responds. But the responses themselves will be autogenerated, rather than the outcome of explicit thought and decision.

Although GUO Xiang’s position here may seem far-fetched, I suggest it is defensible and indeed almost commonsensical. His stance amounts to the claim that *dao* is immanent in implicit action-guiding attitudes—such as values, preferences, desires, judgments, and so forth—that “just come” to us when we absorb ourselves in our circumstances. And indeed it seems we often discover our most basic, reliable grounds for action through the immediate, self-so responses of our inherent character. For example, many of us have had the experience of explicitly pondering a decision only to realize we have already implicitly made it or of laying out the pros and cons of two alternatives only to find we have already pre-reflectively settled on one. Many of our moral judgments rest on brute, bedrock values that come so-of-themselves to us, such as the value of family members’ lives or of fairness or equality.

On GUO Xiang’s model, then, what might prompt change and reform to our inherent character and the *dao* we follow? His criteria for apt *dao*-following are that our activity flows freely (*tong* 通, *shun* 順) and fits the abilities and endowed allotment of things, allowing each to proceed in a way that is so-of-itself. Living well in this way is characterized by ease or calm (*an* 安) and freedom from dependence on any specific external conditions (*xiaoyao*). On Guo’s behalf, we can plausibly contend that these criteria or their absence can induce changes in our inherent character. For example, people for whom an acquired skill such as swimming or boat-handling has become second nature probably learned their skill through an unforced, free-flowing course of action. Perhaps they lived near water, were drawn to these activities, and found them a comfortable, satisfying fit for their dispositions and abilities. Through repeated practice, swimming or boating ultimately became part of their inherent character. Conversely, if some course of activity leads to obstacles, distress, or

conflict with our autogenerated responses, then our actions fail to flow freely, bring difficulty instead of ease, and fit our situation or our dispositions poorly. To resolve the problems, changes to our course or our character may be needed. The appropriate path of reform would in turn be discovered through autogenerated responses of our inherent character aimed at finding a more fitting course, perhaps by trial and error (Guo 1961: 281).

7. Conclusion

To return to the questions posed in the Introduction, on GUO Xiang's picture, following *dao* and attaining free-and-easy wandering indeed bring with them self-fulfillment, but the self in question is constituted by the ongoing independent transformation or autogeneration of our inherent character and its abilities as they interact with the environment. This process of autogeneration and self-fulfillment can proceed smoothly and fittingly, Guo contends, only when it is non-minded, or occurs without explicit, reflectively self-conscious direction. "Minded" activity, guided by explicit attitudes toward fixed tracks, interferes with it, as such attitudes are at best one step removed from the indeterminate, obscure actuality of autogeneration and *dao*. Any attempt to direct our course by explicitly "having a mind" to do something amounts to taking action and to depending on something external to us instead of flowing along with the autogenerated, non-dependent *dao*. Guo's doctrine of non-mindedness thus rests on his account of *dao* as immanent in the autogenerated, non-dependent activity of things.

Stripped of technical terminology, GUO Xiang's stance is that the good life—a life of intrinsic self-fulfillment and thus psychological freedom and ease—is to live according to how the dynamically developing dispositions, abilities, and resources we have at any one time interact with the concrete situations we encounter. Since there is no *dao*—and thus no ethical path—outside of each person's ongoing course of development, the only legitimate normative grounds for action are those that yield the best, most adaptive fit between our dispositions and our situation. A fascinating, profound feature of Guo's thought is how it grounds normativity in human self-fulfillment, albeit a distinctive conception of self-fulfillment achieved by adeptly and unselfishly adjusting our course to the shape of our circumstances.²⁶

This chapter has presented an interpretation of GUO Xiang's views on agency and how they fit together with his metaphysical view of *dao*. In seeking to clarify Guo's ideas, I have argued that several potentially puzzling features of his thought are in fact intelligible and at least *prima facie* plausible. Still, if Guo's position as a whole is to prove defensible, numerous aspects of his thought call for further examination. Ultimately, his normative views on agency stand or fall with his account of *dao* and thus of the sources of normativity. So above all a thorough defense is needed of his doctrine of *dao* as independent transformation. To bolster his normative stance, his conception of good fit,

²⁶ Brook Ziporyn expresses this point with Daoist flair: "real value ... resides precisely in non-awareness: the fitting comfortableness of the traceless self-forgetting self-so." Ziporyn 2015: 404.

expressed through terms such as *shi* 適, *yi* 宜, and *dang* 當, requires further elucidation and elaboration. The metaphysical and psychological implications of his complex, challenging notion of *ming* (obscurity) require clarification and defense, and it remains to be shown to what extent the psychological state of “joining in obscurity” with things is a practicable norm or only a vague theoretical ideal. A further question is whether GUO Xiang’s wholesale dismissal of “having mind” is justified. Even if we acknowledge the priority of non-minded activity, perhaps “minded” thought or action might nevertheless have a legitimate role in facilitating appropriate non-minded responses.

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