

A Path with No End:

Skill and *Dào* in *Mòzǐ* and *Zhuāngzǐ*

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For early Chinese philosophical texts, how does skill relate to *dào*, the ethically apt path and its performance? In the *Mòzǐ*, a key to following *dào* is to set forth explicit models or standards for guiding and checking performance. By applying the right standards, we develop the skill needed to follow the *dào* reliably, just as a carpenter uses a set square as a standard to develop the skill of producing square corners. Following *dào*—and thus pursuing the ethical life—is strongly analogous to the performance of skills.

The *Zhuāngzǐ* presents a sharply contrasting stance. Consider the famous story about a skillful butcher who carves up oxen as smoothly and elegantly as if dancing along with a symphony. Praised for his skill, the butcher responds that what he cares about is *dào*, which is ‘beyond skill’. The ensuing discussion implies that the process of acquiring, performing, and extending skills exemplifies *dào*, yet there is something more to *dào* than skill.

What is this something more? On a ‘Zhuangist’ view, a key difference between skill and *dào* is that *dào* has no fixed, predetermined ends. *Dào* is a general, open-ended process, one that is continually shifting and transforming. Unlike fixed skills, we never fully master *dào*, nor do we even know exactly where it will lead, as the nature of *dào* is such that we must regularly find creative ways of extending it as we proceed along it.

Here a problem arises. The *Zhuāngzǐ* makes it clear that there is a distinction between adept and poor performance of *dào*. But if *dào* has no fixed ends, by what criteria can we distinguish more from less fitting paths and more from less adroit ways of pursuing them? A plausible answer is that particular contexts themselves yield provisional grounds for such evaluations. These grounds are then revised or replaced in response to developing circumstances and continuing performance of *dào*. The resulting approach to understanding and living the good life, I will suggest, can informatively be labeled an ethics of *dào* and *dé* (virtue), referring to the path we follow and the capacities by which we follow it.