

A Path with No End:  
Skill and *Dào* in *Mòzǐ* and *Zhuāngzǐ*

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### 1. Introduction

How does skill relate to *dào* 道, the ethically apt path and its performance? Two early Chinese ‘masters’ anthologies that make prominent use of craft metaphors imply profoundly contrasting answers to this question.

For the *Mòzǐ* 墨子, a key to following *dào* is to set forth explicit models or standards for guiding and checking performance. By learning to consistently apply the right standards, we can develop the skill needed to follow the *dào* of the sage-kings reliably, just as a carpenter uses a set square to produce square corners or a wheelwright uses a wing compass to fashion round wheels. Following *dào*—and thus the ethical life—is strongly analogous to the performance of skills. Like an artisan’s craft, *dào* has a fixed end that can be explicitly articulated.

A sharply contrasting stance is implied by the renowned skill exemplar Páo Dīng the butcher in the *Zhuāngzǐ* 莊子. Praised for how his every movement in carving up cattle is perfectly attuned, yielding a display of skill matching that of an exquisite dance or musical performance, the butcher responds that what he actually cares about is *dào*, which is ‘advanced beyond skill’. Intriguingly, most of what Páo Dīng says in explaining this point pertains to how he developed his craft, performs his work, and overcomes new challenges. The implication is 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? A skill is the ability to competently perform a task with a specified end. In the *Zhuāngzǐ*, a key difference between skill and *dào*, I will suggest, is that *dào* is unlike skill in having no fixed, predetermined ends. *Dào* is a general, open-ended process, one that is continually shifting and transforming. We can never fully master *dào*, nor 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.

Nevertheless, discussions in the *Zhuāngzǐ* make clear that a distinction obtains between adept and poor performance of *dào*. Accordingly, there must be factors by which to distinguish more from less fitting paths or ends to pursue and more from less adroit ways of pursuing them. Here again, *dào* is closely intertwined with skill, as evaluations of *dào* performance resemble assessments of skill, couched in terms of how effective, successful, competent, or adroit one's activity is. If *dào* has no fixed ends, however, by what criteria can we assess whether some course of activity amounts to an effective or adroit performance of *dào*? A plausible Zhuangist answer, I propose, is that particular contexts themselves yield provisional grounds for such evaluations. These grounds can then be 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* 德 (virtue), referring to the path we follow and the capacities by which we follow it.

The upshot for the relation between skill and ethics is that in both Mohist and Zhuangist thought, a comparison with skills is helpful to understanding the theory and practise of ethics. For the Mohists, the ethical *dào* is strongly analogous to a skill. In the *Zhuāngzǐ*, skilled performances may exemplify *dào*, but the flourishing practise of *dào* goes beyond skill, because unlike skills, *dào* has no fixed, determinate ends or boundaries.

## 2. *Dào*, Models, and Skill in the *Mòzǐ*

The *Mòzǐ* is a collection of writings by anonymous hands presenting the thought of Mo Di 墨翟 (fl. ca. 430 BC) and his followers, who formed one of early China's most prominent social and philosophical movements. The Mohists presented China's first systematic ethical and political theories, which are grounded in their distinctive brand of communitarian consequentialism.

As the Mohists and other pre-Han texts use the word, '*dào*' functions much like the English 'way'. '*Dào*' can refer to an actual method or manner of doing something, as when the *Mòzǐ* speaks of the various *dào*s by which inept rulers decrease the population (20/15).<sup>1</sup> It can also refer to a normatively competent or appropriate method of doing something, as when the texts speak of the *dào* of making clothing (20/4) or boats and carts (20/8) and 'the *dào* by which to bring order to the people and unify the masses' (12/61). By extension, it can refer more generally to a normatively apt set of practises or way of life. The Mohists claim, for example that their ethical norm of inclusive care is 'the *dào* of the sage-kings' (16/83). In such contexts, *dào* overlaps what we think of as morality. For example, referring to obvious moral values, Mohist writers speak of 'the *dào* of benevolence and righteousness' (25/80).

<sup>1</sup> References to *Mòzǐ* cite chapter and line numbers in Hung (1966).

*Dào* is primarily practical, not verbal. Mohist writings regularly pair it with statements or verbal teachings (*yán* 言), distinguishing explicit expressions or formulations of *dào* from *dào* itself. Statements can function as guidelines to direct us in following *dào*, and the activity of promulgating explicit teachings may be part of *dào*. But *dào* itself is the normatively apt conduct or practise (*xíng* 行), not merely the verbal teaching that directs us toward that practise (10/27, 25/25).

Nevertheless, the Mohists see verbal formulations and other explicit standards as crucial in clarifying and guiding the practise of *dào*.<sup>2</sup> They refer to such guidelines as ‘models’ or ‘standards’ (*fǎ* 法). The Mohist ethical norm of all-inclusive care for everyone is considered a ‘model’ of ‘the *dào* of the sage-kings’, for example (15/11, 16/83). The core Mohist ethical standard of promoting the benefit of all is another prominent model (32/1). One Mohist text urges that no affair of any kind can be undertaken successfully without the use of models (4/1).

In labeling guidelines such as inclusive care ‘models’, the Mohists expressly assimilate them to tools that artisans use to guide and evaluate the performance of crafts, since in Classical Chinese such tools are also called ‘models’ (*fǎ*). Prominent examples are the wheelwright’s wing compass and the carpenter’s set square, used to produce round wheels and square corners and to check whether a particular wheel or corner is up to standard. As one Mohist text explains, all artisans, whether expert or not, use models to ‘measure’ their work (4/4). Models do not ensure perfect performance, but they reliably help the unskilled to improve. ‘The skilled can match the models exactly. The unskilled, although they can’t match them, by relying on them in their work still surpass [what they can do by] themselves’ (4/3–4).

The craft analogies imply that practising *dào* is a matter of performing a skill.<sup>3</sup> As in carpentry or wheel-making, the practise of *dào* can be clarified, guided, checked, and improved by reference to explicit models that the performer seeks to emulate. The models are not identical to *dào*, nor does merely applying the right model ensure that one follows *dào* successfully. But models facilitate the normatively apt, skilled performance that is *dào*. The right model can articulate *dào* so clearly that using it to gauge what does or doesn’t conform to *dào* is ‘like differentiating black from white’ (27/72).

The process by which models are applied to guide action underscores the skill-like character of *dào* performance. Models function as exemplars to be emulated or

<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, the Mohists hold that *dào* can be explicitly articulated and that it can be taught, two assumptions that are rejected in the *Zhuāngzǐ*, as Lisa Raphals discusses in a recent anthology on skill in *Zhuāngzǐ* (2019: 136–37).

<sup>3</sup> A difference between *dào* and skill is that we can refrain from performing a skill without thereby losing it, whereas we cannot refrain from conforming to *dào* without thereby being unethical. Someone who rarely rides a bicycle does not thereby lose the skill of bike riding, but someone who rarely follows *dào* loses any

matched in carrying out a skilled task. In the paradigmatic cases, the carpenter uses the square to draw a line and then saws an edge that copies the line. The wheelwright uses the compass to mark the rim and then shaves the rim or adjusts the spokes until the rim matches the mark. In more abstract cases, the model might be a norm such as ‘benefiting people’. If a course of conduct conforms to the norm, we perform it; if not, we avoid it (32/1). Conceptually, the Mohists understand a model such as ‘benefit people’ or ‘inclusively care for each other, in interaction benefiting each other’ (15/10–11) as a practical standard to emulate in our course of conduct, rather than a theoretical general principle from which to draw inferences about what to do.

A crucial presupposition drives the Mohist conception of *dào* as a practical performance, analogous to a skill, that can be guided by reference to models. The craft analogies imply that, like making wheels or houses, *dào* has fixed, specifiable ends. The compass and square function as clear, useful models only given the ends of producing round wheels and right-angled corners. Mohist norms such as all-inclusive care function as models of *dào* only given an understanding of *dào* as directed at the end of promoting the benefit of all, which the Mohists take to be the basic good that explains the moral values of benevolence and righteousness.

By contrast, *Zhuāngzǐ* writings typically reject benevolence and righteousness as values and question whether *dào* has any fixed or specific ends.<sup>4</sup> A *dào* with no specifiable end is a *dào* for which no models can be established—a *dào* that transcends any one skill.

### 3. An Expert Butcher on *Dào* versus Skill

The *Zhuāngzǐ* is an anthology of brief texts from roughly the late fourth to the mid-second century BC presenting a range of views that later archivists grouped together under the label of ‘Daoism’. The collection is named after a figure called Zhuāng Zhōu 莊周, about whom little is known, but it is unclear what portion of the material, if any, can plausibly be attributed to him. The texts offer a rich medley of criss-crossing ideas and viewpoints sharing various family resemblances; they are probably best read as a compendium of intersecting and overlapping conversations or social media posts than as a systematic attempt to present a unified, integral doctrinal stance. My discussion will treat selected passages as contributions to a discourse touching on *dào* and its relation to skill, exploring how various ideas in this discourse relate to each other and drawing out some of their implications. In some places, the discussion will reconstruct or elaborate

claim to ethical virtue. I suggest the Mohist explanation of this difference would be that *dào* is skill-like, but since it is a comprehensive way of life, we cannot refrain from engaging in it.

<sup>4</sup> On rejecting benevolence and righteousness, see, for example, *Zhuāngzǐ* 6/84. (References to *Zhuāngzǐ* cite chapter and line numbers in Hung [1956].) On a *dào* without fixed ends, see, for example, the passage quoted in section 6 below.

views in the texts; in others, I may be assembling positions that are only latent in the source material.

The most well-known discourse on skill in the *Zhuāngzǐ*—Páo Dīng the butcher's explanation of his craft—begins by distinguishing *dào* from skill and explaining that its chief concern is with *dào*, not skill. Yet the remarks that follow are almost entirely about the butcher's craft. What, then, does his discussion imply about the relation between skill and *dào*?

Carving up an ox for Lord Wén Huì, his master, the butcher steps, leans, and slices as gracefully as if performing an elegant ritual dance to the rhythm of a symphony. Amazed, Wén Huì asks how skill (*jì* 技) could reach such heights. The butcher responds that what he cares about is *dào*, which is 'more advanced than' or 'advanced beyond' skill (3/5). He sketches how he developed his craft and performs it now, how he overcomes challenges, and the satisfaction his work brings. Wén Huì exclaims that from the butcher's remarks he has learned how to 'nurture life', or provide what is crucial to living well (3/12). The text thus frames the discussion as concerned with *dào* and living well. The butcher's remarks are presented as doubly significant, applying to the specific skill of meat carving and also to the general concern of living well.

Here, then, is a first respect in which *dào* advances beyond skill: *dào* applies not merely to any one skill, such as the butcher's, but to living well in general. It generalises in a way that skills do not. It is not a particular skill, but skilled work such as the butcher's can exemplify it—even bloody, filthy work slaughtering oxen and carving meat. As Guō Xiàng says in his commentary, the butcher's concern is with the 'patterns of *dào*' (*dào lǐ* 道理), which he 'lodges' (*jì* 寄) in his skill (Guo 1961: 119). Reflecting this concern with *dào*, rather than skill, Páo Dīng talks less about *what* he does in his work than *how* he does it. His focus is on the process, not the concrete technique (how he holds the knife, for example). This focus reflects the general nature of *dào* as understood in this context: it primarily concerns *how* we do what we do—the approach and manner—and only secondarily *what* we do—the substance or content. As we will see, however, the *how* shapes the *what*: applying the approach to *dào* that the butcher illustrates leads us toward certain sorts of actions and away from others.

Páo Dīng's remarks can be divided roughly into three parts (3/5–11). First, he describes how he acquired his skill. As a beginner, he saw only whole oxen; as an intermediate, after three years of practise, he saw them as if already sliced up, directly perceiving the joints and seams where the knife would cut. Now, as an advanced expert, he says, 'I meet it with my spirit, not looking with my eyes.' He acts without a reflectively self-conscious process of observing the ox and deciding how to cut, instead moving directly on the promptings of 'spirit', a more fundamental, automatic mode of agency.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> My interpretation here follows the Cūi Zhuàn and Xiàng Xiu commentaries (Guo 1961: 120). For more on the role of 'spirit', see Fraser (2019).

Next, Páo Dīng describes how he works. He carves smoothly and gracefully because he ‘complies with natural patterns (*lǐ* 理)’—cutting along the major gaps, being guided by the main seams, and thus working in accordance with (*yīn* 因) what’s ‘inherently so’ in the structure of the ox. This way, he says, he never directly hits a ligament or tendon, let alone a bone. Through this approach, he boasts, he avoids even normal wear-and-tear on his knife, having gone a whole nineteen-year calendrical cycle without needing to sharpen it. There is space between the joints, and the knife edge has no thickness, he says, so ‘there’s always plenty of room for the blade to wander about.’

Páo Dīng then goes on to explain how, despite his high level of skill, he regularly encounters intricate, knotty situations in which the grain and gaps are difficult to find. He cautiously prepares, slows down, focuses his vision, moves the knife subtly, and the meat suddenly comes apart. Having resolved the difficulty, he steps back and looks around in relaxed satisfaction before wiping and sheathing the knife.

What aspects of the butcher’s remarks generalise, informing us about *dào* rather than only meat-carving? What stands out, I suggest, is that *dào* amounts to a process of acquiring and exercising competence in detecting and responding to ‘patterns’, finding one’s way through ‘gaps’, and regularly working through difficulties. The butcher’s experience implies that this process can be deeply satisfying.

Looking more closely at his descriptions, we can expand on this characterisation. Undertaking *dào* involves a lengthy process of learning and internalising a way of perceiving and interacting with things. Once we have acquired some *dào*, acting on it becomes spontaneous and automatic, something we regularly do without reflective self-consciousness. The adroit practise of *dào* lies in avoiding obstacles by working with the inherent grain or pattern (*lǐ*) of things, according with (*yīn*) the solid, unmovable facts about them, and so finding space through which to move. Moreover, if we can make ourselves ‘thinner’, figuratively speaking, reducing the extent to which we collide against things, we will more easily fit through the gaps and can avoid being worn down.

Crucially, *dào* is not simply a matter of applying practised expertise to familiar, routine cases. It also includes regularly extending existing skills by working our way through unfamiliar, difficult situations, without knowing in advance exactly how we will do so. *Dào* refers not only to a well-formed path and a manner of following it; it is also the spontaneous, creative process by which we find a way forward when the path is difficult or blocked.<sup>6</sup> The recurrent experience of being pulled from our comfort zone and forced to navigate knotty, unsure terrain is another respect in which we might say that *dào* advances beyond skill.<sup>7</sup> Presumably, this feature marks a sense in which *dào* cannot be taught or handed down to others, since each of us must find a way for

<sup>6</sup> Dan Robins (2011) emphasizes this point, which I will develop below.

<sup>7</sup> This is Robins’s suggestion (2011). Arguably, however, skills do include a capacity to adapt to new challenges, albeit within the circumscribed field of the skill.

ourselves. It also helps explain why the butcher nowhere mentions the models (*fǎ* 法) that are so prominent in the Mohist conception of *dào* as clearly articulated and signposted by explicit, determinate standards. Since *dào* as the butcher presents it regularly leads beyond familiar, routine cases, it draws on an uncodifiable, creative capacity for adaptation that cannot be captured by fixed, predetermined standards.<sup>8</sup>

Páo Dīng's comments thus depict *dào* as a process or an approach—how to learn and proceed adeptly in some field of activity while regularly overcoming challenges. His own skill exemplifies this process, but the process itself could apply to any activity. This generality reflects another respect in which *dào* is distinct from and advances beyond skill. A skill is not just a process: skills are partly defined by their ends. Páo Dīng is a skilled meat-carver not simply because of how he approaches his work but because he produces cleanly sliced cuts of meat. Skills such as meat-carving come with inherent ends by which to evaluate performance. Páo Dīng knows he has successfully handled the knotty sections when the meat suddenly comes apart—falling, he says, 'like a clump of earth to the ground'. The carpenter and wheelwright perform their skills well when their work matches the square or compass and they produce houses that stand firmly upright or wheels that roll smoothly. Indeed, the process of performing a skill is intelligible as such only in the context of the defining end to which the skill is directed.

By contrast, if my suggestion above is plausible, *dào* in this context is a general process without any fixed end. What factors, then, determine whether we are indeed pursuing *dào* aptly or poorly? Lord Wén Huì declares that the butcher's remarks show how to 'nurture life'. Perhaps a criterion of apt *dào*-following is whether a person stays alive and healthy—indeed, perhaps my suggestion is mistaken, and the end of *dào* is life. However, numerous *Zhuāngzǐ* passages indicate that the adept see life and death as two aspects of a single process, without privileging life over death (e.g., 5/30, 6/46). It seems that the Zhuangist practitioner seeks to stay healthy and alive when doing so is the obvious, fitting course but has no hesitation about accepting death when it too seems fitting. So death need not reflect a failure to follow *dào* well. The point of Wén Huì's remark is not that *dào* aims at preserving life; it is that the butcher's descriptions illustrate the process of how to live a flourishing life.

*Dào* is advanced beyond skill in applying not just to the pursuit of one or another end but to any end. Here an obvious question arises. Does the conception of *dào* as a

<sup>8</sup> In this regard, consider the contrast between the Mohist figure of the wheelwright guiding and checking his work against the compass and the wheelwright depicted in the *Zhuāngzǐ* (13/68–74), who claims that mastery in cutting wheels rests on an inexpressible, unteachable art of chipping the wood not too slowly or hastily. The two visions are not necessarily contradictory; cutting wheels could be a subtle art with results that nonetheless need to be checked against the compass. But the difference in emphasis is informative as to the two contrasting conceptions of skill and *dào*. For further discussion of these conceptions of skill, see Raphals (2019: 133–35).

process with no specific end cover any activity we might undertake, without constraint?<sup>9</sup> Some ends are deplorable. Can a vicious but meticulous and skillful serial killer justifiably claim to follow *dào* well? Perhaps guidelines like the Mohists' fixed, determinate 'models' are needed as constraints to exclude the serial killer from claiming mastery of *dào*.

The Páo Dīng story implies that there are indeed constraints. Páo Dīng distinguishes a mediocre butcher, who changes his knife monthly, from a good butcher, who changes it annually, from Páo Dīng himself, who has gone nineteen years without dulling a blade. Clearly, there are better and worse ways of following *dào*. Arguably, the serial killer's approach to *dào* is deeply defective. No matter how skillful his actions may seem, they will most likely induce retribution eventually, rendering his path a repugnant failure. But the relevant constraints, I suggest, are neither general nor fixed. They arise from the process itself, from how well, in a particular context, we conform to the natural patterns, follow the seams and gaps, accord with what is inherently so, and avoid obstacles.

What, then, distinguishes how well a particular agent fulfills these criteria? This is a crucial question for Dàoist ethical thought. How do we distinguish apt *dào* from injudicious *dào* or adept from inept *dào*-following in the absence of fixed standards or ends?

#### 4. Proficiency in the Patterns

The question of what marks competence in *dào* arises again when we look at *Zhuāngzǐ* passages that focus on *dào*, rather than skill. *Dào* itself and adept performance of *dào* are described in terms familiar from descriptions of skill, yet no specific, determinate criteria are given to mark the competent practise of *dào*.

The 'Autumn Waters' dialogue, for example, discusses how *dào* can guide conduct, explaining *dào* as Páo Dīng does by appeal to the patterns (*lǐ* 理) of things (17/46). The practical conditions we encounter are constantly changing, the text holds, with the result that concrete, action-guiding distinctions that seem appropriate in one context may need to be reversed in another. Adept performance of *dào* requires flexible, adaptive responses, not commitment to fixed norms, as the Mohists advocate. 'Don't constrain your intent, or you'll be hobbled in following *dào*...don't proceed by a single [standard], or you'll be at odds with *dào*' (17/42–43). We are to 'embrace the myriad things' and proceed without limits, boundaries, biases, favouritism, or any fixed direction, seeking to accord with how things 'transform of themselves' (17/41–47). 'Knowing *dào*' is

<sup>9</sup> Steven Coutinho raises a pair of related questions (2019: 97). Does Zhuangist thought have the resources to distinguish skilled performances that reflect sageliness from those that do not? Has it grounds by which to disapprove of, for example, actions that harm others? As the discussion below explains, I think the *Zhuāngzǐ* can resolve both issues.



equated with ‘attaining proficiency (*dá* 達) in the patterns’ and thus understanding how to adapt our conduct to changing situations (17/48). The emphasis on adaptive, contextual responses to patterns resonates with the account of how the cook conforms to the inherent features of the ox and with descriptions of other *Zhuāngzǐ* skill exemplars, such as the whitewater swimmer who flows with the *dào* of the water (19/52–3), the artisan whose fingers transform along with things (19/62), or the woodcarver who lays his hand to work only when he can ‘see’ the finished carving latent in the inherent nature of the wood (19/58).

The prominence of the concept of ‘pattern’ or ‘grain’ (*li*) in ‘Autumn Waters’ and the Páo Dīng story reflects the important role of this notion across the pre-Han literature. ‘Pattern’ refers to facts about how things are structured or organised, how they relate to or interact with each other, and how they develop, proceed, or transform. Conforming to patterns is thus a prerequisite for proper or successful action. Misunderstanding or overlooking them is likely to lead to error or failure. Accordingly, following *dào* well lies in finding a path that aligns with the patterns; following it badly is struggling against or conflicting with the patterns.<sup>10</sup> A distinctive feature of the Zhuangist approach is that the patterns are understood to be deeply contextual and continually transforming.

How do abstract descriptions of the ideal of adaptively responding to patterns translate into practise? Two *Zhuāngzǐ* stories concerning social interactions illustrate such responses well. The first is a story of failed interaction, the second of a successful response.

Failure is illustrated by the story of a seabird that serendipitously landed near the capital of the landlocked state of Lu (18/33–39). Delighted by the bird’s visit—an auspicious omen—the Lord of Lu had it escorted to the ancestral temple, where he honoured it with a ritual feast and musical performance. Sadly, the bird became upset, refused to eat or drink, and soon died. Despite his good intentions, the lord only harmed the auspicious guest, because he followed customary norms for honouring a human dignitary, neglecting the reality that music and crowds would only disturb a bird, who instead needed to fly about, roost in trees, and dine on grubs and bugs. The lesson of the story is that ‘names stop at reality; what’s right is determined by what fits’ (18/39). To proceed adeptly, we must set aside labels or titles (‘names’, *míng* 名) associated with conventional conceptions of right and wrong and instead attend to the ‘reality’ of the situation (*shí* 實) and what best ‘fits’ it (*shì* 適), adapting our actions to the facts (such as a bird’s normal diet), rather than rigidly following codified standards (such as the ritual protocol for hosting an honoured guest). To do so, the text explains, is to ‘attain

<sup>10</sup> Ontologically, then, *dào* might be regarded as inherent in the patterns. In some strands of Dàoist thought, it may be regarded as the source of the patterns, referring to the way in which they issue forth. These fascinating aspects of *dào* deserve careful treatment but are beyond the scope of my discussion here, which focuses on *dào* as an ethical path.

proficiency (*da*) in the patterns (*tiáo* 條, a synonym of *lǐ*) and preserve welfare’ (18/39). In failing to deal with the bird appropriately, the Lord of Lǚ ineptly disregarded the relevant patterns, with tragic results.

A contrasting, successful interaction with others is illustrated by the story of a monkey keeper who accommodated his charges by adjusting their daily menu (2/38–40). The keeper announced that the monkeys would get three nuts in the morning and four in the evening. Preferring a larger breakfast, the monkeys were angry. So the keeper reversed the allocation: everyone would have four in the morning, three in the evening. The monkeys were delighted. The keeper ‘harmonised’ (*hé* 和) the situation by adjusting the nut distribution in a way that defused the monkeys’ anger at no cost to himself, as the total allocation remained seven nuts per day (2/39–40).

This adjustment illustrates what the text calls ‘according-*shi*’ (*yīn shì* 因是), or adaptively and provisionally ‘affirming’ things or taking them to be ‘right’ (*shì* 是) ‘in accordance with’ (*yīn* 因) particular circumstances (2/37)—just as Cook Ding proceeds ‘in accordance with’ (*yīn*) what is ‘inherently so’ in the grain of the meat.<sup>11</sup> The discussion leading up to the monkey story contends that action-guiding distinctions between ‘this/right’ and ‘not/wrong’ or between ‘so’ and ‘not-so’ are determined by the *dào* we carry out, which ‘completes’ one among multiple potential ways of proceeding (2/33).<sup>12</sup> Apart from the *dào* we practise, nothing is inherently right or wrong, ‘so’ or ‘not-so’. Hence if a path we undertake runs into difficulty, we are free to change direction. Grasping these points, the adept refrain from ‘imposing-*shi*’ (*wéi shì* 為是), or deeming things this or that on the basis of fixed standards applied without regard for particular contexts. Instead, they ‘accommodate things in the ordinary’ (2/36). The ‘ordinary’ (*yōng* 庸) is what is useful or effective (*yòng* 用), successful (*dé* 得), and connects or proceeds in a proficient, free-flowing manner (*tōng* 通) (2/36–37). To accommodate things successfully in some context is to apply ‘according-*shi*’. Indeed, the adroit practise of *dào* lies in acting on such provisional, ‘according-*shi*’ attitudes without knowing one is doing so—without knowing what the appropriate responses will be, since they are discovered in the course of our activity (2/37).<sup>13</sup> An implication is that, as discussed in section 3, *dào* is indeed exemplified by the process of working through the knotty parts without knowing in advance exactly how we will do so.

<sup>11</sup> I follow A. C. Graham (1969/70) in taking *yīn shì* 因是 to be a set phrase because the two graphs occur together in the text four times apparently referring to the same idea. As Graham proposed, the phrase *yīn shì* seems to contrast with *wéi shì* 為是, which also appears four times, referring to insistently imposing some *shì* judgment on things.

<sup>12</sup> The next several paragraphs draw on the discussion in Fraser (forthcoming), section 3.3.

<sup>13</sup> At 2/37, I follow Wang Shumin in taking 因是已 to be equivalent to 因是也. I also follow Wang Yinzhi 王引之 in reading 已而不知其然 as equivalent to 此而不知其然 (Wang 1988: 64). See too Chen (2007: 72).

The monkey keeper's compromise with his wards thus illustrates a general conception of *dào* as an adaptive response to circumstances that facilitates ongoing 'ordinary coping', or useful, successful, free-flowing movement along a path presented by the situation. Instead of acting on fixed standards of right and wrong, as the Mohists advocate, the idea is to respond adaptively to the 'patterns' operative in the context. On this view, the criteria of appropriate action are a cluster of notions such as doing what 'fits' or 'accords with' the 'reality' of the particular situation or what 'attains proficiency' (*dá* 達) in the 'patterns' and 'harmonises' with things. An apt course of action will seem 'ordinary' while being 'effective', 'successful', and 'free-flowing' or 'proficiently connecting through'.

The overlap between this cluster of terms and descriptions of skill is striking. In effect, conduct that accords with *dào* is conceptualised along the lines of adept skill performance, using terms implying facility, competence, and proficiency. These terms again raise the question of what criteria distinguish apt from inapt *dào*-following. What makes some course of conduct 'fitting', 'harmonious', 'successful', or 'free-flowing'?

## 5. The Ends of *Dào*

How do we evaluate how well some course of action 'fits' (*shì* 適) or 'flows' (*tōng* 通) in a concrete context? Since *dào* in general has no fixed ends, a plausible Zhuangist answer is that particular contexts themselves provide provisional or *pro tanto* grounds for such evaluations. These grounds can then be revised or replaced as we go along, in response to developing circumstances and continuing performance of *dào*.<sup>14</sup>

Think of our present *dào* as encompassing our values, interests, and ends, our capacities, and our current path and manner of activity. In any given situation, we find ourselves proceeding according to some *dào*. As we do so, we interact with our environment and with other agents whose *dào* intersects or converges with ours, both of which we must take into account if we are to proceed in a fitting, free-flowing way. Our initial *dào* and our relation to the context, including other agents, jointly provide starting criteria by which to evaluate how well various ways of continuing forward fit the situation, flow freely, attain harmony, preserve welfare, and so forth. A fitting path forward will accommodate our ends—and those of others we interact with—as we proceed with our *dào*. Our preliminary conception of good 'fit' (*shì*) or 'success' (*dé* 得) may simply be to continue following our initial *dào* smoothly, using our existing capacities to fulfill the provisional values and ends we began with. As we proceed through concrete, changing circumstances, however, our *dào* may need to be modified, and with it our ends and criteria of 'fit'. Perhaps the *dào* we are pursuing leads to obstacles, generates conflict, or creates frustration—all indications of a failure to accord

<sup>14</sup> This section draws on the discussion in Fraser (forthcoming), section 4.

with the patterns at hand and of poor fit between our conduct and the context. Perhaps we discover that some of the values or ends we take for granted clash with each other, such that we must modify or forgo some in order to proceed smoothly with others. Perhaps we adopt new values or ends as we extend our path. In all of these cases, we may need to refine or revise our *dào*, including the internal criteria by which we assess it as ‘fitting’, ‘successful’, or ‘free-flowing’.

Cases such as the monkeys and the seabird illustrate this contextual approach to evaluating ‘fitting’ or ‘free-flowing’ activity. The monkey keeper’s initial *dào* involved caring for the monkeys and feeding them seven nuts per day, divided among meals in a certain way. The monkeys protested, creating an obstacle to this *dào* and thereby indicating a failure to ‘fit’ or ‘flow freely’. For the keeper, the criteria of a fitting, successful way forward were ends such as preserving the monkeys’ welfare, calming them, and meeting the overall nut budget of seven per day. So he adjusted the allocation per meal—a relatively marginal feature of his original *dào*—to accommodate his charges’ preferences while still proceeding in a way consistent with other, more important features. By criteria such as allocating seven nuts per day, keeping the monkeys happy, and achieving harmony with them, his modified *dào* proved ‘competently free-flowing’ (*tong*).

The Lord of Lǚ responded to the seabird’s visit according to an elaborate religious and cultural *dào* involving cosmological beliefs about auspicious omens and ritual norms concerning how to honour visiting dignitaries. Obtusely acting on this *dào* without regard for the ‘reality’ of the situation or the ‘patterns’ of avian welfare led to a disastrous outcome for both sides, as in seeking to honour the bird the lord only harmed it. By both the lord’s and the bird’s lights, a more ‘fitting’, competent path would have been for the lord to modify his original *dào* in a way that fulfilled his aim of celebrating the rare visit while also successfully nurturing the bird. Perhaps, for example, he could have moved the bird to a wetland sanctuary, affixed a commemorative marker to the tree where it landed, and conducted a ritual at the ancestral shrine.

*Zhuāngzǐ* writings offer no specific method for finding such ‘fitting’ courses of action beyond proceeding with an open, ‘empty’ (*xū* 虛) mind, seeking to adapt to the ‘patterns’ and ‘what’s inherently so’ without rigidly imposing any preconceived way of going on.<sup>15</sup> This continual, subtle process of adjustment again reflects how *dào* is intertwined with skill. The apt *dào* is discovered by working our way through intricate, difficult spots in a skill-like manner, much as Páo Dīng delicately feels his way through the knotty parts. In doing so, we draw on the tacit capacities that have brought us where we are without knowing beforehand just how we will proceed next.

<sup>15</sup> The notion of an open, ‘empty’ (*xū* 虛) mind is pivotal to Zhuangist moral psychology. For more discussion, see Fraser (2014b).

Moreover, given that *dào* has no determinate end, in many cases there is unlikely to be any uniquely correct way to go on. Perhaps, reappraising his nut budget, the monkey keeper could instead have offered four nuts at both meals. Perhaps, contemplating the monkeys' happiness, he could have set them free in a forest to find their own nuts. Perhaps, reconsidering the bird's likely preferences, the Lord of Lǚ could have simply let it fly off and offered a prayer of thanks. Or perhaps, on seeing the bird, he might have realised it was simply lost and dropped his cosmic-religious interpretation of the event. The aim is not necessarily to follow the 'correct' *dào*, for there may be no such thing. It is to find a path that provisionally allows us to move on, balancing various ends and addressing obstacles or frustrations as best we can. The complex, dynamic nature of the 'patterns' of things means that any such path must be undertaken provisionally, with humility. Our initial moves through the 'knotty' parts may fail to fully 'fit' all of the relevant patterns or may 'harmonise' the factors in play partly but not wholly. New patterns may emerge as we go. Our actions themselves may change the situation, such that further responses are needed. A judicious *dào*-follower will remain perpetually open to adjustments in the path, aware that, insofar as *dào* can be said to have a rough, general aim, it just is the ameliorative process of continually seeking out what 'fits' or 'flows' in evolving circumstances, by standards of 'fit' or 'flow' that may themselves also evolve.

So a further respect in which *dào* is like skill yet goes beyond it is that we must regularly apply our existing competence to reassess and reform our *dào* in response to changing circumstances that may jar with aspects of it as developed so far. In performing his skill, Páo Dīng finds his way through the knotty parts by making fine adjustments to his knife-work. By extension, in navigating through the 'patterns' we encounter, we all must make fine adjustments to our *dào* to find the most fitting path we can. The result may sometimes be a rather different *dào* from what we started with.<sup>16</sup>

## 6. An Ethics of *Dào* and *Dé*

The conception of *dào* I have been describing entails continually adjusting our provisional ends as we navigate through shifting circumstances. For an example of this view of *dào*, consider the story of the goose that could not honk, which criticizes the idea, prominent in some *Zhuāngzǐ* passages, that being deemed useless by others may be useful to oneself (see, e.g., 1/42–47, 4/64–75). The story contrasts a mountain tree that grows large because woodcutters find it useless for timber with a goose that is butchered because it cannot honk (20/1–9). The tree's being deemed useless led to health and longevity; the goose's being deemed useless led to premature death. So, a student asks a fictional *Zhuāngzǐ*, where should we settle? To live well and avoid 'entanglement' with things, should we present ourselves to others as worthy or worthless? *Zhuāngzǐ* suggests

<sup>16</sup> Echoing these observations, Wai Wai Chiu suggests that key features of skillful performance in *Zhuāngzǐ* include fluency, fine-tuning, and freedom from previously instilled ways of proceeding (2019: 7).

that neither worthiness nor worthlessness is an appropriate aim. Nor indeed is a moderate course between them, seeking to avoid either worthiness or worthlessness. Instead, he suggests:

Wander about by riding on *dào* 道 and *dé* 德...without praise or criticism, now a dragon soaring in the sky, now a snake slithering along the ground, transforming together with circumstances, never committing to acting only one way, now above, now below, taking harmony as your measure. Wandering about with the source of the myriad things, letting things be things without letting them treat you as any [fixed] thing....Students, remember this! Make your home only in *dào* and *dé*!<sup>17</sup> (20/6–9)

Instead of following any set norm or committing to any one path or end—being useless, useful, or somewhere in between, for instance—the text advocates ‘riding along’ with *dào* and *dé*, allowing ourselves to be drawn along fitting paths (*dào*) through our inherent virtue or capacity (*dé*) for finding and following them. To ‘ride *dào* and *dé*’ is to wander about with the flow of natural processes—the mysterious ‘source’ of things—pursuing no particular direction or end by which to praise or blame, proceeding now in this manner, now in that, undertaking different modes of activity without committing exclusively to any. We are to shift along with circumstances, seeking only to maintain harmony (*hé* 和) with things as we flow along, adjusting fluidly without becoming a determinate ‘thing’ that others could aim to use. No fixed norms or ends capture the adaptive, responsive ‘transformation’ (*huà* 化) characteristic of employing our inward *dé* to follow *dào* as we encounter it.

In light of passages such as this, I suggest that the *Zhuāngzǐ* can informatively be described as presenting an ethics of *dào* and *dé*.<sup>18</sup> The central concepts in this ethics are not right and wrong or moral virtues and vices, but apt or fitting paths of conduct and the virtue, or capacity for agency, by which we follow such paths. The focus is on the path we pursue and how we pursue it—whether the path ‘flows’ or ‘connects through’ (*tōng* 通), ‘fits’ (*shì* 適), and yields ‘harmony’ and whether our manner of activity displays the flexibility, resilience, and creative responsiveness needed to find and follow such a path. Rather than applying familiar moral norms, this ethics assesses conduct and character in terms similar to how we assess the performance of skills: by how responsive we are to particular situations, how proficient we are at proceeding along a sustainable course of activity, how resilient and adaptable we are in dealing with change, challenges,

<sup>17</sup> An alternative interpretation, reading 鄉 as 向, is ‘Take only *dào* and *dé* as your direction!’ An alternative interpretation of the preceding line is to avoid becoming enslaved to things.

<sup>18</sup> I elaborate on this proposal in Fraser (forthcoming), section 4, from which some remarks in this section are drawn.

and misfortune.<sup>19</sup> To perform *dào* well is to find our way through a field of ‘patterns’ (*lǐ* 理) freely and smoothly, with harmony and ease, while avoiding hindrance or obstruction, in a manner akin to the competent performance of an art or a skill. The good life lies in manifesting *dé* in such performances and thereby ‘wandering’ (*yóu* 遊) through our circumstances, much as Cook Ding’s knife is said to ‘wander’ through the spaces between the joints of the ox (3/9).<sup>20</sup> The metaphor of *dào* as a process of ‘wandering’ is telling: *dào* is not a path toward a specific end or destination, but a meandering course toward nowhere in particular.

This conception of apt conduct and the good life helps to explain the intense interest in skills in the *Zhuāngzǐ*, as skilled performances offer examples of fluid, adaptive responses to changing circumstances, albeit within the fixed scope of a particular skill, with a particular end. An instructive way of understanding one salient Zhuangist ethical vision, then, is that the crux of a flourishing life lies in ‘advancing beyond skill’ by extending to life as a whole the open, ready responsiveness familiar from the performance of skills.<sup>21</sup> The ideal—or at least the version of a Zhuangist ideal implied by whoever compiled the collection’s first chapter, ‘Freely Wandering About’—is to roam without fixed ends or bounds, relying on nothing in particular and thus following no fixed standards or norms (1/21).

Consider a story from ‘Freely Wandering About’ that contrasts living adeptly with its opposite, clumsiness, while extending the metaphor of *dào*-following as carefree wandering. *Zhuāngzǐ*’s friend *Huìzǐ* was given the seeds of a large bottle gourd, which grew to produce gigantic, 500-litre fruit. Gourds were typically used as either containers or ladles. *Huìzǐ* tried using the giant gourds as containers, but when he filled them with water, they collapsed, unable to hold up their own weight. He tried cutting them open to make ladles, but they proved too large to dip into anything. Frustrated, he declared the gourds useless, he tells *Zhuāngzǐ*, and smashed them (1/36–37).

*Zhuāngzǐ* berates *Huìzǐ* for being clumsy (*zhuó* 拙) at using big things. Instead of worrying that the gourds were useless as containers or ladles, he says, why not make them into floats, climb astride, and go drifting about—that is, wandering—on rivers and lakes (1/42)? Nothing is useful or useless in itself; usefulness is always relative to some norm or end. *Huìzǐ* has locked himself into trying to use the gourds according to fixed ends inapplicable to rare, gigantic fruit. His narrow-minded competence in conventional uses of regular-sized gourds renders him clumsy in finding creative uses for unusually large gourds. His mind is overgrown with brambles, remarks *Zhuāngzǐ* (1/42)—obstructed, closed off to novelty, and thus inept at finding new ends to fit unusual situations. Those who ‘ride along with *dào* and *dé*’, by contrast, develop an open-minded

<sup>19</sup> For a discussion of the moral psychology implied by these remarks, see Fraser (2014b) and (2019).

<sup>20</sup> This interpretation of the Zhuangist good life is explored in Fraser (2011) and (2014a).

readiness to go beyond familiar ends to find creative ways to engage with their circumstances.

## 7. Conclusion

The Mohists explicitly compare ethical practise to performing a skill. Like a skill, *dào* has a determinate end, which explicit ‘models’ can guide us in pursuing, much as the compass and square guide artisans in producing round wheels and square corners. To a large extent, the ethical life for the Mohists is a matter of mastering the skill of reliably distinguishing and undertaking what is benevolent and righteous.

For a prominent strand of thought in the *Zhuāngzǐ*, on the other hand, the performance of skills can exemplify how to proceed with *dào*, but *dào* itself goes beyond skill, extending to life as a whole the adaptive learning, competent performance, and problem-solving acumen displayed in skilled activity. Unlike skill, *dào* is a general, unbounded process with no fixed aims or purpose. In the course of this process, we find ourselves acting on contextually specified models, norms, values, and methods, but these are continually open to revision or replacement. Circumstances regularly present us with ‘knotty’ stretches, prompting us to find creative, adaptive ways of going forward that draw on but go beyond the capacities and path we have developed so far. Indeed, I suggest, the crux of *dào* lies in working our way through such stretches, extending, redirecting, and refashioning our path. Unlike any skill, or indeed any activity with specified boundaries and goals, *dào* is a path with no end—one on which we continually make and remake our way forward.

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<sup>21</sup> As Coutinho suggests, in a Zhuangist philosophy of skill, ‘living well’ and ‘cosmic wisdom’ are ‘manifested in practical adeptness in negotiating our environments’ (2019: 87).



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