

Emotion and Agency in *Zhuāngzǐ*

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Among the many striking features of the philosophy of the *Zhuāngzǐ* 《莊子》 is that it advocates a life unperturbed by emotions, including even pleasurable, positive emotions such as joy or delight.¹ Many of us, philosophers and lay people alike, see emotions as an ineluctable part of life. Indeed, we may consider appropriate emotional responses to beneficial or harmful situations a crucial component of a well-developed moral sensitivity and a good life. The Zhuangist view of emotion challenges such commonsense views so radically that we might regard it as a test case for the fundamental plausibility of the anthology's ethical vision: if the Zhuangist stance on emotion is untenable, then other aspects of Zhuangist ethics may founder as well. In this essay, I explore a Zhuangist approach to emotion and its connections with human agency, attempting to show that at least one version of a Zhuangist view of emotion passes the "basic plausibility" test. Whether or not we ultimately agree with this view, there are reasonable considerations in its favor.

The exact view I will discuss is not presented explicitly in the text. It is a construction or interpolation from theoretical claims in different parts of the anthology. I suggest, however, that views roughly like this one, or largely overlapping it, probably underlie and motivate statements in many parts of the *Zhuāngzǐ*.² The view I will examine is not the only

¹ Interesting comparisons and contrasts can be drawn between the Zhuangist stance on emotion and that of Hellenistic schools such as the Stoics, Epicureans, and Skeptics or of early modern European writers such as Montaigne, Lipsius, and Spinoza. These relations are beyond the scope of this essay, but it is worth remarking that despite some similarities to these Western thinkers, Zhuangist views appear to be unique in their content, conceptual structure, and theoretical grounding.

² Like most texts attributed to the pre-Qín "various masters" (諸子), the *Zhuāngzǐ* is an anthology of brief, roughly paragraph-length writings by different hands. (For a discussion of the highly composite structure of early Chinese texts, see Boltz [2005].) The *Zhuāngzǐ*'s hundreds of different parts are linked thematically by a network of doctrinal family resemblances and historically or genealogically probably by numerous intersecting teacher-student lineages, as the texts were likely composed and transmitted among groups of teachers and

position on the emotions in the *Zhuāngzǐ*, but it is especially interesting philosophically, and it is highly relevant to contemporary ethics and action theory.

For convenience, let me give the view to be discussed a label: the “Virtuoso View” of emotions. This is an allusion to the core Zhuangist ethical concept of *dé* 德, whose content overlaps that of notions such as virtuosity, power, potency, virtue, vitality, charisma, adroitness, proficiency, and capacity. As I will explain, the Virtuoso View is deeply intertwined with various Zhuangist conceptions of *dé*. Another reason for dubbing this the “Virtuoso View” is that I believe it is a roughly accurate description of the psychological state manifested in virtuoso performance of arts, skills, and other activities.

I will begin by describing the Virtuoso View and sketching its theoretical foundation, which ultimately involves many aspects of Zhuangist thought, including claims about human agency, the self, psychophysical hygiene, the good life, epistemology, and metaphysics. Next, I will consider several objections to it and will attempt to defend it, or at least a modified version of it, against these objections. I will argue for three major theses. First, the Virtuoso View is easily intelligible—especially given Zhuangist assumptions about physiology—and largely, if not entirely, defensible. Indeed, to some extent it reflects many

students. The anthology is organized as thirty-three “books” or “chapters,” each a collection of short stories or remarks, often grouped loosely by theme. Typically, these stories and remarks share a broadly interrelated doctrinal orientation, but they do not purport to present a unified or coherent set of doctrines. Even a conservative count, such as Liu Xiaogan’s (1994), attributes at least four different authorial or doctrinal voices to the corpus. My own view is that there are almost certainly many more, and that even the seven so-called “inner chapters” that many scholars attribute to the historical Zhuāng Zhōu 莊周 are most probably the work of several different authors. (For a detailed critique of the view that the “inner chapters” represent an authorially privileged, chronologically early, or doctrinally canonical section within the anthology, see Klein [forthcoming]. For related arguments, see too Fraser [1997].) In general, however, because little historical information is available on the authorship or provenance of individual parts of the *Zhuāngzǐ*, I believe the appropriate interpretive approach is to focus on the texts, not their unknown authors. That is, instead of attempting to reconstruct the systematic thought of one or more particular authors—a project that simply cannot be carried out convincingly, given the nature of the various “books” and our lack of historical information about them—interpreters should focus on exploring and reconstructing the rich discourses on various themes found in the anthology. Given the literary and physical structure of the collection, the genealogical relationships between its component texts, and their shared broad outlook, we can expect different parts to explore common themes from a variety of angles, presenting views that may overlap substantially but also diverge significantly. From reconstructions of such discourses, we can move on to consider or develop systematic positions that are grounded in Zhuangist motifs and views, but not necessarily explicitly presented in or endorsed by all parts, or any particular part, of the anthology.

people's commonsense view of emotion. Second, and more important, it reflects a crucial insight into a fundamental dichotomy at the core of human agency: the unavoidable conflict within a self-aware human agent between an internal, engaged perspective and an external, detached one. Few philosophers, East or West, have called attention to this tension at the root of human agency, but I will draw comparisons between the *Zhuāngzǐ* and two who have: Heidegger (1962) and Nagel (1979). Third, I will suggest that certain problems or conflicts arising from the Virtuoso View actually reflect inherent features of the human predicament and thus are not mere conceptual defects. Thus even if we do not find the Virtuoso View wholly convincing, we can nevertheless gain much insight from it.

An Emotional Predicament

A story in “The Human World,” Book 4 of the *Zhuāngzǐ*, illustrates the general stance I am calling the Virtuoso View. The story relates the predicament of Zǐgāo, Duke of Shè 葉公子高, a high official of the powerful southern state of Chǔ 楚, who is dispatched by the King of Chǔ on an important diplomatic mission to the formidable northern state of Qí 齊. Within hours of receiving his assignment, Zǐgāo finds himself feverish with anxiety. Recalling the words of his mentor Zhòng Ní 仲尼 (Confucius), he remarks that only a person of *dé* 德 can handle affairs without bringing one of two kinds of trouble upon himself—either “troubles with the *yīn* and *yáng*” (陰陽之患—that is, health problems) or “troubles in the human *dào*” (人道之患, problems in human relations and affairs) (4/36–37).³ In his case, though he has yet to engage in the matter, his health is already suffering, and if the mission fails, he will surely face the king's wrath and thus difficulties in human relations. As a minister, he says, these two sources of distress are too much for him to bear (4/38–39).

³ Citations to the *Zhuāngzǐ* give chapter and line numbers from *Zhuāngzǐ Yǐndé* 《莊子引得》 (*A Concordance to Zhuāngzǐ*), Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series, Supplement no. 20 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956).

So Zǐgāo is caught in an inescapable, stressful predicament: he has a difficult assignment that he cannot decline; failure will bring punishment; and he is sick with anxiety. His emotional state is interfering with his ability to function normally and is actually harming him physically. Can Zhòng Ní offer any advice?

In response, Zhòng Ní makes several general points about handling potentially stressful responsibilities and situations.⁴ The gist of his remarks is that in nearly any area of life, we encounter situations and pressures about which we “cannot do anything” (不可奈何). The text dubs these “the inevitable” (*bù dé yǐ* 不得已). For instance, we are born into a family and must care for our parents, an inescapable aspect of our “fate” (*mìng* 命). We are born into a political society and must comply with requirements it imposes on us—another inescapable part of life, which the text calls “duty” (*yì* 義). To live well, we must cope with these and other inevitable matters while maintaining the health of our own heart (*xīn* 心)—in most early Chinese thought the nexus of agency. To do so is to exercise *dé* (virtuosity, power, potency, adroitness).

As to serving your own heart, without sorrow or joy alternating before you, to know what you can't do anything about and be at ease with it as with fate, this is the pinnacle of *dé*. As a minister or son, there are bound to be matters that are inevitable. Act on the facts of the matter and forget yourself. What leisure will you have for delighting in life and hating death? (4/41–44)⁵

A key to reaching “the pinnacle of *dé*” is to recognize and be at ease or peace (*ān* 安) with the inevitable, just as we accept various aspects of our fate, such as our race, place of birth, sex, or height.⁶ Then, according to the text, intense emotions such as sorrow and joy, or delight in life and hatred of death, will cease to disturb us. Only by achieving such equanimity can one preserve one's health and employ the tact and discretion needed to handle complex affairs

⁴ I discuss these points in more detail in Fraser (2008).

⁵ 自事其心者，哀樂不易施乎前，知其不可奈何而安之若命，德之至也。為人臣子者，固有所不得已，行事之情而忘其身，何暇至於悅生而惡死？

effectively. Zǐgāo should simply proceed according to the facts of the situation and “forget” (忘) himself, by ceasing to worry about his own welfare or preferences. Zhòng Ní later adds that “to let your heart wander by riding along with things and to nurture your center by entrusting yourself to the inevitable is to reach the ultimate” (4/52–53).⁷ Zǐgāo must learn to maintain equanimity and nurture his psycho-physical “center”—the heart or chest and the *qì* 氣 or spirit (*shén* 神) within it—by accepting the inevitable and calmly wandering along with his circumstances.

The Virtuoso View of emotion corresponds roughly to the descriptions this passage associates with *dé*. “Virtuosos,” or persons of *dé*, accept the inevitable without experiencing intense emotions. They nurture an inner state of calm and ease, without consciously dwelling on their own welfare. This state enables them to attend fully to their circumstances and competently handle matters at hand. Such people are not utterly emotionless: they experience a general sense of ease or peace, and they retain affective commitments to the welfare of their parents, for example. (The text implies that they embody the virtues of *xiào* 孝 and *zhōng* 忠—family devotedness and political loyalty.) But they are free from strong, disruptive emotions, whether pleasant, positive ones such as joy or unpleasant, negative ones such as sorrow. Roughly this sort of psychological state probably occurs commonly in the virtuoso performance of arts or skills. For instance, a tennis or basketball “virtuoso” who has just scored a point or committed an error does not dwell on it and may experience only a weak emotional response, if any. The virtuoso maintains psychophysical equilibrium and immediately shifts focus to the next shot or play.

⁶ Fate, or *mìng* 命, refers to facts regarded as “mandated” and beyond our control, such as hereditary traits or socio-historical facts.

⁷ 且夫乘物以遊心，託不得已以養中，至矣。

Emotion and Virtuosity

Numerous *Zhuāngzǐ* passages instantiate variants of the Virtuoso View. These consistently link the notion of *dé* to affective equanimity, acceptance of fate (命), recognition of one's place in the flux of nature, and affective identification with the Great *Dào* 大道,⁸ or the totality of nature and its constituent processes.

Consider, for instance, two of the exemplars of *dé* whose stories are collected in Book 5, “Signs of Full Virtuosity.” Wáng Tái 王駘, an ex-convict amputee with as many disciples as Confucius, is said to have achieved a “constant heart” (常心) grounded in a combination of cognitive and affective attitudes (5/1–13). He understands and attends to the respects in which the myriad things are “one,” or form a single spatial-temporal whole, and thus experiences no loss when things alternate or transform. As a result, he has no preferences and is emotionally unperturbed by even the greatest of changes, such as death or cataclysm, all of which he accepts as if fixed by fate and thus beyond his control. He feels as little emotion over the amputation of his foot (a criminal punishment inflicted on him in the past) as he would the loss of a clump of dirt. He discerns and preserves what is non-dependent (無假) in himself, namely his “ancestor” (宗)—which I interpret here as the mysterious source of one's capacity for agency. These attitudes allow him to “let his heart wander in the harmony of *dé*.”⁹ One might think that Wáng's acceptance of fate and indifference toward his body might produce passivity or defeatism. But the text instead depicts these attitudes as empowering: he is said to be at ease in the world as if it were his palace and to view the world as a vast storehouse of resources available to him.

⁸ I use this expression—borrowed from the views attributed to Shèn Dào 慎到 in *Zhuāngzǐ* Book 33—to refer to the *dào* constituted by the totality of things, events, patterns, and processes in the cosmos. It contrasts with the various particular *dào* followed by particular creatures, communities, or phenomena.

⁹ 遊心乎德之和。

Āi Tái Tuō 哀駘它 (5/31–49) is a horrendously ugly man whose mysterious charisma causes people to find him intensely attractive. His ability to win trust and affection without saying or doing anything in particular is attributed to his “capacity” or “stuff” (*cái* 才) being “whole” (全), while his *dé* is preserved within and not manifested in his physical form. The text associates our “capacity” with “what employs the body” (使其形者), implying that it refers to inner faculties or capabilities that either constitute or enable agency. The text’s account of one’s “capacity being whole” emphasizes preserving affective harmony (和) and ease (豫) in the face of unknowable and uncontrollable change, or the “march of fate” (命之行). One is to allow no “openings” through which the vagaries of fortune can “enter” (入) to disrupt the harmony (滑和) of one’s spirit. Indeed, for this text, *dé* just is the cultivation of perfect inner equanimity or harmony.¹⁰ Such psychological harmony enables Āi to “encounter things and generate the opportune moment in his heart.”¹¹ An agent whose “capacity is whole” is no passive victim of fate, but exerts agency by creating opportunities from his circumstances.

Another example of the virtuoso view comes from the story of the four friends in “The Great Ancestral Teacher” (6/45–60), who see “life and death, presence and absence” (生死存亡) as “a single whole” (一體). One of them, Zǐyú 子輿, develops a disfiguring terminal disease. He marvels at his condition, yet his heart remains “at ease and unconcerned” (閒而無事). Asked whether he detests the disease, he remarks:¹²

Gain is a matter of the opportune moment, loss a matter of flowing along. If we are at ease with the moment and dwell in the flow, sorrow and delight cannot enter. This is what in ancient times was called “release from bonds.” As to those who cannot

¹⁰ 德者成和之修也。

¹¹ 接而生時於心。

¹² A nearly identical remark appears in the story of Lǎozǐ’s death in “The Key to Nurturing Life” 養生主 (3/17–19).

release themselves, there are things that bind them. Yet things do not win out over Nature; it's always been so.¹³ What would I hate about it? (6/52–53).¹⁴

With equanimity, creativity, and good cheer, Zǐyú explains that he will adapt to make the best of whatever physical changes the course of his disease brings. Perhaps it will transform his left arm into a rooster, in which case he will keep the night watch; perhaps it will transform his right arm into a crossbow, in which case he will shoot game. Perhaps it will transform his buttocks into cartwheels, in which case he will go off for a joyride (6/50–52). He regards the disease not as impeding his powers of agency, but as providing novel opportunities to employ them.

Two further illustrations come from Book 21, “Tián Zǐ Fāng” 田子方. Sūn Shū Áo 孫叔敖 (21/62–65) was thrice promoted to premier of his state but took no glory in his rank; thrice he was dismissed but was unperturbed about it. His explanation of this equanimity has two basic parts, both of which echo ideas in the Zǐgāo story discussed above. First, he is emotionally unaffected by whatever lies beyond his control: “Since I regard gain and loss as not up to me, I wasn’t upset, that’s all.”¹⁵ Second, he invests value only in inherent features of his self or activity. If honor and success lie in the political post, then he never really possessed them in the first place. If instead they lie in him, then they do not lie in the post, and losing the post does not entail losing them. Sūn could not care less about social rank, as he already achieves fulfillment through his own free and easy wandering.

Finally, a dialogue between Confucius 孔子 and Lǎo Dān 老聃 (21/24–38) ties the Virtuoso View to a form of “ultimate happiness.” The text presents emotional equanimity as a crucial aspect of “letting the heart wander in the beginning of things,”¹⁶ an activity that Lǎo

¹³ A similar passage at 3/17 refers to the failure to accept change and “dwell in the flow” without emotional disruption as “fleeing from Nature and turning one’s back on reality” (遁天倍[背]情).

¹⁴ 且夫得者時也，失者順也，安時而處順，哀樂不能入也。此古之所謂縣解也，而不能自解者，物有結之。且夫物不勝天久矣，吾又何惡焉？

¹⁵ 吾以為得失之非我也，而無憂色而已矣。

¹⁶ 遊心於物之初。

Dān describes as “ultimate beauty and ultimate happiness” (至美至樂). The text’s explanation of such wandering stresses three points. First, it is characterized by “great constancy” (大常), or constancy on a macro, general level, insofar as it is an activity that continues undisturbed despite changing particular circumstances. Second, this constancy is achieved by identifying with the world as a whole (天下), understood as the totality or “one” (一) that incorporates the myriad things. This identification is apparently not construed as a loss of the individual self, but an extension of it, such that the self is understood as a part of and through its relation to the totality. Third, such constancy is marked by affective equanimity, here construed as an absence of strong positive or negative emotions. The agent ceases to be emotionally disturbed by change, such as bodily injury, life or death, gain or loss, or fortune or misfortune. A person who follows the Great *Dào* is “free” or “released” (解) from psychological disturbances caused by affective responses to change. Achieving such a state is indicative of great *dé*.

The Virtuoso View

These accounts, coupled with Zhòng Ní’s advice to Zǐgāo, present a general eudaimonistic ideal—the life of *dé* or virtuosity—in which emotional equanimity is a major element. The Zhuangist virtuoso “nurtures his center” (養中) or keeps his “capacity whole” (才全) by maintaining a constant (常), harmonious (和) psychological state of “being at ease with the moment and dwelling in the flow” (安時處順). He ceases to have strong preferences, and intense emotions such as joy (喜), anger (怒), sorrow (哀), delight (樂), shock and fear (驚懼), and anxiety and worry (憂患) rarely or never occur and do not “enter” (入) and affect his psycho-physiological locus of agency (variously referred to as the heart 心, the chest 胸, the center 中, the “spirit storehouse” 靈府 or “spirit tower” 靈臺, the

“dwelling” 舍, or the spirit 神).¹⁷ His heart thus remains “empty” (虛),¹⁸ and he achieves “release” (解) from things. Changes in his circumstances do not disturb his psyche; he ceases to worry about success or failure, survival or death, and even “forgets” (忘) himself. He recognizes that much of what happens is beyond his control and accordingly accepts “the inevitable” (不得已) or “fate” (命). Rather than inducing a passive, apathetic fatalism, however, this realistic appraisal of the limits of personal efficacy liberates the virtuoso by shifting the focus of agency to what he can control. He achieves a form of flexible, responsive agency that is self-sufficient or independent (無待) of contingent factors, in that it focuses on “wandering” (遊) through the world by flexibly adapting to and “riding along with things” (乘物).¹⁹ According to some passages (such as the stories about Zǐgāo or Wáng Tái), this capacity for flexible wandering renders the virtuoso’s actions more effective, as he is better prepared to find creative, adaptive responses to changing situations. Moreover, although the virtuoso is free of disruptive emotions, he is not utterly affectless. He experiences a general positive sense of ease or calm, harmony, and satisfaction or fulfillment and, according to some passages, a form of happiness or delight, good cheer, and playful enjoyment or zest for life.²⁰

These descriptions dovetail with perhaps the most well-known statement about emotions in the *Zhuāngzǐ*, the claim in one passage of “Signs of Full Virtuosity” that the sage “has human form but lacks human affects” (5/54).²¹ As the text makes clear, the import is not that the sage lacks all emotion. It is that “*shì-fēi* [right/wrong, this/not-this] do not obtain

¹⁷ See, e.g., 21/44–45, 4/53, 19/14, 21/32, 5/45, 19/62, 19/25, 19/12–13.

¹⁸ On the links between the Zhuangist view of emotion and emptiness, see Fraser (2008).

¹⁹ As Puett observes, for the *Zhuāngzǐ*, “the liberation that comes from no longer being dependent on things precisely involves an acceptance of the order of Heaven” (2003, 255). The order of Heaven (天, also Nature) corresponds to what the text calls “the inevitable” or “fate.”

²⁰ As Ivanhoe (2010) notes, the spontaneous, nature-guided character of virtuoso action produces a deep sense of ease, security, confidence, and peace.

²¹ 有人之形，無人之情。

in him” (5/54).²² The ensuing dialogue between Huì Shī 惠施 and Zhuāngzǐ clarifies that “lacking affects” (無情) here refers to the sage “not harming himself internally with likes and dislikes, but constantly going along with the self-so, without adding to life” (5/57–58).²³ These remarks employ different terminology but converge in spirit with the descriptions above. The key ideas are that the virtuoso is not committed to any particular set of value distinctions (*shì-fēi*) and thus does not allow preferences or aversions to harm or disrupt him, as Zǐgāo’s worries about his assignment injured him. Instead, he follows along with the inherent course or patterns of things, without attempting to help them along.

What I am calling the Virtuoso View, then, is just the stance toward emotions or other affective states that emerges from this more general eudaimonistic ideal, which, following the *Zhuāngzǐ* itself, we may call “wandering” (遊).²⁴ The Virtuoso View identifies a state of affective harmony, resilience, and equanimity concerning contingent, transitory circumstances that is a central feature of the life of wandering and *dé*.²⁵ The details of and motivation for advocating this state rest partly on the Zhuangist account of the ontology of emotion. So let me next sketch how Zhuangist writers probably understood emotions and their effect on us.

Zhuangist Ontology of Emotion

Ontologically, in early China emotions were generally regarded as states of the *qì* 氣 that constitutes the agent’s *qíng* 情 (affections, constitution, status),²⁶ which is the active,

²² 是非不得於身。

²³ 不以好惡內傷其身，常因自然而不益生也。

²⁴ For a detailed discussion of “wandering,” see Fraser (forthcoming).

²⁵ The centrality of the Virtuoso View to the wandering ideal means that, as Kupperman (1999) suggests, a core part of the Zhuangist ethical project is to “educate the emotions” so as to lead agents to live more flourishing lives.

²⁶ For discussions of early Chinese views of the structure of emotions, see Puett (2004) and Chan (forthcoming). I have especially benefited from Chan’s detailed analysis, although my own interpretation of the Zhuangist ontology of emotions differs somewhat from his, primarily in assigning a less significant role to *yù* 欲 (urges, desires) and in interpreting *qíng* 情 as the actualized state of *xìng* 性.

actualized dimension of the agent's *xìng* 性 (dispositional nature).²⁷ For the *Zhuāngzǐ*, emotions such as joy, anger, sorrow, and delight appear to be caused by the agent's relation to “external things” (外物)—that is, persons, objects, or situations. The emotion-producing relation is established by the agent's adopting toward things either cognitive-evaluative attitudes such as *shì-fēi* 是非 (this versus not-this, approval versus rejection) or preferences and aversions (*hào-wù* 好惡, like versus dislike).²⁸ The operative relation is metaphorically characterized as a “bond” or “tie” (懸、結). The point of the metaphor is probably that the agent adopts fixed cognitive-evaluative attitudes that in effect “bind” her to particular things, preventing her from freely following along with and adapting to circumstances.²⁹ A likely psycho-physiological explanation of such “bonds” is that the agent's attitudes cause her attention and *qì* to become fixated on some approved or disapproved, preferred or disliked thing. This fixation produces emotions—pleasant, excited, agitated, or painful *qíng* states—according to whether or not circumstances accord with the agent's approvals or preferences.

Since these “bonds” are produced by the discriminating activity of the heart (心)—the same general activity that is the basis for cognition—emotions are intertwined with and grounded in cognitive judgments.³⁰ Without a *shì-fēi* judgment that something does or does

²⁷ I take this to be the import of Xúnzǐ's well-known statement that *qíng* is the “stuff” of *xìng* 情者、性之質 (*Xúnzǐ*, Book 22).

²⁸ Such attitudes and preferences may themselves also have an affective aspect, as indicated by their inclusion in discussions of the affects (e.g., 5/54, 31/30). For the *Zhuāngzǐ*, there is probably no strict distinction between cognitive, evaluative, and affective attitudes; *shì* attitudes and preferences may inherently incorporate a positive affective component, *fēi* attitudes and aversions a negative one. For more on the affective content of *shì-fēi* attitudes, see Fraser (2011).

²⁹ Such fixed attitudes contrast with the approach advocated in Zhuangist texts such as “Discourse on Evening Things Out” (齊物論) and “Autumn Waters” (秋水) that, instead of committing to fixed *shì-fēi* attitudes, the agent should adjust evaluative distinctions freely in response to different or changing circumstances. The agent who fluidly adjusts her *shì-fēi* attitudes in response to the facts of the situation will experience emotional equanimity, as she has no fixed *shì-fēi* attitudes that bind her to things and thus disrupt the free-flowing equilibrium of her *qì*.

³⁰ Chan (forthcoming) correctly notes the importance of a cognitive dimension in the Zhuangist understanding of emotion. For a discussion of other aspects of this cognitive dimension, see Fraser (2008). Compare too Wong

not belong to some kind (*lèi* 類) or thing (*wù* 物) toward which the agent holds an evaluative attitude—approval or disapproval, preference or aversion—emotions will not arise. Changes in cognitive attitudes can thus be expected to bring about changes in emotional states.³¹ Since in early Chinese thought cognition is constituted by judgments that things are “the same” (同) or “different” (異), of one kind or another (Fraser 2005), fundamentally emotions are triggered by the agent’s dispositions to see particular things or situations as similar or dissimilar in various respects.³² Such dispositions are regarded as open to modification through either persuasion or habituation. By reflecting on and habituating oneself to attend to certain respects in which things are similar or different rather than others, agents can guide and train their emotional responses to things—and presumably their preferences and aversions as well.

This point is important in understanding Zhuangist justifications for the Virtuoso View and the rhetoric by which the texts attempt to modify the audience’s emotions. Part of the virtuosity of exemplary figures such as Wáng Tái or Zǐyú, for instance, is that they “see the respects in which things are one” (視其所一, 5/8), or the same, and thus are emotionally unperturbed by changes in their circumstances. By altering how they discriminate things as “the same” or “different,” “one” or “not one,” agents can modify their emotional responses. An agent who sees everything, including his own life, as part of “the same” unified cosmic process will hold no preferences regarding the outcome of changing circumstances. Such an agent will thus be emotionally unperturbed by any change whatsoever, just as water insects

(1991), which argues that Mencius holds neither a Kantian theory of practical reason, which gives reason priority over emotion, nor a Humean theory, which gives emotion priority over reason.

³¹ By contrast, the opening line of Xúnzǐ’s “Discourse on Music” 樂論 might be taken to imply that for him, emotions such as delight (樂) are an unchangeable aspect of the human constitution, as he states that delight is “something human *qíng* surely cannot avoid” (人情之所必不免也).

³² Such dispositions are a subset of the phenomena of “seeing-as” or “seeing aspects,” to which Wittgenstein devoted much attention. See, e.g., Wittgenstein (1968, pp. 193ff.) and Budd (1987).

are unperturbed by the flow of water below them and grazing animals are unperturbed by a change in pasture (21/31–32).³³

To sum up, emotions are produced by evaluative attitudes invoked in particular instances by the cognitive-affective discrimination that things are or are not “the same” as some preferred or approved “kind.” Emotional responses to things can be modified in two ways, either by changing one’s general preferences or approvals or by changing what one sees as “the same” or “different,” whether in particular instances or in general. Discussions of emotion in the *Zhuāngzǐ* tend to assume a strong link between cognitive and affective attitudes, probably reflecting an underlying assumption that the two are interrelated. It is expected that persuasive rhetoric can produce changes in what agents see as similar—and thus what they prefer—and so can modify their emotions.

Impediments to Virtuosity

Given this background, we can see that Zhuangist writers have a psycho-physiological theory available to explain why, as one passage puts it, intense emotions are “impediments to *dé* 德” (德之累, 23/68–69) that interfere with the freely adaptive activity that constitutes “wandering.”³⁴ Not all passages that address emotions explicitly allude to this theory, but many do, and it probably provided an implicit starting point for reflection on emotion.

To contemporary readers, the salient aspects of negative emotions such as sorrow or fear are probably that they are painful or unpleasant to experience. We also recognize that when such emotions are especially strong, they hamper our ability to focus our attention and act normally or effectively.

³³ 草食之獸不疾易藪，水生之蟲不疾易水，行小變而不失其大常也，喜怒哀樂不入於胸次。

³⁴ Interestingly, the same passage characterizes various components of agency—rejection, pursuit, selecting, giving, cognition, and ability—as “obstructions” to *dào* (道之塞) (23/67–70). The passage itself advocates a radical stance in which agency is abandoned for the status of *wú wéi* 無為 (non-doing).

For Zhuangist writers, however, the fundamental problem with intense emotions is that they actually physically injure the agent by disrupting the normal, healthy balance of *qi* in the body. This physiological theory explains the frequent textual references to preventing emotions from “entering” (入) the chest, heart, or spirit and harming the agent by disturbing his internal harmony (滑和) (5/45) or “stirring up the chest” (盪胸) (23/69).³⁵ As Zhuāngzǐ explains in the exchange with Huì Shī cited above, the point of “lacking affects” (無情) is that the agent does not “internally injure himself with likes and dislikes” (5/57–58).³⁶ Zǐgāo’s stress-induced physical illness is just such an “internal injury,” one that impairs his “capacity” (才), so that, unlike Āi Tái Tuō’s, it is no longer “whole” or “intact” (全). Hence Zhòng Ní urges him to “nourish his center” (養中)—to take better care of his internal psycho-physical health.

The same physiological theory explains why emotions impede the agent’s ability to act well—that is, her ability to exercise *dé* in smoothly adjusting to circumstances so as to flow along with the *Dào* 道. Appropriate action in particular situations requires the capacity to adapt flexibly and fluidly to the situation. Emotions “bind” the agent to things, preventing such fluid responses. In so “binding” the agent, they block the free flow of *qi* through the heart and body and thus interfere with the agent’s ability to detect and react to features of his circumstances. Virtuoso action for the *Zhuāngzǐ* requires that the agent “fast” (齋) or “empty” (虛) the heart and employ the still, reactive, tenuous *qi* of his spirit and body to “listen” (聽) to things (4/26–28), so as to respond (應) to them “like a mirror” (若鏡) (7/32–33).³⁷ Emotions are “impediments to *dé*” (德之累) (23/67–70) or “diseases of *dé*” (德之邪) (15/14)

³⁵ For similar comments about emotions entering the chest, see too, e.g., 3/18, 6/52, 13/7, 19/14, and 21/32.

³⁶ 以好惡內傷其身。

³⁷ The notion of “listening with the *qi*” may be akin to the notion in modern *Tàijiquán* 太極拳 of using one’s calm *qi* to “listen to force” (聽勁).

that disturb this emptiness and equilibrium, allowing “diseased *qi*” (邪氣) to “attack” (襲) (15/9) and, presumably, stirring up the *qi* so that it fills the heart, leaving it “stuffed” (實) and congested, rather than “empty” (虛) and unobstructed. By maintaining a calm, empty state of affective equilibrium, the virtuoso keeps his *dé* and spirit (神) whole (全) and free of damage (虧) or defects (郤). Thus he is able to avoid injury while succeeding in practical affairs.³⁸

To contemporary ears, this theory may sound alien and fantastic, especially given the terminology of an archaic *qi* metaphysics and physiology. But I submit that if we read the theory metaphorically and discount somewhat for rhetorical excess, it overlaps considerably with plausible views familiar from contemporary performance psychology. Athletes, artistic performers, and craftspeople in various fields are all acquainted with the association between virtuoso performance and a loose, open, or “empty” psychological state in which we unselfconsciously “forget” ourselves, become more alert and responsive to our circumstances, remain calm and cool under pressure, and avoid misjudgment, hasty decisions, and faulty actions due to emotions or cognitive biases. We all understand what one *Zhuāngzǐ* passage is getting at, for instance, when it claims that good swimmers can easily learn how to handle a boat because they “forget the water”: they are as at home on water as on land, and thus no worries about the various ways their craft might capsize enter their hearts and interfere with their performance (19/22–25). Similarly, many of us have personal experience with the following phenomenon:

Playing for tiles, you’re skilled. Playing for fancy belt buckles, you get the shakes. Playing for gold, you’re a nervous wreck. Your skill is the same, but [in the latter two cases] there’s something you’re worrying about; this is putting weight on something outside yourself. Anyone who puts weight on what’s outside gets clumsy on the inside. (19/25–26)³⁹

³⁸ This summary draws on a number of passages, including primarily 7/32–33, 15/8–10, 19/11–15, and 23/67–70.

³⁹ 以瓦注者巧，以鉤注者憚，以黃金注者殫。其巧一也，而有所矜，則重外也。凡外重者內拙。

The more we worry about the outcome, the worse we perform. The Virtuoso View is in effect an extension of this truism so that it covers not merely games of skill but life as a whole. Just as an elite athlete or musician does not let emotions “enter” her chest to disrupt her competitive or artistic performance, the Virtuoso View advocates that we not allow emotions to disrupt our performance in life.

Grounds for the Virtuoso View

Before we can critically evaluate the Virtuoso View, we need to consider the grounds for it presented in the texts. Given the pivotal place of the Virtuoso View in the overall Zhuangist conception of the good life, these grounds converge and overlap with those for the broader eudaimonistic ideal of “wandering,” which I explore elsewhere.⁴⁰ Most of the considerations the anthology offers in favor of the Virtuoso View are thus also considerations in favor of the good life of wandering.

One justification for the Virtuoso View, as we have seen, lies in a conception of psycho-physiological health. Intense emotions are regarded as disrupting the normal, harmonious balance of *qi* and thus injuring the agent internally.

Another justification is that affective equanimity is thought to have instrumental value in facilitating effective performance of practical tasks. One expression of this point is the remark about how our skill in a game suffers in inverse proportion to our emotional investment in the prize. Another is Zhòng Ní’s claim that Zǐgāo will be able to handle his mission effectively enough if he can “act on the facts of the matter and forget himself” (4/43–44).

A further, deeper justification for the Virtuoso View extends these points into a distinctive Zhuangist conception of flourishing agency. I have suggested that the Zhuangist view of *dé* is exemplified by the intelligent, adaptive, responsive activity manifested in the

⁴⁰ See Fraser (forthcoming).

expert performance of skills. Such high-performance activities, I propose, are particular instantiations of the Zhuangist conception of a flourishing life—a life of *dé* and wandering. That is, the best kind of life, according to this eudaimonistic ideal, is one in which the agent constantly maintains a version of the “high-performance state” that obtains during such activity—to do so is just to employ *dé* in wandering. Typically, a constitutive element of high-performance activity is the sort of affective state the Virtuoso View describes. Since the Virtuoso View articulates the affective dimension of such activity, a justification for the eudaimonistic ideal concurrently yields a justification for it.

The preceding grounds are implicit in the connections between the Virtuoso View and various Zhuangist values. But the *Zhuāngzǐ* also argues explicitly for the Virtuoso View, or at least a closely related stance. The most common such argument is that this view is an appropriate response to the nature of reality and the human predicament, as the Zhuangist tradition construes them. The texts stress that we live in a world of constant flux and transformation, subject to forces we can neither control nor fully comprehend, in which our aims are often frustrated and things we value frequently pass away.⁴¹ Acknowledging these points is supposed to convert us to the Virtuoso View. Zhòng Ní, for instance, expects Zǐgāo to achieve affective equanimity by recognizing that some events “we can’t do anything about”; he will thus come to peace with them, “as with fate.”⁴² Zǐyú and, in a parallel passage, a man named Qín Shī 秦失 assume that once we see how gain and loss are a matter of the “moment” or “time” (時), we will be “at ease with the moment and dwell in the flow.” Those who cannot shift along with the flow will be punished emotionally for “fleeing from Nature” (遁天, 3/17–19), for nothing can “overcome Nature” (勝天, 6/52–53). Sūn Shū Áo

⁴¹ Moreover, according to Zhuangist skepticism, we lack sufficient grounds to justify any claim to know what is “finally” or “ultimately” (*guǒ* 果) of value, and we have good grounds for thinking there are a plurality of contextually justifiable values available to us (see Fraser 2009). Hence we cannot justify total emotional investment in any particular thing or project.

⁴² 知其不可奈何而安之若命。

explains that he had no strong emotional reactions to his repeated political promotions and dismissals, as he regarded these as inevitable, gain and loss ultimately being beyond his control (21/62–65). Zhuāngzǐ recovered from grief over his wife’s death when he recognized how her death was part of an inexorable process, such as the procession of the four seasons (18/18),⁴³ and concluded that continuing to mourn her showed he was “incompetent with respect to fate” (不通乎命, 18/19).

A core, repeated Zhuangist contention, then, is that cognitive acknowledgement of our inefficacy in the face of “the inevitable” (不得已) or “fate” (命) justifies and produces affective equanimity. The idea seems to be that once we properly recognize the limits of our efficacy as agents, we will withdraw any intense emotional investment from things that fall outside the scope of our control. Clearly, however, people often do have emotional investments in things that are beyond their power. To give a trivial example, many people are invested emotionally in how their national team performs in World Cup soccer. So the route from acknowledging our inefficacy to adopting the Virtuoso View is not a direct one. If it is to work, the justification requires some intermediate steps.

I suggest that these steps may run roughly as follows. For the *Zhuāngzǐ*, *dé* is our Nature-given capacity to exercise agency in navigating *Dào*. As human beings, we have a fundamental, instinctive inclination to employ our *dé*, or exert our capacity for agency. Once we recognize the limits to our efficacy, we see that adopting certain kinds of aims and commitments tends to frustrate this inclination. We will exercise *dé* more effectively and enjoy a more fulfilling life if we reorient ourselves toward aims and commitments that offer a greater chance of success. But success in pursuing any particular aim or commitment is contingent (有待) on “external things” (外物) over which we have no control (無奈).

⁴³ 今又變而之死，是相與為春秋冬夏四時行也。

Moreover, “external things can’t be taken for certain” (26/1).⁴⁴ Only a wholly “internal” project—one not contingent (無待) on anything “external”—can enable us to transcend contingency, ensuring that success lies entirely in our power. But there is only one such project: the higher-order project of the practice of *dé* itself—or, identically, the project of “wandering.”

If we adopt this as our core project, then we identify with the process of wandering itself—a process that is itself free of contingency, insofar as it consists precisely in continual adaptation to contingently changing circumstances. (To commit to wandering in this way amounts also to committing to follow *Dào*; so it probably also entails identifying with the “Great *Dào*” of the cosmos.⁴⁵) Our core values or commitments thus shift away from what we cannot control to what we can. We focus on the higher-order, ongoing process of wandering, rather than on the outcome of any particular first-order activity. Having identified with this “constant” (常), higher-order project, we experience affective equanimity, for we “bind” ourselves to no particular external things and our aims can be neither wholly completed (as wandering continues indefinitely) nor defeated (as we can wander with virtuosity regardless of external circumstances). As some *Zhuāngzǐ* passages indicate,⁴⁶ wandering itself can produce emotions of ease, happiness, or fulfillment, much as a virtuoso performer is likely to experience satisfaction or fulfillment during a performance.

Through a certain conception of *dé* and its fulfillment, then, reflection on “the inevitable” and our place in the cosmic process of transformation may justify and motivate a life of wandering and with it the Virtuoso View. But why accept this conception of *dé*—and the conception of flourishing agency I am proposing goes hand-in-hand with it? The Zhuangist stance is that this construal of *dé* represents the fullest expression of our natural

⁴⁴ 外物不可必。

⁴⁵ Since our death is part of *Dào*, this is at the same time a commitment to eventually facing and accepting our own death.

capacities (才) as human beings. Fundamentally, what we are is creatures who are able to employ *dé* in this fashion—to exert powers of intelligent, critical, responsive, flexible agency in undertaking particular projects while simultaneously maintaining critical awareness of the limitations of these projects, the plurality of alternative projects, and the place of our lives and activity in the “Big Picture,” the cosmic perspective of Nature (天) or the “Great *Dào*.” The flourishing exercise of *dé*—the fullest application of our powers of agency—requires that we “dwell in the flow,” in such a way that our emotional ties to “external things” are always provisional, transitory, and easily released. The result is emotional equanimity. The justification for the Virtuoso View is thus partly aesthetic, in that it identifies certain features of our activity as the highest, finest, or most admirable, and partly teleological, in that it claims that such a life best fulfills our capacities.

Other Zhuangist Views of Emotion

As I indicated at the outset, the Virtuoso View is a construction based on diverse theoretical elements presented in different *Zhuāngzǐ* passages. Moreover, it is surely not the only view of emotion found in the *Zhuāngzǐ*. At least two other views are prominent, one more moderate than the Virtuoso View, one more radical.⁴⁷ The first is illustrated by the story of *Zhuāngzǐ*'s wife dying (18/15–19). At first, *Zhuāngzǐ* grieves for his loss; only later does he begin to place his wife's death in the context of natural transformations, until he eventually recovers from his grief. I take this to imply that, contrary to the Virtuoso View, he first allows grief to “enter,” and only later recovers equanimity and moves on.⁴⁸ The second,

⁴⁶ See, e.g., 3/11, 5/45–46, 6/27–28, and 21/24–38.

⁴⁷ Olberding (2007) and Chan (forthcoming) both identify at least two distinct views of emotion in the *Zhuāngzǐ*. Chan contrasts a position similar to the Virtuoso View with a radical view such as that described below. Olberding contrasts a position roughly similar to the Virtuoso View with a more moderate view and argues that the latter better reflects basic Zhuangist values. I will attempt to argue for a more aggressive Zhuangist stance on emotions than Olberding seems to think plausible, but will also reaffirm several of the important challenges she directs toward such a stance.

⁴⁸ One could argue, however, that this story is fully consistent with the Virtuoso View, as *Zhuāngzǐ* himself says that his grief signaled “incompetence” (不通)—and thus a lack of virtuosity—with respect to “fate” (命).

more radical view characterizes the sage as merging so wholly with natural patterns as to have no emotions whatsoever. Such a figure ceases to exercise agency or live a recognizably human life at all. He is like “an infant,” who “acts without knowing what he is doing, moves without knowing where he is going, his body like the limb of a withered tree and heart like dead ashes” (23/41).⁴⁹ He lives “as if drifting”; he “does not think or deliberate, does not plan ahead,” but instead “moves only when pushed” (15/12).⁵⁰

For the purposes of this discussion, however, I will largely set these other views aside. The radical view is too implausible; it amounts to the extinction of human agency in pursuit of complete spiritual union with nature.⁵¹ It founders on a single fundamental problem: given that human life, like that of all other creatures, is part of and issues from the *Dào* of Nature, how can the finest way of life for us possibly be to *abandon* our most distinctive feature—our Nature-given capacity for agency?⁵² On the other hand, the moderate view seems easily defensible on commonsense grounds, but it fails to fully do justice to the considerations the *Zhuāngzǐ* offers in favor of the Virtuoso View.

My concern in the remainder of the paper, then, will be to consider several potential objections to the Virtuoso View, in order to explore to what extent it may be defensible. Perhaps the Virtuoso View inevitably slides into the radical view, in which case it should be rejected. Or perhaps in the end it is not really distinct from the moderate view. In that case it might be defensible, but less challenging or distinctive than it seems at first glance.

Abandoning Intentionality?

In this and the next two sections, I will briefly consider several of the most important objections that might be raised against the Virtuoso View. The complexity and depth of these

⁴⁹ 兒子動不知所為，行不知所之，身若槁木之枝而心若死灰。

⁵⁰ 其生若浮...不思慮，不豫謀...迫而後動。

⁵¹ The radical view thus has a distinctly soteriological flavor and might be regarded as a form of religious enthusiasm. I discuss a version of this view more sympathetically in Fraser (2008).

objections precludes addressing them thoroughly in a short essay, but I can at least suggest roughly how an adequate response might run.

The first and most fundamental objection is that by advocating affective equanimity toward the outcomes of the various particular projects in our lives, the Virtuoso View may in effect be indirectly advocating that we abandon intentionality and thus agency. I have proposed that the Virtuoso View is part of a package of Zhuangist ideas that depict a life in which we exert our powers of agency in the fullest, most flourishing way. The objection is that on the contrary, a life without deep emotional commitments would be one in which we fail to exert agency at all.⁵³ Perhaps the simplest way to make this point is simply to observe that if we do not care deeply about anything, then we will lack motivation to act and may cease to employ agency. A more profound and elaborate way of articulating roughly the same idea emerges from Heidegger's analysis of the structure of Dasein, the way of being distinctive of agents such as ourselves. Heidegger famously proposes that *Sorge*—"care," including concern about things and solicitude for others—is the unifying, fundamental feature of Dasein's way of being-in-the-world (1962, 237ff.). By "care," of course, Heidegger is not referring simply to particular emotions such as worry or grief, but to a feature of the existential-ontological structure of our way of being (1962, 241). Still, a consequence of his interpretation of this structure is that some form of affective commitment is integral to the sort of intentionality characteristic of Dasein and thus of human agency. This objection also highlights an internal tension in the Zhuangist view as I presented it. I suggested that the Virtuoso View is akin to an extrapolation of familiar features of performance psychology to life as a whole. But one might object that this extrapolation is misconceived, or is perhaps even a category mistake. Performance psychology concerns how to effectively pursue

⁵² A view akin to the radical view is aptly mocked in *Zhuāngzǐ* Book 33, "All Under Heaven" 天下, where it is dubbed "a pattern for dead people" (死人之理), "not the conduct of living people" (非生人之行) (33/51).

practical aims or purposes to which we have committed ourselves. Virtuosity is generally defined with respect to such aims or purposes; without commitment to some aim or purpose, the concept becomes empty. Yet any such commitment entails some degree of affective involvement. So there can be no such thing as virtuosity without affective involvement.

I think these objections do tell against the radical view of emotion described in the preceding section. But the Virtuoso View, as I have attempted to articulate it, does not advocate totally forsaking all affective attitudes and abandoning all commitments to particular projects. The texts do not imply that figures such as Wáng Tái, Āi Tái Tuō, or Sūn Shū Áo undertake no projects at all. Just the contrary: Sūn Shū Áo, for example, three times accepted appointment as premier of his state. In the Zǐgāo story, Zhòng Ní explicitly claims that all of us inevitably find ourselves with certain commitments, minimally to our family and state. And of course the various Zhuangist exemplars of virtuosity in practical skills—such as Páo Dīng 庖丁 the butcher—make commitments and pursue concrete aims.⁵⁴ What the Virtuoso View advocates is that our fundamental commitment be to the higher-order project of wandering, or the life of *dé*. As part of that higher-order project, we will make numerous provisional, conditional commitments to particular projects—just as, while wandering through a foreign city while sightseeing, at any one time we will provisionally commit to traveling in one direction or another. To wander is not to remain motionless; nor is it merely to “drift,” as the radical sage is said to do (15/12).

As to whether there is such a thing as a sort of overarching, higher-order virtuosity in life, distinct from virtuosity in particular, concrete skills or activities, I suggest that a generalized conception of virtuosity can be delineated by abstracting features common to

⁵³ Olberding (2007) raises a related worry, that achieving total equanimity, as some Zhuangist figures are said to do, entails sacrificing the responsiveness needed to achieve the delight in life that other Zhuangist figures are depicted enjoying.

⁵⁴ Nivison (2000) makes these points well.

various particular forms of virtuosity. The virtuoso of life realizes such features both in how he handles particular projects and in how he approaches life as a whole.

A Fundamental Tension

Another critical question we might raise is whether the Virtuoso View might be fundamentally incoherent, leaving us with a schizophrenic conception of agency. The Virtuoso View conceives of agency as in effect comprising two simultaneous, contrasting moments or dimensions. Through the first moment—the “engaged” moment—we commit to particular activities or projects. Through the second—the “wandering” moment—we look beyond these, situating them within the context of the Great *Dào* of the cosmos and treating them as contingent, subordinate parts of an ongoing flow of virtuoso activity.⁵⁵ This second moment renders us always ready to detach from a commitment if circumstances make doing so the most appropriate way to “dwell in the flow.” (For example, we would detach ourselves from many of our commitments if a calamity forced us to dramatically change our life plans.) A critic might object that these dual moments are incompatible or that they make genuine commitment to particular projects impossible. The critic might doubt whether we can really be committed to a project while simultaneously appreciating its contingency and being prepared to relinquish it.⁵⁶ Perhaps the potential for detachment provided by the second moment of agency might interfere with our capacity for commitment and perseverance, by launching a slide into nihilism, indecisiveness, or indifference.

The possibility of such interference is unavoidable, I think. Indeed, most of us have experienced it at one time or another. Yet I contend that the potential conflict between the two moments is not a defect of the Virtuoso View. To the contrary, this conflict is manageable, and indeed it is essential to a fully human way of life.

⁵⁵ As Nivison (2000, 180) observes, the Zhuangist adept achieves a form of “detachment-in-engagement” that allows him to focus wholly on the performance of skills associated with his role in life without being “worn down” by doing so.

The grounds for claiming that the conflict between the moments is manageable are that, as a matter of fact, many people do manage it successfully in their daily lives. For example, for several weeks now, I have been strongly committed to the project of writing this essay. Researching and planning it has taken up much of my time. This project is meaningful to me. My commitment to it and related projects forms part of my self-identity. However, I am also acutely aware that the project is an expression of intellectual interests that by the standards of mainstream society are marginal and largely inconsequential. The project is likely to be of vanishingly little significance even in my tiny subfield within contemporary academia, let alone in 21st-century world philosophy, the scope of human history, or the broader cosmic scheme. If circumstances forced me to drop the project entirely, I would let it go with at most only mild, passing regret and simply look for a worthwhile new direction in which to exert agency and reshape my identity.

To be sure, as the hypothetical critic worries, an obsession with the contingency of our lives and values might generate nihilism, an excessively critical pessimism, or an inability to appreciate goods or persevere in projects. But equally, commitment without appreciation of contingency can easily produce dogmatism, closed-mindedness, and frustration. Performance psychology indicates that developing the “wandering” moment of agency contributes to our capacity for virtuoso performance. I suggest that this moment is probably also an element of robust mental health. More profoundly, to fail to find a balance between the engaged and wandering moments—and thus exert our ability to engage in Zhuangist wandering—is simply to fail to adequately develop our cognitive and affective capacities. A proponent of the Virtuoso View would also contend that failure to find a balance between the two constitutes a failure to acknowledge reality—it amounts to “fleeing from Nature and turning one’s back on reality” (3/17), rather than competently integrating the

⁵⁶ Wong (2003, 409) raises such a concern, suggesting that “detachment and engagement cannot coexist at the

spheres of “Nature” (天) and “the human” (人). Flourishing human agency requires bringing both moments into play. On the Zhuangist view, what we fundamentally are is “wanderers of the Way,” and an authentic human life—a life of *dé*—is a life of such wandering. Wandering involves simultaneously balancing commitments to particular projects with a grasp of broader contexts and the place of our projects within them, while also making a higher-level commitment to wandering itself. Given the facts about Nature and fate (命, also “mandate”), humans are in effect “mandated to wander,” whether or not we do so willingly and in self-awareness. The question is not whether to live a life of wandering; it is how to do so with virtuosity.

The Virtuoso View as I have developed it here converges in several respects with the views of two important 20th-century philosophers. One is Thomas Nagel, who in several works has explored the tension between two contrasting standpoints human beings can take up toward themselves and their lives.⁵⁷ The first is an internal, subjective standpoint in which we engage with various purposes and projects; the second is an external, objective standpoint in which we step back to survey our lives with detachment. Nagel links the tension between these standpoints to philosophical problems concerning the meaning of life, personal identity, and agent-centered versus agent-neutral approaches to ethics, among other issues. Yet he insists that “there is no credible way of eliminating the inner conflict” produced by our ability to take up these two standpoints (1986, 221). Rather, the tension between them is “one of the most human things about us: a manifestation of our most advanced and interesting characteristics” (1979, 23). An acute sense of this tension “is the opposite of self-denial and the result of full awareness” (1986, 223).

The other thinker I have in mind is Heidegger, whom I mentioned earlier. On the one hand, Heidegger contends that “care” and a consequent “resoluteness” are fundamental

same time in the same mind but must alternate in ascendancy.”

aspects of our way of being as agents.⁵⁷ But on the other hand, he also contends that “authentic resoluteness” simultaneously requires both an attitude of committed “holding-for-true” toward what is disclosed by our way of life and “a resolute holding-oneself-free for taking back” (1962, 355). As John Haugeland glosses this point, “resoluteness cannot become rigidly set in its ways about its situation, but rather must be held open and free for whatever its current possibility is. In particular, it must hold itself free for a possible—and, in each case, necessary—*taking it back*” (2000, 68; original italics). For Heidegger, this dual structure of commitment and “holding-oneself-free” to withdraw that commitment explains how “Dasein becomes free...from the events of the world” (1963, 358). It stands at the core of his conception of the authentic life.

A Good Life?

A third set of objections concerns the place of emotions in the good life. A critic might argue that some emotions—such as intense joy—have intrinsic value. A life without them might thus seem less good than one in which they regularly occur.⁵⁹ Or a critic could argue that emotions such as joy and grief may be justified responses to value. Their absence thus might signal a lack of proper appreciation of value. When Hui Shī 惠施 castigates Zhuāngzǐ for celebrating, rather than mourning, his wife’s death, he enumerates events of value in their married life—such that she was his partner in raising children—implying that Zhuāngzǐ’s conduct demonstrates a failure to appreciate them properly (18/15–19). A life without such appreciation of value may be one that is thereby less good. If emotions are a

⁵⁷ See especially Nagel (1979, 11–23, 196–213) and (1986, 214–223).

⁵⁸ As John Haugeland explains (1982, 24), “resoluteness” refers to a self-understanding that claims one’s roles in life as one’s own, by one’s own choice, and thus resolves conflicts that may produce an inconsistent self-understanding. “Insofar as self-understanding critically takes over its roles” and achieves resoluteness, it is “self-owned” or “authentic” (*eigentlich*).

⁵⁹ Naturally, by the same token, intense negative emotions, such as grief, would detract from the value of life. A life of pleasant equanimity might thus be equally good or better than one that mixes intense positive and negative emotional experiences, unless the negative emotions were significantly outweighed by positive ones.

necessary part of appreciating value, then the Virtuoso View may advocate a life that is defective, at least by some standards of value.

Both these potential objections are variations on an underlying general worry, namely that in endorsing a life of affective equanimity, or at least a life in which the four intense emotions of joy, anger, sorrow, and delight rarely or never occur, the Virtuoso View is neglecting crucial features of a good human life.⁶⁰

Before addressing this line of objection, we should reiterate that the Virtuoso View need not advocate the total absence of emotion. It is committed only to rejecting intense, disruptive emotional states that impair our *dé*. Any particular project an agent might pursue necessitates applying action-guiding value distinctions, such as provisional *shì-fēi* distinctions.⁶¹ Since, as I explained earlier, such distinctions probably include an affective component, the Virtuoso View can allow for mild affective responses to circumstances and thus the appreciation of value through such responses. It insists only that such emotional responses not be so strong as to disrupt the prevailing general state of calm or ease associated with “dwelling in the flow,” so that our *dé* or capacities (*cái* 才) remain unimpaired.⁶²

A quick, preliminary response to this third set of objections would be to point out that, in the *Zhuāngzǐ*'s native intellectual context, against the backdrop of the psycho-physiological *qì* theory described earlier, intense emotions are regarded as injurious to health. Thus they actually impede, not foster, the agent's ability to participate in or appreciate valuable aspects of life. The Virtuoso View purports to solve this

⁶⁰ This is also one aspect of the general criticism, articulated in the *Xúnzǐ*, that the *Zhuāngzǐ* injudiciously favors the perspective of Nature (天) over that of “the human” (人). See *Xúnzǐ Yǐndé* 荀子引得 (*A Concordance to Xúnzǐ*) (1986), Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series, Supplement no. 22 (reprint) (Shànghǎi: Shànghǎi Gǔjī), 21/22.

⁶¹ Of course, many *Zhuāngzǐ* passages famously advocate that we not intentionally *guide* action by fixed *shì-fēi* distinctions. Nevertheless, even if action is produced through a contextual, responsive process, in the course of any action we will implicitly draw such distinctions, though they may be provisional, flexible, and contingent on the particular situation.

psycho-physiological problem and so enhance the goodness of the agent's life. Even if we set aside early Chinese psycho-physiological beliefs, I think a parallel claim is to some extent defensible, insofar as we can agree with Zhuangist writers that powerful emotions can so severely disrupt our ability to function normally as to render us unable to appreciate or realize any value at all. However, for the sake of discussion, let's set this point aside. Indeed, let's set aside the entire justification for the Virtuoso View given earlier and examine only new considerations.

Faced with these objections that intense emotions contribute to a good life, an advocate of the Virtuoso View could probably offer two fresh points in its defense. First, it is doubtful that intense emotion is an indispensable modality through which we appreciate value. An agent can fully appreciate the value of something without feeling strong emotions about it. Consider Zhuāngzǐ's status once he comes to see his wife's death in the context of natural processes and recovers from his initial grief (18/15–19). Although his sorrow has passed, he strongly affirms the value of her life. Indeed, it is a normal and nearly universal experience for us to continue to appreciate the value of things or events, whether positive or negative, long after our initial emotional response to them has faded and we have recovered affective equilibrium. The Virtuoso View merely advocates that this normal adjustment process take place much more quickly—preferably instantaneously—than it does for most people. This difference in the rate and ease of adjustment is part of what makes the Zhuangist virtuoso a “virtuoso”: like a virtuoso in any other field, she handles difficult adjustments more adeptly than other people do.⁶³

⁶² Olberding (2007) also develops an interpretation on which Zhuangist Daoism might sanction a certain range of emotional responses, which she argues are essential components of the conception of human flourishing she finds in the text.

⁶³ As Fox (1996) puts it, the text is in effect describing the behavior and attitudes of the perfectly well-adjusted person, someone wholly at ease in all situations. As he observes, it is unclear whether Zhuangists advocate that everyone should or could be like this.

Second, arguably the Virtuoso View exchanges certain familiar affective experiences—such as the four intense emotions—for other, more sophisticated affective experiences that are of greater value. By contextualizing mundane human events such as birth and death within an overarching cosmic order, the Virtuoso View may lead to deeper, more profound appreciation of their value, as illustrated by Zhuāngzǐ’s considered appreciation of his wife’s life. It may yield appreciation of values the agent previously overlooked, as when Lǎozǐ claims (21/24–38) that by identifying with the *Dào*-totality and the cosmic process of transformation, achieving affective equanimity, and “letting the heart wander in the beginning of things,” he has experienced “ultimate beauty and ultimate happiness.” And it may yield fulfillment and satisfaction from the peak employment of our capacities, as illustrated by Páo Dīng’s satisfaction upon finishing a piece of work (3/11).⁶⁴

Still, we should acknowledge that some *Zhuāngzǐ* passages do slide from descriptions suggestive of the Virtuoso View into more radical claims—claims that might legitimately prompt worries along the lines of the “good life” objection.⁶⁵

Consider the story of Mèngsūn Cǎi 孟孫才, as related by Yán Huí 顏回 and Zhòng Ní (6/75–82). When his mother died, Mèngsūn displayed no grief and felt no emotional disturbance. He merely carried out her funeral competently, in accordance with social expectations. Unlike Zhuāngzǐ, who needed time to recover emotionally after his wife’s death, Mèngsūn adjusted instantly. Clearly, however, he also respected social mores and others’ reactions; he wailed aloud at his mother’s funeral in order to accompany the other mourners, who were genuinely distressed. In these respects, his attitudes and conduct seem to square with the Virtuoso View. At least initially, the story does not present him as a

⁶⁴ Heidegger makes a parallel observation when he remarks, of authentic resoluteness, that “along with the sober anxiety which brings us face to face with our individualized potentiality-for-Being, there goes an unshakable joy in this possibility” (1962, 358). That is, in the authentic exercise of agency, the simultaneous, dual movement of commitment and holding back, while recognizing the various possibilities open to us, produces a form of joy.

supra-human sage who has transcended mundane human concerns. But Zhòng Ní goes on to remark that “Mr. Mèngsūn doesn’t know why things live, nor why they die; he doesn’t know to take the lead, nor to follow behind. It’s as if he has transformed into a thing that merely awaits [further] transformations that he doesn’t know about, that’s all” (6/77–78).⁶⁶ The passage goes on to question the basis of self-identity and to imply that the ideal state is one in which we simply flow along with natural transformations, accept “the arrangement” (排) and “enter the unity of the empty sky” (入於寥天一)—phrases we might read as implying that Mèngsūn has relinquished the basis of agency. Thus the passage ultimately seems to present a quite radical vision of the good life, one that diverges considerably from the Virtuoso View or other ideals to which we can easily relate.⁶⁷

I suggest that this passage reflects an inherent conflict in much Daoist thought between, on the one hand, self-fulfillment and virtuoso agency, and, on the other, a critical grasp of the limitations of our knowledge, acknowledgment of the mystery and indeterminateness of the self, and recognition of our place in the broader cosmic picture. Some *Zhuāngzǐ* passages maintain a balance between these dimensions of human life. Others, such as this one, tip toward a more extreme view, in this case recommending that we take up the cosmic standpoint and “enter the unity of the empty sky,” an image that echoes the radical ideal of relinquishing individual agency in order to “merge with the power of Nature” (合天德) (15/13–14). (In the original Chinese, a single word, *tiān* 天, refers here to both the sky and Nature.) This conflict represents one aspect of perhaps the fundamental problematic of Daoist philosophy: the appropriate relation between the realm of “Nature” (天) and that of

⁶⁵ Olberding (2007) calls attention to the conflicts between such passages and more moderate ones, such as *Zhuāngzǐ*’s response to his wife’s death.

⁶⁶ 孟孫氏不知所以生，不知所以死；不知就先，不知就後；若化為物以待其所不知之化已乎。

⁶⁷ Yearley (1983) long ago noted the distance between this “radical” side of *Zhuangist* thought and mundane human values. Olberding (2007) sees the equanimity displayed by Mèngsūn as leading to a life that is less good than one that makes room for grief and ensuing adaptation, as illustrated in the story of *Zhuāngzǐ*’s wife’s death.

“the human” (人). Taken as a whole, the *Zhuāngzǐ* presents an extended conversation on this problematic, in which different passages throughout the anthology explore different positions.

Concluding Remarks

Core elements of the Virtuoso View are surely plausible, and arguably the view as a whole is as well. The Virtuoso View may exaggerate somewhat by depicting the virtuoso as experiencing no disruptive emotions whatsoever. Perhaps the virtuoso is instead comparable to an athlete whose concentration on the ongoing flow of the game pushes emotions from the center of consciousness to the far periphery, such that even though they are not wholly eliminated, their effects are minimized. But a Zhuangist proponent might reply that the athlete illustrates exactly what is meant by not allowing emotions to “enter” the chest and disrupt the agent’s psycho-physiological harmony. The virtuoso ideal simply extends the familiar phenomenon observed in the athlete to our performance in life as a whole. Again, the Virtuoso View may exaggerate in treating all of life as an extended “performance state.” For it seems that sometimes we do not “perform,” but only observe, contemplate, appreciate, and so forth. Yet a defender of the Virtuoso View could plausibly reply that these activities are all aspects or parts of the long-term performance of our life projects. One conclusion we might draw, then, is that the Virtuoso View is largely defensible. Perhaps it exaggerates in some respects, but the exaggerations are understandable, at least partly plausible, and probably easily mitigated.

A critic could push for a different, more pessimistic conclusion, however. One could argue that the Virtuoso View tends inevitably toward a radical stance in which human agency is swallowed up in an identification with the totality of Nature (天) and its courses (道) of transformation (化). This tendency is illustrated by the story of Mèngsūn Cǎi and perhaps by other figures, such as Zǐyú, the deformed, dying friend who eagerly anticipates being

remolded by “the maker of things” (造物者, 6/47–48) into whatever contingent form might happen to come next.

As a closing thought, I want to suggest that this potentially radical consequence of the Virtuoso View—or, alternatively, the running conflict in the *Zhuāngzǐ* between the Virtuoso View of emotion and the radical view—simply reflects the inescapable Nagelian conflict between subjective commitment to our particular lives and projects and the transcendent, objective stance that our critical and reflective capacities enable us to adopt, in which we view our concerns in a broader context. In Zhuangist terms, this conflict maps roughly onto the distinction between “the human” and “Nature” or the “Great *Dào*.” It is no surprise that Zhuangist discourse does not fully resolve the conflict between these stances, since, as Nagel himself emphasizes (1986, 221), it is probably ineliminable. It represents a genuine dichotomy in our nature and self-understanding, one that arises from spontaneous employment of our capacities for thought and agency. Some *Zhuāngzǐ* passages do, however, affirm the possibility of balancing these two dimensions of agency (see, e.g., 6/20 and 17/50–53),⁶⁸ such that, as one passage puts it, “Neither Nature nor the human defeats the other” (6/20).⁶⁹ As in Heidegger, such a balance is associated with a conception of authenticity: a person who achieves it has “returned to the authentic” (反其真, 17/53) or become an “authentic human” (真人, 6/20). Heidegger and Nagel, I believe, are correct to contend that in the fullest realization of human agency, the contrasting moments of engagement and wandering operate simultaneously. I conclude that this mode of agency converges in many respects with the Virtuoso View and the Zhuangist ideal of *dé*.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ For an insightful discussion of this balance, see Puett (2003), who concludes that this strand of Zhuangist thought aims not at “transcendence of the human but rather a continuation and perfection of the Heaven within man” (258).

⁶⁹ 天與人不相勝也。

⁷⁰ An earlier version of this paper was presented at “Reflection on Philosophical Roots of Korean Emotion: Emotion in Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism,” Chonnam National University, Gwangju, South Korea,

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