

## *Xunzi* versus *Zhuangzi*:

### Two Approaches to Death in Classical Chinese Thought

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**Abstract** The contrasting approaches to death and bereavement in classical Confucianism and Daoism epitomize the different orientations of the two ethical traditions. Confucianism, here represented by Xunzi, interprets and manages death and bereavement through distinctive cultural practices, specifically rituals and associated norms of propriety, which are intended to bring order, harmony, and beauty to human events and conduct. Daoism, here represented by the *Zhuangzi*, contextualizes and copes with death and loss through an understanding of and identification with natural processes. Both approaches address death and bereavement through a systematic, naturalistic philosophy of life that makes no appeal to a conception of divinity or a personal afterlife. For Xunzi, the heart of this system is ritual propriety, through which all human affairs—including inevitable, natural events such as death—must be mediated. For the *Zhuangzi*, by contrast, rigid, ritualized cultural forms are an obstacle to coping efficiently with natural processes such as death. Rather than constructing a sphere of “the human” as distinct from “the natural,” the *Zhuangzi* urges us to situate the human within nature in a way that removes the opposition between the two. This essay contrasts and critiques the two approaches, contending that although Xunzi’s theory of ritual presents a plausible account of the relation between humanity, culture, and nature, it fails to address death appropriately as an inexorable, natural event. By contrast, the *Zhuangzi* presents an attractive way of relating human life and death to nature and thus perhaps offers a means of finding solace concerning death. The essay suggests, however, that the Zhuangist stance may be grounded primarily in a certain ethical or aesthetic attitude, rather than in an objectively compelling argument. Ultimately, both approaches may rest as much on contrasting ethical and aesthetic sensibilities as on rational argumentation.

**Keywords** Confucianism, Daoism, *Xunzi*, *Zhuangzi*, death, ritual

## Introduction

The contrasting approaches to death, dying, and bereavement found in classical Confucianism and Daoism epitomize the fundamentally different orientations of the two ethical traditions. Confucianism, as represented by Xunzi, interprets and seeks to manage death and bereavement through distinctive cultural practices—specifically, through ritual propriety (*li* 礼), a combination of elaborate rituals and associated norms of propriety. These rituals and norms are intended to bring order (*zhi* 治), harmony (*he* 和), and beauty (*mei* 美) to human events and conduct. By contrast, Daoism, as represented by the *Zhuangzi* anthology, contextualizes and copes with death and loss through an understanding of and identification with inevitable natural processes, denoted by terms such as Nature (*tian* 天) and fate (*ming* 命). For the *Zhuangzi*, to conform intelligently to natural patterns is at the same time to achieve harmony and order.

Both approaches address death and bereavement as an integral part of a systematic, naturalistic philosophy of life that makes no appeal to a conception of divinity or a personal afterlife. In Xunzi’s Confucianism, the heart of the system is the concept of ritual propriety (*li* 礼), through which all human affairs, including inevitable, natural events such as death, must be mediated. To Xunzi, such cultural mediation, or “patterning” (*li* 理), of nature is what makes us fully human. The *Zhuangzi*, too, recognizes that human activity and cultural practices organize or impose patterns on nature. But for Zhuangist writers, attachment to rigid cultural forms such as those Xunzi advocates is an obstacle to coping efficiently with the flux of natural processes. Rather than constructing a sphere of human culture that stands in contrast to nature, the *Zhuangzi* urges us to situate the human within nature in a way that removes the opposition between them. This essay contrasts and critiques these two approaches, with the aim of elucidating the potential insights they may offer into the significance of death and associated cultural practices. Although Xunzi’s theory of ritual presents a plausible account of the relation

between humanity, culture, and nature, I argue, his treatment of death fails to address death appropriately as an inexorable natural event. By contrast, the *Zhuangzi* may offer an attractive way of relating human life and death to nature and thus perhaps of finding solace concerning death. I suggest, however, that the Zhuangist stance rests ultimately on the appeal of a certain ethical or aesthetic attitude toward life, death, and the world, rather than on a rationally compelling argument, and thus it cannot claim to be the uniquely “right” way of approaching death. Indeed, both approaches might aptly be described as expressions of contrasting ethical and aesthetic temperaments or sensibilities concerning life, death, and the relation between human culture and the broader realm of nature.

### Xunzi’s Ethics

Xunzi’s approach to death is an integral part of his overall ethical philosophy. He holds that all aspects of life are to be guided by a comprehensive system of ritual or ceremonial propriety (*li*) and duties (*yi* 义) associated with one’s “part” (*fen* 分) or role in a hierarchical, authoritarian social structure.<sup>1</sup> His main justification for this system is that it is the most effective way of “patterning” or “organizing” (*li* 理) the natural world—including human beings, in their natural, uncultured state—so as to achieve social “order” (*zhi* 治), and, as a result, material welfare. The system is effective, he thinks, because it is uniquely successful in “aligning” (*can* 参) the human, cultural world with natural conditions. He also holds that the sorts of cultural and ethical norms manifested in such a system of ritual propriety and duty are what make us fully human; our capacity to live by such norms is what distinguishes us from lower creatures and enables us to dominate them. To live according to ritual propriety and duty is to fulfill our human capacities. Xunzi implies that such a life is not merely ethically and materially better than alternatives but aesthetically more beautiful. Indeed, among the “ordering” functions of ritual propriety is that it provides elegant cultural forms (*wen* 文) by which emotions such as care (*ai* 爱) and reverence (*jing* 敬) can be expressed and the beauty (*mei*) of fulfilling one’s duty can be realized (Xunzi 1966, 19.63–64; Watson 1963, 100).<sup>2</sup> Attitudes or affects (*qing* 情) constitute the content or purpose of ritual propriety; ritual forms and patterns are their orderly, elegant outward manifestation. Ritual propriety is necessary because without it people may be inclined to act in a disorderly way, on the brute, uncultured impulses generated by their spontaneous attitudes.

It is crucial in understanding Xunzi to see that “order” or “control” (*zhi*) is a paramount value for him. His conception of “order” seems to comprise moral, aesthetic, and political aspects. It is achieved through a society-wide exertion of effort in moral and cultural training, focusing on ritual propriety (*li*). Order contrasts with disorder or chaos (*luan* 亂), which Xunzi associates with natural, spontaneous, uncultivated impulses and conduct. Nature—including human nature—in itself is disorderly; order is produced by imposing ethical-cultural patterns onto nature.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed presentation of Xunzi’s ethics and the role of ritual propriety in it, see Fraser (2012, 261–69), on which this summary is based. The metaethical views that undergird Xunzi’s ethics are treated in Fraser (in press). Both articles provide extensive citations from primary texts and references to the secondary literature, which I therefore largely omit here. For a brief, helpful summary of Xunzi’s doctrines, see Robins (2007). For a more in-depth discussion, with a detailed review of the literature, see Hagen (2007). Hutton (2007) offers a helpful critical review of Hagen. Other informative treatments of Xunzi’s ethics can be found in Ivanhoe (1991) and Hansen (1992).

<sup>2</sup> References to the *Xunzi* cite chapter and line numbers in the Harvard-Yenching concordance (Xunzi 1966), which are also provided in the electronic text of the *Xunzi* at the Chinese Text Project (<http://ctext.org/xunzi>). All translations are my own, but for readers’ convenience I also cite the Watson translation (Watson 1963). Watson’s interpretations and my own frequently diverge significantly, however.

<sup>3</sup> In this respect, Xunzi’s metaethical position can helpfully be characterized as “constructivist.” See Hagen (2007) and the discussion in Fraser (in press).

## Xunzi on Death

Xunzi devotes much of his lengthy “Discourse on Ritual Propriety” (“Li Lun” 礼论) to a discussion of death. His concern is to explain the significance and functions of the various rituals through which the “Erudites” (*Ru* 儒, also “Confucians”) of his time handled death and mourning. These rituals manifest the ethical significance of death and life, he claims (Xunzi 1966, 19.89–90; Watson 1963, 105). Death, like life, is to be “ordered” or “managed” (*zhi*) according to ritual propriety (*li*) because proper performance of the rituals is needed to maintain social order. Death calls for special attention, for two reasons. First, intense emotions are involved, which must be managed and expressed properly (Xunzi 1966, 19.93–96, 19.119; Watson 1963, 106, 109), lest they disrupt compliance with ritual more generally and thus undermine social order.<sup>4</sup> Second, and even more important, as the end of life, death must be handled well in order to bring the human way or path (*dao* 道) to proper completion (Xunzi 1966, 19.43; Watson 1963, 96), and with it the path of filial devotion (*xiao* 孝) to one’s parents or superiors (Xunzi 1966, 19.91; Watson 1963, 105). The central purpose of ritual conduct during bereavement is thus to ensure that the life of the deceased is brought to an ethically and aesthetically proper conclusion and that our filial duties to the deceased are fulfilled in an orderly way.

Xunzi emphasizes that the key to proper management of death and mourning is to achieve “unity” (*yi* 一) between the deceased’s life and death (Xunzi 1966, 19.42–44; Watson 1963, 96–97; Xunzi 1966, 19.79–81; Watson 1963, 103). Such unity fulfils people’s wishes, he claims, and is the ultimate expression of political loyalty and filial devotion (Xunzi 1966, 19.49; Watson 1963, 97). To achieve this unity, the deceased must be treated with the “ornamentation” or “adornment” (*shi* 饰) appropriate for expressing reverence (*jing* 敬) commensurate with their station in life. Specifically, the deceased must be treated in a way consistent with the treatment due them while alive. Xunzi says:

In funeral rituals, we adorn the dead on the basis of the living. We send them off to their death by largely symbolizing their life. So we serve the dead as if they were alive, serve the absent as if they were present, and the end and beginning are unified. (Xunzi 1966, 19.79–80; Watson 1963, 103)

In discussing the details of funeral rituals, Xunzi repeatedly stresses this theme: the deceased are to be treated as if alive, albeit with appropriate ritual gestures to symbolize that they are in fact dead (Xunzi 1966, 19.79–93; Watson 1963, 103–104). For instance, the corpse is dressed in fine clothing, but the belt buckle or hat pin is omitted. The grave goods may include food jars without their contents or sitting mats without the accompanying armrests. A carriage should be provided, but without horses. Moreover, our material treatment of the dead must parallel our treatment of them while alive. If the deceased was a nobleman, for example, he should have a grand tomb resembling a palace, stocked with rich grave goods (Xunzi 1966, 19.42–54; Watson 1963, 97–98). Failure to provide material goods commensurate with the deceased’s social status is disrespectful and violates ritual propriety.

One might suggest that Xunzi’s point is merely that our treatment of the dead must reflect their social status. Perhaps the gist is not that we should treat them in a way parallel to how we did while they were alive, but that we should treat different dead people differently, each appropriate to their status and relation to us. A deceased king or parent should be treated differently from a deceased farmer or neighbour, for example.<sup>5</sup> Without question such differential treatment is a major consequence of Xunzi’s view. Yet the text seems to explicitly advocate something stronger than mere differential treatment. Although we are to acknowledge that the departed are in fact dead, we are nevertheless to “serve the dead *as* (*ru* 如) the living,

<sup>4</sup> See Xunzi’s explanation of the parallel function of ritually proper music in facilitating the orderly expression of emotion (e.g., Xunzi 1966, 20/1–5; Watson 1963, 112).

<sup>5</sup> I thank an anonymous referee for this suggestion.

serve the absent *as* the present” (Xunzi 1966, 19.80; Watson 1963, 103, my italics), such as by furnishing them with ritually appropriate material goods, among other expressions of respect.

For Xunzi, then, death and bereavement are managed by maintaining continuity between our attitudes and conduct toward the living and the dead. Xunzi downplays the break between life and death, instead emphasizing the unity of the cultural order and the norms of propriety through which we interact with others, whether alive or not. We might wonder whether he adopts this position because he believes the dead actually remain among us as ghosts. Yet elsewhere he explicitly dismisses belief in ghosts and other supernatural phenomena (Xunzi 1966, 17.29–33, 17.38–40, 21.76–77; Watson 1963, 83–84, 85, 135). Instead, the grounds for his view appear to be exactly what he says: consistency of treatment according to ritual propriety is a crucial part of the *dao* and thus necessary to maintain social-ethical order. Although the dead are no longer present, they retain their status as persons within the ritual structure. To treat them otherwise might tear open a potentially menacing rift in the normative cultural order.

According to Xunzi, the ritual procedures for handling death and bereavement divide into four phases: the wake, burial, mourning period, and, after mourning concludes, occasional sacrifices to honor the deceased. To gain a clear picture of his conception of the orderly, cultured “patterning” of death, it is important to understand just how lengthy and elaborate the rituals undertaken in these four stages are. On the death of their father, for example, adult children are to hold a wake lasting fifty to seventy days (Xunzi 1966, 19.57; Watson 1963, 99), followed by the burial and then mourning rituals lasting at least twenty-five months (Xunzi 1966, 19.93–94; Watson 1963, 105–6). During mourning, survivors live in a small hut, wear sackcloth mourning robes, walk with a cane, eat only thin gruel, and sleep on a mat of twigs with an earthen pillow (Xunzi 1966, 19.94–96; Watson 1963, 106). These details, Xunzi explains, are “adornments” of the survivors’ intense grief. Later, survivors periodically perform ritual sacrifices in honor of the deceased (Xunzi 1966, 19.117–27; Watson 1963, 109–11). Xunzi emphasizes that during such ceremonies the host addresses and offers food and drink to the spirit-impersonator, who represents the deceased, as if the departed person were actually in attendance, sharing the meal with the guests. After the ceremony the host escorts the guests to the door, then changes clothes, returns to his seat, and weeps, as if the deceased had departed with the other guests. Xunzi comments:

How sorrowful! How reverent! We serve the dead as we serve the living, serve the absent as we serve those present, giving shape to the formless, and thus complete the proper cultural forms. (Xunzi 1966, 19.127; Watson 1963, 111)

Xunzi here rhapsodizes over the survivors’ grief, expressed in a ritual scenario that presumably occurs more than two years after the deceased’s passing. He seems to think it fitting and aesthetically pleasing for the bereaved to wallow in ritually demonstrated sorrow for an indefinite length of time after their loss.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, his entire lengthy discussion of the ritual handling of death and bereavement includes only one brief remark concerning the survivors’ recovery, when he indicates that the rituals function to gradually distance them from the deceased, thus helping them return to emotional equanimity or normal life (Xunzi 1966, 19.60–63; Watson 1963, 100). As to coping with the prospect of our own demise, Xunzi says nothing at all. Presumably he believes we can take comfort in the expectation that after our death others will continue to express care and respect for us according to ritual propriety.

### **A Symbolic Denial of Death?**

I suggest that Xunzi’s general discussion of ritual propriety (*li*) offers much insight into its role—and that of related cultural practices—in guiding human conduct, facilitating and

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<sup>6</sup> Xunzi explains that formal mourning should conclude after 25 months, since mourners must eventually return to normal life and extending mourning past the onset of the third year would be excessive (Xunzi 1966, 19/96–97; Watson 1963, 106; Xunzi 1966, 19/100–3; Watson 1963, 109). However, occasional post-mourning ritual sacrifices seem to continue indefinitely.

channeling the expression of emotions, and mediating interpersonal relations. He rightly calls attention to the function of ritual and other cultural norms in shaping human life. He observes, for instance, that the *dao* we follow as human beings—of which ritual is for him the core—is not given by nature but is a cultural artifact constructed in interaction with nature.<sup>7</sup> As to his approach to death, he is probably correct that a fitting response to death will generally involve a degree of continuity in our attitudes toward the departed. Love for a deceased parent or spouse, for instance, typically and appropriately continues after the person's death.

However, Xunzi's specific approach to the ritual handling of death calls for critical examination. In particular, I want to question his conception of ritual propriety as maintaining a strong, unbroken unity between life and death, especially in our relation to a person despite his or her death. Xunzi's position, I suggest, is tantamount to a symbolic refusal to acknowledge death for what it is: an uncontrollable, disorderly rupture in human roles and relations. Death inevitably disrupts the normal social order by removing the deceased from their place in social relations and terminating their reciprocal role in human interaction. By insisting that the dead are to be treated analogously to our treatment of them while alive, I suggest, Xunzi seeks to retain them within the ritual, cultural order, rather than acknowledge that their participation in human affairs has been irreversibly broken off. He thus affirms the continuity of the normative cultural order even in the face of a distressing, disruptive natural event.<sup>8</sup> His account of death rituals is paradigmatic of how he sees ritual propriety as "patterning" nature and thereby placing even uncanny, uncontrollable natural events within a stable, regimented cultural framework. His approach makes little if any attempt to cope with death on its own terms, as something other than life. Instead, he treats it as in effect a deficient mode of life. Consequently, I suggest, despite his rhetoric of employing cultural forms to "pattern" nature, in his approach to death he fails to achieve the promised integration between "unordered" nature and the human cultural order.

Of course, we should agree with Xunzi that, for the living, the dead retain a significance grounded in normal human relations (though I suggest he fails to fully acknowledge how death radically changes the nature of this significance). But a satisfactory approach to death requires also that we recognize and emphasize its place in the broader context of natural conditions and processes on which the human order supervenes. For the dying or the deceased, death is a permanent exit from the human domain and a final, total re-assimilation with nature. Instead of facilitating reconciliation with these facts—whether among survivors or those approaching death themselves—Xunzi's approach metaphorically denies them. Rather than acknowledging that death fractures the human cultural order—that the deceased in effect are seized from that order to be reclaimed by nature—he waxes lyrical about the unity and wholeness of the human *dao* as manifested in ritual propriety. By prompting survivors to interact with the deceased as if alive, yet simultaneously emphasizing their permanent absence, the rituals he advocates seem likely to prolong and perhaps even amplify the survivors' pain, making it more difficult for them to achieve closure concerning their loss. Indeed, considered as a whole, the rituals he endorses seem detrimental to survivors' physical, psychological, and economic welfare.

Xunzi invests so much authority in his particular conception of ritual, cultural order, I suggest, that he overlooks the very function of ritual he himself so perceptively notes elsewhere. Rituals and other cultural norms organize, structure, and interpret natural conditions—including the pre-cultural, primitive, inescapable aspects of human existence—so as to constitute a recognizably human form of life and to facilitate our relations with each other and the pursuit of our projects. When ritual loses sight of the conditions it exists to mediate—when it ceases genuinely to be an effective way of interacting with them—it is reduced to a hollow exercise, conducted for its own sake. It may even defeat its own purpose, as may be the case with the Confucian funeral

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<sup>7</sup> For a review of this and other strengths of Xunzi's general account of ritual, see Fraser (2012, 267–68).

<sup>8</sup> In this respect, Xunzi's stance converges with Hertz's and Durkheim's proposal that death rites function to reaffirm the permanence of the social order after it is ruptured by a member's demise (Hertz 1907; Durkheim 1912).

traditions Xunzi describes. On the other hand, when we do attend to the natural conditions ritual purports to cope with, Xunzi's claim that one particular set of ritual norms are uniquely effective—those he traces to the culture of the Zhou dynasty—seems preposterous. A variety of ways of coping successfully with natural conditions are nearly always open to us.

I conclude, then, that although Xunzi's theory of ritual is grounded in an account of the relation between humanity and nature, his treatment of death his treatment of death founders in handling death as an inevitable natural event. Here it may be instructive to examine how death is addressed in the Daoist anthology *Zhuangzi*. Various *Zhuangzi* passages explore a range of positions on the relation between humanity and nature. What I take to be the dominant view in the anthology is that the best way of life will be one that achieves a balance between human concerns and natural conditions by recognizing nature as, on the one hand, an inescapable precondition and constraint on human life and, on the other, the source of what is genuine in us.

### A Zhuangist Approach to Ritual

As a first illustration of Zhuangist thought, consider the following story, which presents an intriguing counterpoint to Xunzi on funeral rituals.

Three men, Master Sanghu, Meng Zifan, and Master Qin Zhang were friends. . . . Soon Master Sanghu died. Before he was buried, Confucius heard about it and sent Zigong to help with the funeral affairs. One [of the two surviving friends] had composed a song, one strummed his zither, and in harmony they sang,

Ah, so, Sanghu!  
Ah, so, Sanghu!  
You've returned to the genuine  
While we remain here as men, O!

Zigong rushed forward and said, "May I ask, singing in the presence of a corpse, is this ritual propriety?" The two men looked at each other and laughed, saying, "What does this guy know about the point of ritual?" (Zhuangzi 1956, 6.60–65; Watson 1968, 86)<sup>9</sup>

The friends seem not to question the value of ritual (*li*), and of course they are in fact performing a funeral ritual of their own—albeit a spontaneous, unorthodox one that seems to honor, not mourn, their friend's death. They imply that ritual does have a significance, which Zigong misunderstands because of his attachment to conventional norms of propriety. Part of this significance may be just what Xunzi would say: rituals are cultural forms that structure events so as to articulate their meaning, facilitate expression of the emotions they incite, and give these events closure or bring them to completion by weaving them into the intelligible fabric of human life. Performing rituals may indeed be part of what makes us human. But equally important, the two men imply that there is no single proper way to accomplish these ends. Ritual answers a human need for structure and intelligibility, but the specifics of that need and the most suitable way of meeting it may vary for different people in different contexts. For the two friends, who knew their deceased companion best, singing an improvised ditty expressing wonder over his return to nature may indeed be a wholly appropriate funeral ritual.

Moreover—and I take this to be another aspect of the implied "point" of ritual—it is naive to think that ritual can fully impose order or intelligibility on death. Uncanniness and mystery lie at the heart of death and other natural transformations; no cultural mediation can strip these features away. The only adequate way to render such events intelligible is by acknowledging

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<sup>9</sup> References to the *Zhuangzi* cite chapter and line numbers in the Harvard-Yenching concordance (Zhuangzi 1956), which are also indicated in the electronic text of *Zhuangzi* at the Chinese Text Project (<http://ctext.org/zhuangzi>). All translations are my own, but for readers' convenience I also cite the Watson translation (Watson 1968). As in our readings of Xunzi; Watson's interpretations and my own often diverge significantly.

from the start that they are fundamentally uncontrollable, inevitable, and beyond the human order. They provide the conditions or material for cultural activity but ultimately are not themselves determined or controlled by it. The extent to which, in Xunzi's words, we "pattern" or "organize" (*li*) nature is in the end sharply constrained. For this reason, such events can be made intelligible only by situating them within not merely the human *dao*, as Xunzi does, but the broader context of natural processes. This the two friends do by remarking on their companion's "return to the genuine"—an allusion, in the Zhuangist conceptual framework, to a return to or embrace of Nature (*tian*).<sup>10</sup> The friends' rite does not purport to secure order or organize nature but simply to acknowledge—and celebrate—our place in it. Accordingly, the friends also do not share Xunzi's concern with maintaining an unbroken unity in the human, cultural *dao* by incorporating death within it. Instead of seeking a sense of security or belonging by identifying with a heavily ritualized—and therefore familiar and controlled—cultural order, their spontaneous ceremony aims at finding peace by situating human life in and identifying with uncontrollable, unfathomable natural processes, achieving an attitude the *Zhuangzi* elsewhere describes as "being at peace with the moment and dwelling in the flow" (Zhuangzi 1956, 6.52; Watson 1968, 84). Indeed, rather than imposing an organizing framework on nature so as to realize a particular conception of "order," these Zhuangist figures are depicted as rambling along with natural processes, "wandering beyond the realm" (Zhuangzi 1956, 6.66; Watson 1968, 86) and "whirling around in the limitless" (Zhuangzi 1956, 6.61–62; Watson 1968, 86). Where Xunzi sees nature as lacking any orderly pattern, they see it as offering various courses along which to roam.

### Zhuangist Ethics

This broader contextualization of human events within the processes of nature is characteristic of Daoist ethics. Daoism seeks to understand human life by situating it within the holistic context of natural processes that constitute the world. The Zhuangist conception of the good life is profoundly concerned with our dependence on and response to facts and events that are beyond our control, which different passages in the anthology variously label "nature" (*tian*), the "inevitable" (*budeyi* 不得已), or "fate" (*ming*). (The latter two terms typically refer to circumstances we can do nothing about and must simply accept as brute facts.) To live well, for the *Zhuangzi*, we must appreciate how such facts and events form a unified, organic, continuing process of which our own life is a part. Appreciation of our place in this process is expected to prompt us to identify with it. We then exercise our natural powers of agency (*de* 德) to spontaneously "wander" (*you* 游) through changing natural patterns (*tian li* 天理) and facts (*gu ran* 固然, "what is inherently so") as we encounter them, thus achieving psychological and social harmony (*he* 和). With respect to gain and loss—and thus to life and death—the ideal is to understand that "gain is a matter of the opportune moment; loss is a matter of the flow of events." Thus one can be "at peace with the moment and dwell in the flow" (Zhuangzi 1956, 6.52, 3.18; Watson 1968, 84, 52–53).<sup>11</sup>

Cultural norms, such as ritual propriety, may figure among our adaptive responses to nature. Such norms are one potentially effective way of finding a path through the natural circumstances we encounter. But, contrary to Xunzi's views, we cannot really hope for fixed, controlled, or even determinate circumstances of "order" here. The most we can achieve is simply a harmonious response to nature, and the most effective cultural forms for achieving such harmony may be free-form, adaptive, or fluid, as our natural circumstances themselves are.

<sup>10</sup> The words of the friends' song might be taken to imply that human life is somehow less "genuine" or "authentic" (*zhen* 真) than the total assimilation to nature that death brings. A characteristic Zhuangist stance is that what is most genuine in us is what is bestowed by Nature (*tian*). In death, we return wholly to nature. In life, however, the "genuine person" is one who achieves a balance between human activity and nature (Zhuangzi 1956, 6/20; Watson 1968, 80).

<sup>11</sup> The capsule summary of Zhuangist ethics in this paragraph is based on the detailed account presented in Fraser (Fraser 2011, 98–103).

Death is a prominent theme in Zhuangist ethics because it is the most salient example of an inevitable natural change—an aspect of fate (*ming* 命). The ability to face death with equanimity is a sign that one possesses great virtuosity (*de*) or that one’s “capacities are whole” (*cai quan* 才全) (Zhuangzi 1956, 5.42–43; Watson 1968, 73). Equanimity toward death, and toward fate in general, might seem to imply a fatalistic or pessimistic attitude, or perhaps a nihilistic stance that devalues life and agency. For the *Zhuangzi*, however, acceptance of fate is seen as an important step toward enhancing life and empowering us as agents. To live a flourishing life, we must first accept and identify with fate, thus freeing ourselves to respond to “the inevitable” intelligently and creatively. Agents who grasp their place in the inevitable flow of nature are “freed” (*jie* 解) from “ties” (*jie* 结) to things (Zhuangzi 1956, 3.19, 6.53; Watson 1968, 53, 84–85) and thus no longer at the mercy of fate. Rather than being passive victims of their circumstances, they are ready, as one passage puts it, to “accept things as they come and generate the opportune moment in their heart” (Zhuangzi 1956, 5.46; Watson 1968, 74).<sup>12</sup>

### A Zhuangist View of Death

Core elements of this approach to life—and thus to death and bereavement—are illustrated by the well-known story of the death of Zhuangzi’s wife.

Zhuangzi’s wife died. When Huizi went to mourn her, he found Zhuangzi squatting with his legs splayed, drumming on a tub, and singing. Huizi said, “You lived with her, brought up children, and grew old. Not to cry at her death is indeed enough already. But you even drum on a tub and sing. Isn’t this going too far?!”

Zhuangzi said, “It’s not so. When she first died, how could I not grieve like everyone else? But I looked into her beginnings, and originally she had no life. Not only no life, but no body. Not only no body, but no *qi* 气 (“energy-stuff”). Amidst the mysterious chaos, something changed and she had *qi*. The *qi* changed and she had a body. Her body changed and she had life. Now there’s been another change and she’s died. These changes are to each other as the procession of the four seasons, spring and autumn, winter and summer. She was going to sleep quietly in a giant bedroom, while I in turn was wailing and weeping—I took this to show I was incompetent with respect to fate. So I stopped.” (Zhuangzi 1956, 18.15–19; Watson 1968, 191–92)

The story affirms the value of life and acknowledges that grief is a normal response to death. Inordinate or prolonged grief is inappropriate, however, as it signals a lack of “competence” or “mastery” (*tong* 通) in comprehending and dealing with fate (*ming*). Conversely, the story implies, achieving competence in responding to fate can alleviate grief and restore emotional equilibrium. To comprehend and cope with fate appropriately, we must recognize how life and death fit into a series of uncanny transformations that form an inevitable, natural process akin to the procession of the seasons.

A person competent with respect to fate may spontaneously perform cultural activities in recognition of pivotal events such as death, as Zhuangzi’s impromptu drumming and singing and the two friends’ improvised funeral show. However, heretofore are no expectations as to what form such activity will take. Indeed, the texts hint that these ceremonies sometimes best serve their purpose when they are spontaneous and even free-form, rather than heavily ritualized.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> For a more detailed discussion, see Fraser (2011, 101). See too Olberding (2007), which offers a balanced critique of different Zhuangist attitudes toward death.

<sup>13</sup> Another passage, the story of Mengsun Cai (Zhuangzi 1956, 6/75–82; Watson 1968, 88), implies that in ritual propriety, as in other areas, we should seek a course of action that best fits the context, including the needs of others around us. When Mengsun’s mother died, he himself had no need for the wailing and weeping of a conventional funeral ritual. A simple, impromptu ceremony would have sufficed for him, but not for those around him. Hence he held a conventional, albeit simplified funeral. See the discussion in Fraser (2012, 280–81).



Nor do these activities purport to bring about “order” (*zhi*). They only express appreciation and understanding of events that are fundamentally beyond human control.

The story of Zhuangzi’s wife concerns bereavement. Yet the anthology applies the same set of ideas in addressing the prospect of our own death. Again, the Zhuangist approach stems from a conception of human life as part of a unified, holistic, inexorable thread of natural processes of which death is an integral part. This conception forces us to acknowledge that, like everything in nature, we are subject to inevitable transformations and will eventually die. To live well, we must accept and cope with the inevitable.<sup>14</sup> Beyond these points about fate and the good life, however, some *Zhuangzi* passages present a more radical idea: just as we value life, so too should we value death.

Soon Master Lai fell ill. Gasping, he was about to die. His wife and children encircled him and wailed. Master Li went to ask about him and said, “Shoo! Get away! Don’t disturb the transformations.” He leaned on the doorway and talked with him, saying, “How wonderful, the process of creation and transformation! What will it make you into next? Where will it make you go? Will it make you into a rat’s liver? Will it make you into a bug’s arm?”

Master Lai said, “Parents’ relation to their children is such that, whether north, south, east, or west, the child only follows their command. The relation of *yin* and *yang* [natural forces and processes] to people is even more important than that of our parents to us. They having brought me near death, were I to disobey, I would be impudent. What wrong have they done in this?! The Huge Clump burdens me with form, labours me with life, eases me with old age, and rests me with death. So what makes my life good is the very thing that makes my death good.

“Now if a master smith were casting metal and the metal jumped up and said, ‘I must be made into an Excalibur,’ the smith would surely take it to be cursed metal. Now having once taken on human form, were I to say ‘Only a human, only a human,’ the creator-and-transformer would surely take me to be a cursed human. Now in this instance I take heaven and earth to be a great furnace and the process of creation and transformation to be a master smith. Where could I go that wouldn’t be acceptable?!” (Zhuangzi 1956, 6.53–60; Watson 1968, 85)

One way of defending the idea that death should be valued just as life is stems from the observation that life and death form an integral whole. They are two phases of one and the same overall process. If we value part of this process, the reasoning then runs, we must value the entirety: properly understood, our valuing life at the same time commits us to valuing death. This line of thought is reflected in one possible interpretation of Master Lai’s remark about what makes death good. His words can be construed as meaning, roughly, “that I deem my life good is the very basis for deeming my death good.”<sup>15</sup> On this interpretation, Lai’s point would be that because life and death are a single process, my attitude of finding life good provides a sufficient reason for also finding death good. However, this reasoning is unconvincing and perhaps specious, an instance of the fallacy of composition. Of course, the fact that life and death are a unified process provides indisputable grounds for acknowledging that, like every living creature, we must eventually die. This truism yields a compelling reason for learning to accept the prospect of our own death. But it hardly constitutes a reason for *valuing* death.

The translation above adopts an alternative construal of Master Lai’s remark, which I suggest both coheres better with the overall gist of the passage and provides more persuasive grounds for

<sup>14</sup> For a detailed exploration of this Zhuangist conception of the good life and the grounds for it, see Fraser (2011, 102–08).

<sup>15</sup> Watson translates the line this way, as does Graham (Watson 1968, 85; Graham 1981, 88). Legge’s interpretation is similar to mine (Legge 1891). This remark appears twice in Book 6 of the *Zhuangzi*, once in the conversation translated here (Zhuangzi 1956, 6/58; Watson 1968, 85) and once earlier in a set of expository remarks (Zhuangzi 1956, 6/24–25; Watson 1968, 80).

his position. The main theme of the passage is that human life is a part and product of the interplay of natural forces and processes, *yin* and *yang*, with which we have an even closer relation than we do with our parents. These forces and processes generate an endless succession of creation and transformation (*zao hua* 造化), which includes the sequence of our birth, growth, and death. The “Huge Clump” (*da kuai* 大塊)—nature, or perhaps a metaphor for the amalgamation of *qi* that constitutes the world and everything in it—bestows the various phases of life and death on us. Thus, fundamentally, whatever it is that makes my life good emerges from the same forces and processes of formation and transformation that eventually also bring about my death. Master Lai’s claim, then, is that just as these processes are what ultimately make my life good, they also make my death good. For the value of my life derives from its place in the holistic course of natural creation and transformation, and death has a parallel place in that course. A key premise implicit to this line of thought is that the goodness of my life in some way lies precisely in its being part of this course. In other words, the goodness of life lies in how it relates to the “Great *Dao*,” since, I suggest, the holistic course of creation and transformation is typically, though not exclusively, what early Daoist texts are referring to when they speak of *Dao* (Way) or *Da Dao* 大道 (Great Way). Master Lai expresses an almost religious attitude of identification with and trust in *Dao* when he indicates that wherever the process of creation and transformation sends him would be “acceptable” or worthy of “approval” (*ke* 可).

Master Lai’s position seems to deny that death is a disvalue, at least for some agents in some circumstances. Such a denial may seem inconsistent not just with common sense but with other Zhuangist views. Elsewhere, for instance, the *Zhuangzi* seems to treat the exercise of *de* (power, virtuosity, agency) in “wandering” (*you*) through natural patterns as a core or fundamental good (Fraser 2011, 102–03). Yet our capacity for such virtuoso wandering terminates with death. Death seems to annihilate our *de*. This is a significant difference between life and death, one that seems incongruent with the idea that whatever grounds we have for considering our life good at the same time make our death good as well. Can Zhuangist thought explain away this incongruence?

A potential answer may lie in the relation between *de* and *Dao*. A thorough treatment of this complex issue would take us beyond the scope of this essay, so I can provide only a brief sketch. For the *Zhuangzi*, we exercise agency by employing natural capacities—stemming from our *de*—through processes that not only are shaped by but themselves are a microcosm of the patterns and uncanny transformations that characterize *Dao*, the holistic course of nature.<sup>16</sup> The self and its *de* are embedded in the natural process of “creation and transformation,” in two respects. First, the content of our identity—the dispositions, abilities, capacities, and values that constitute our *de*—is produced by the same ultimately mysterious natural processes that led to our birth and will lead to our death. Second, the psychological processes and states that drive our actions are themselves part of this course and share its uncanny, indeterminate, mysterious features.<sup>17</sup> What makes our life good, for the strand of Zhuangist thought of interest here, is our ability to employ *de* in “wandering” through the world, finding fitting paths to follow in particular circumstances. The *de* we employ in this activity is bestowed on us by *Dao*, and its

<sup>16</sup> Unpacking this claim would require a detailed account of the Zhuangist conception of the self, toward which I can here offer only the few preliminary remarks that follow and a promissory note for future work. I offer an initial attempt at such an account in Fraser (2013).

<sup>17</sup> The first of these claims is based on *Zhuangzi* passages such as Master Lai’s remarks or Zhuangzi’s reflections on his wife’s demise. The second is based on a wide variety of remarks in the *Zhuangzi*. These include the many comments throughout the first third of Book 2, “Discourse on Evening Things Out,” about the mysterious, unknown sources of the self, such as how affective attitudes spring up from who-knows-where, without our knowing on whose behalf they come (Zhuangzi 1956, 2/13–15; Watson 1968, 38); the conversation between the Shadow and Penumbra, about the unknown causes of our actions (Zhuangzi 1956, 2/92–94; Watson 1968, 49); and the remarks of Master Yu, a friend of Master Lai, who speaks of the “creator-and-transformer” (Zhuangzi 1956, 6/50–52; Watson 1968, 84) potentially turning him into a variety of forms, each of which would give him different dispositions and abilities, with different possibilities for action.

exercise is itself part of the flow of *Dao*. In a fairly straightforward sense, the exercise of *de* in agency—our life of “wandering” through the circumstances presented to us, acting on motives and employing capacities we happen to find ourselves with—just is the *Dao* as manifested in us.<sup>18</sup>

In one respect, our death is the extinction of our capacity for agency—our *de*. But our capacity for agency is itself a product of the workings of *Dao*, and, for the *Zhuangzi*, the flourishing exercise of this capacity is fundamentally an immersion in the flow of *Dao*. Death is merely a different form of immersion in the flow. At some level, then, what makes our life good is the process of *Dao*, which, Master Lai proposes, also makes our death good, for death too is a mode of flowing along with *Dao*. Death can be regarded as a disvalue for me as an individual insofar as it terminates my capacity for agency, thus subsuming me wholly within nature. In the Zhuangist view, however, things have never been otherwise. My activity has always been just one stream in the broader course of nature. In death, I am simply “returning to the genuine”—to the workings of nature that have always lain at the core of my activity as an individual. The fundamental source of what I am—the flow of *Dao*—remains unchanged despite my death.

Are these compelling grounds for the idea that death is good in a way somehow analogous to how life is? At bottom, I think, this view rests primarily on an ethical or aesthetic attitude—or perhaps even a religious attitude—rather than rational persuasion. It asks that we as individual agents identify with *Dao*—the course of the natural process of “creation and transformation”—as the “source” or “ancestor” (*zong* 宗) (Zhuangzi 1956, 5.6; Watson 1968, 69; Zhuangzi 1956, 7.29; Watson 1968, 97) of what we are. It is presented as, in effect, an ethically and aesthetically attractive outlook we may take up toward life, death, and the world, one in which we accentuate the respects in which our agency is part of and springs from *Dao*, while disregarding those in which we differentiate our activity from other natural processes and regard it as contrasting with them.<sup>19</sup> This recognition of the variety of ways in which one might distinguish things as belonging to one kind or another is characteristic of the Zhuangist approach to value and *dao*-following in general (Fraser 2009). To view our activity as part of *Dao* is in effect to infuse *Dao* with whatever value we find in our lives and thus, by extension, to bestow similar value on death. Still, the *Zhuangzi* does not, and cannot, claim to establish this as a uniquely “correct” view of death. Nor can its treatment of death rationally compel us to take up this view. At best, it can justify this understanding of death only by pointing out how it coheres with, and tends to facilitate the practice of, the Zhuangist conception of a good life—a life of nimble, fitting, psychologically unfettered responses to our circumstances.

**Acknowledgments** An earlier version of this paper was presented at a workshop on “Death: Philosophy, Therapy, Medicine” at the Centre for Humanities and Medicine, University of Hong Kong, April 2010. I am indebted to Barbara Dalle Pezze for organizing the workshop and to the workshop participants for a constructive discussion. I especially thank Siu-fu Tang and Wu Yi for very helpful comments on the original workshop paper. I also thank two anonymous referees for this journal for constructive comments.

<sup>18</sup> This suggestion dovetails with the traditional interpretation of *de* in the *Daodejing* as the “power” or “virtue” of the *Dao* as manifested or embodied in each individual living thing.

<sup>19</sup> Compare the attitude of the ex-convict amputee Wang Tai, a sagely exemplar of the Zhuangist good life who is depicted as unmoved by matters of life and death. Wang is undisturbed by the amputation of his foot, because “he views the respects in which things are one [the same] and does not see those in which they have suffered loss; he views losing his foot as discarding a clump of earth” (Zhuangzi 1956, 5/8; Watson 1968, 69). The *Zhuangzi* asks us to approach our death similarly, attending to “the respects in which things are one” and not those in which death is a loss for us, such that our death seems an insignificant change, like the loss of a clump of earth.

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