This paper addresses the treatment of the good life in the *Zhuangzi* (ca. 350-300 BCE), one of the central texts of the Daoist school of thought. After a brief introduction to previous work on the Zhuangzian good life, the essay proceeds into a discussion of the opening lines of the text, wherein the “Kun fish and Peng bird” metaphor is introduced. Reading this image as a metaphorical representation of the unfettered mind, the paper explores the modes by which one is to access a state of joyful wandering, namely through processes of “non-action” and “non-presence.”
NON-PRESENT NON-ACTION:
THE GOOD LIFE IN THE ZHUANGZI

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Believed to have been written between about 350 and 330 B.C.E., the Zhuangzi is one of the foundational texts of the Daoist philosophical and religious traditions. Named after its putative author, the text has been the subject of more than sixty major East Asian commentaries since the third century, in addition to an enormous body of contemporary scholarship. Historically, the Zhuangzi and other Daoist texts—namely the Daodejing—served as a counterpoint to the dominant implementation of Confucian doctrine in political and social discourse. While the latter argued for rigid adherence to hierarchical social stratification to develop a harmonious society, the former came to represent an escape from social collectivism to discover individual paths to freedom. Translator Burton Watson holds that while most ancient Chinese philosophies were addressed to the politically privileged, the Zhuangzi is an appeal to the spiritual elite. Ideologically, the text encourages its readers to reconsider the epistemological foundations for human judgment; all human ills are “the product of man’s purposeful and value-ridden actions.”1 The ultimate hope of the text for its readers is that one might train the mind so as to remove intent and bias from action, subsequently accessing a space of freedom. To wander and live in this liberated state, called you 遊 in Chinese, is the paradigmatic crux of the Zhuangzi. Existence and movement in you is to live the good life, but you as an idealized mode of life can only be accessed through the initiation of wuwei 無為, a state of mind wherein the practitioner removes biased intentionality from action. Further complicating the relationship between you and wuwei is the concept of the Dao 道 or the Way. In

Daoist thought, the *Dao* is understood to be a natural order that underlies the substance and activity of the universe. The *Zhuangzi* communicates to its readers the nature of this cosmic organization through allegory and narrative, expressing the *Dao* primarily through metaphor. The subsequent discussion will analyze several of these key allegorical tales from the first three chapters of the *Zhuangzi* to explore the good life of *you* as accessed through *wuwei* in relation to the Way.

Western scholars have developed several frameworks through which the *Zhuangzi* articulates the good life. In an article that addresses emotion and agency within the text, Chris Fraser describes what he refers to as the “Virtuoso View.” Fraser writes that so-called “Virtuosos,” or persons of *de* 德, a term meaning “virtue, virtuosity; power,” are accepting of the inevitable without responding with emotions. This is achieved by developing an inner state of serenity and clarity; strong emotions – be they positive or negative – are removed from the mind of a Virtuoso. To Fraser, this view of *de* is typified by the adaptive and responsive execution of higher order skills. Representations of these abilities – one instance being the fable of Cook Ding the Butcher, explored below – are model forms of the Zhuangzian good life, one of *de* and wandering (*you*). Paul Kjellberg believes the text means to represent the good life as an existence of skepticism. He writes, “Skepticism performs for him (Zhuangzi) not just the psychological function of releasing us from worry but also the pragmatic one of guiding us along the right path.” Within the *Zhuangzi* there are several passages that give the reader pause as he reconsiders the validity of what he had understood as truth.

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particular note is the following, taken from *Qiwulun* 齐物论, the second chapter of the text:

Nie Que asked Wang Ni, “Do you know what all things agree in calling right?”

“How would I know that?” said Wang Ni.

“Do you know that you don’t know it?”

“How would I know that?”

“Then do things know nothing?”

“How would I know that? However, suppose I try saying something. What way do I have of knowing that if I say I know something I don’t really not know it? Or what way do I have of knowing that if I say I don’t know something I don’t really in fact know it? Now let me ask you some questions. If a man sleeps in a damp place, his back aches and he ends up half paralyzed, but is this true of a loach? If he lives in a tree, he is terrified and shakes with fright, but is this true of a monkey? Of these three creatures, then, which one knows the proper place to live? Men eat the flesh of grass-fed and grain-fed animals, deer eat grass, centipedes find snakes tasty, and hawks and falcons relish mice. Of these four, which knows how food ought to taste? Monkeys pair with monkeys, deer go out with deer, and fish play around with fish. Men claim that Maoqiang and Lady Li were beautiful, but if fish saw them they would dive to the bottom of the stream, if birds saw them they would fly away, and if deer saw them they would break in a run. Of these four, which knows how to fix the standard of beauty in the world? The way I see it, the rules of benevolence and righteousness and the paths of right and wrong are all hopelessly snarled
and jumbled. How could I know anything about such discriminations?"5

Wang Ni asserts that even the assumption of his knowing something cannot truly be known to be true. As the dialectic between Wang Ni and Nie Que means to show, notions of the truth are highly subjective in nature: nothing can be objectively known. From this, Kjellberg argues that the Zhuangzi challenges the reader to suspend judgment over things about which he cannot be sure, to question the veracity of that which is perceived by the senses. If one can accept this skepticism, then any internal moral struggles that had once plagued the individual will inherently be assuaged, as notions of right and wrong and of good and bad will no longer be held to be true by one’s skepticism of ever having known anything at all.6 It is this state of skeptical ignorance that Kjellberg argues provides access to the good life. Here, however, the discussion of the idealized existence will begin, similar to Fraser above, with an exploration of the term you.

The first chapter of the Zhuangzi, Xiaoyaoyou 逍遙遊 begins in dramatic fashion, with the author employing an evocative visual metaphor to shock the reader so that he might break free from the constraints of the world. The chapter begins:

In the northern darkness there is a fish and his name is Kun. The Kun is so huge I do not know how many thousand li7 he measures. He changes and becomes a bird whose name is Peng. The back of the Peng measures I don’t know how many thousand li across and, when he rises up and flies off, his wings are like clouds all over the sky. When

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5 Watson, p. 41. I have chosen to edit the phonetic system of transliteration originally employed by Watson to the more commonly recognized pinyin system for ease of accessibility to the contemporary reader.

6 Kjellberg, p. 124-127

7 Li 里 refers to a traditional Chinese unit of distance, the value of which has varied considerably over time. At the time of the Zhuangzi’s creation it would have been roughly 400 meters, or roughly 1300 feet.
the sea begins to move, this bird sets off for the southern darkness, which is like the Lake of Heaven.\textsuperscript{8}

Upon first considering the passage, the reader is struck by a sense of what Bryan Van Norden refers to as “a combination of awe and disorientation.”\textsuperscript{9} The text resolves two disparate forms of nearly incomprehensible size through a supernatural process of transformation, thereby marking a transition from the static realms of human understanding into the liberated mindscape of a perfected intelligence. The text does not ask the reader to logically resolve the question of the existence of Kun and Peng, as their existence is well established within the realm of impossibility. The inaccessibility of setting and unknowability of the creatures’ enormity challenge the reader to move in accordance with the metaphor rather than resist the mental encounter with the mythologized beings. As the Peng ascends into the heavens, it symbolically represents the ascension of the mind beyond the limitations of beings with smaller intellect;\textsuperscript{10} it soars above the mundane concerns of the earth below. In wandering – something achieved by acceptance of the inherent impossibility – as in the flight of the bird, the reader himself becomes privy to the state of you epitomized by the soaring of the Peng. In an essay dealing exclusively with this passage, Lian Xinda concludes that as “an inspiring example of soaring up and going beyond, the image is used to broaden the outlook of the small mind; its function is thus more therapeutic than instructional.”\textsuperscript{11} Thus, an individual

\textsuperscript{8} Watson, p. 23.


\textsuperscript{10} The subsequent paragraphs describe smaller birds and bugs questioning the flight of the Peng, a series of images often read as a symbolic representation of lesser minds (Allinson, 1989; Lundberg, 1998).

interpreter is not meant to parse out an ascetic meditation technique nor derive some bit of arcane mysticism from the passage, but most fundamentally, “go with the flow” and unquestioningly experience transcendent movement.

To better understand how to more formally access the state of wandering above, one must consider notions of skillfulness. Episodic representations of perfected abilities, similar to those described by Fraser above, represent seemingly perfected minds that exist in a liberated state of you. To understand the processes by which these skills are manifested, a passage from Yangshengzhu 养生主, the third chapter of the Zhuangzi, can be considered. The story features Cook Ding, a paragon of skillfulness. The text reads:

Cook Ding was cutting up an ox for Lord Wenhui. At every touch of his hand, every heave of his shoulder, every move of his feet, every thrust of his knee – zip! zoom! He slithered the knife along with a zing, and all was in perfect rhythm…

“Ah, this is marvelous!” said Lord Wenhui. “Imagine skill reaching such heights!”

Cook Ding laid down his knife and replied, “What I care about is the way, which goes beyond skill. When I first began cutting up oxen, all I could see was the ox itself. After three years I no longer saw the whole ox. And now – now I go at it by spirit and don’t look with my eyes. Perception and understanding have come to a stop and spirit moves where it wants…”

“Excellent!” said Lord Wenhui. “I have heard the words of Cook Ding and learned how to care for life.”

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12 Watson, pp. 46-47
Cook Ding, a butcher by trade, is so effective at dismembering a cow that he has not changed his knife in nearly two decades, a feat impossible for others of the same profession. His mastery of the trade comes from his encountering the flesh and bone with his mind, rather than working against it with his senses. In an essay delineating skillful knowing from theoretical knowing, Robert Eno writes that Cook Ding’s high skill level – one that allows him to access a state in which experience is no longer mediated by sense organs – is a result of his interactions with shen yu 神欲 or “spirit-like interactions” mediated through “spirit-like impulses,” or shen yu 神欲.\(^{13}\) This practical knowledge gained from experience, although supported by a theoretical base, represents for Eno the epitome of the perfected mind.\(^{14}\) Cook Ding has mastered his trade so fully that the ability is like a second nature to him, an uninterrupted extension of his mind as he encounters the external world. Professor Lee H. Yearley understands this skillfulness of characters in the Zhuangzi as a byproduct of a tripartite self, one in which an individual is motivated by a series of fundamental drives. The term “drive” refers to the motivation for an action performed by an individual. The quality of that motivation, however, is itself dependent on its origin. More fundamental needs – i.e. hunger or thirst – originate from a base part of consciousness, while higher order actions and thoughts originate from a more developed, cultivated mind. These drives exist such that the lower-level drives – explained below – must be satisfied before higher-order actions can be motivated by more complex drives. Yearly describes three distinct drives: dispositional drives, reflective drives, and transcendent drives. Dispositional drives are visceral movements to

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\(^{13}\) The phrases shen yu 神欲 and shen yu 神欲 are transcribed identically, as the first character in each is the same while the second in each uses the same sound. In the former, yu 遇 means “to encounter, to interact.” In the latter, yu 欲 means “want, desire.”

action that are initiated by specific occurrences, while reflective drives are a desire to have drives other than dispositional ones and are a byproduct of conscious desire. Lastly, transcendent drives exceed the normal ability of the self and appear to originate from beyond it.\textsuperscript{15} In acting through transcendent drives, the ego is suppressed for the heightened and skillful execution of skills. In acting through these “transcendent drives,” Cook Ding has moved past notions of fundamental desire for and intentional execution of an action. Yearly and Eno’s conceptions of self-less skills converge, as both transcendent drives and “spirit-like impulses” are two modern attempts to understand the notion of \textit{wuwei} within Western philosophical discourse.

\textit{Wuwei} 無為, a phrase frequently translated as “non-action,” suggests a state in which, through reunion with the \textit{Dao} 道 defined above as the natural order that underlies reality, one exists in perfect harmony with the present, acting without deliberate intention. The word \textit{Dao} need not always refer to an explicit Way, but rather it can suggest any number of natural ordered processes. Deviation from these myriad \textit{daos} represents a chaotic disruption to an overarching natural system, as it is the agglomeration of these lesser \textit{daos} that form the universal \textit{Dao}. In the \textit{Zhuangzi}, to move and wander (\textit{you} 遊) in accordance with a series of natural processes and encounters – the \textit{Dao} described above – is to act in a state of \textit{wuwei}. Translations of the term \textit{wuwei} can be problematic in that they may suggest to the reader that the \textit{Zhuangzi} is recommending an existence in stasis. However, \textit{wuwei} refers to a high-performance state by which one acts without mediating bias. In his discussion of \textit{wuwei} spirituality, Nathaniel Barrett describes the state as “an effortless way of comporting oneself in the world with supreme harmony or efficacy.”\textsuperscript{16} Ostensibly, one acts while in


\textsuperscript{16} Barrett, Nathaniel F. “Wuwei and Flow: Comparative Reflections on Spirituality, Transcendence, and Skill in the \textit{Zhuangzi}.” \textit{Philosophy East and
a performative trance, similar to the modern, colloquial phrase “in the zone.” The story of the butcher above describes a violent, often messy task being executed with a grace and ease rarely attributed to the profession. Cook Ding’s ability requires an intensity of absorption and focus that is incongruous with self-conscious and purposeful acts; the carving of the ox necessitates a loss of the ego in the performance of the work itself. Thus, the experience is understood as a reunion between the actor and the external world, a state characterized by heightened awareness and harmony. This reunion, however, necessitates a dismissal of the ego and its pre-learned knowledge, a state explored in perhaps the most famous episode of the Zhuangzi: Zhuang Zhou’s 17 Butterfly Dream.

Appearing in the second chapter of the text, Qiwulun 齊物論, Zhuangzi describes his dream as follows:

Once Zhuang Zhou dreamt he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting and fluttering around, happy with himself and doing as he pleased. He didn’t know he was Zhuang Zhou. Suddenly he woke up and there he was, solid and unmistakable Zhuang Zhou. But he didn’t know if he was Zhuang Zhou who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Zhuang Zhou. Between Zhuang Zhou and the butterfly there must be some distinction! This is called the Transformation of Things.

The passage has been historically understood as a reflection on the mutability of form; all distinctions originate from a mind that cannot see clearly the interconnectedness of the Ten Thousand Things. 18 Of note here is that the author of the text has removed himself from identification with the character of Zhuang Zhou. Thus, the self has been sacrificed by virtue of the omission of the


17 Zhuang Zhou was a name by which the historical Zhuangzi was known, a fact relevant to the subsequent discussion.

18 Known as wan wu 眾物 in Literary Chinese, “the Ten Thousand Things” is a common phrase in literature and philosophy that is meant to suggest all reality.
pronoun “I;” the narrator has become non-present while still articulating the narrative above.\textsuperscript{19} This is further substantiated by the temporal contextualization of the parable. By relating the narrative from the temporal standpoint of having once happened and disassociating himself from his own historical identity of Zhuang Zhou, the author of the Zhuangzi has subsequently placed himself within the context of a non-present wanderer. Hans-Georg Möller has written on what he refers to as the “structure of presence” in Daoist philosophy, using earlier commentaries on the Butterfly Dream to argue that the sage ultimately occupies this place of non-presence.\textsuperscript{20} He writes, “The Daoist structure of presence, as illustrated in the ‘Dream of the Butterfly,’ consists of a steady and well-ordered process, a process that is constituted by the continuous change of distinct present segments kept in balance by a non-present center.”\textsuperscript{21} It is the liberated mind that exists in the “non-present center.” When read this way, the dream sequence of the Qiwulun can be understood as two present agents – Zhuang Zhou and the butterfly – being articulated by a non-present narrator – Zhuangzi. Admittedly, this narrative does not relate explicitly to you; however, its implicit association with the egoless state of wuwei speaks to the modality by which one is to access a state of joyful wandering. To exist in a mental state of non-presence is perhaps the most integral element in achieving the high-performance state of uninterrupted skillful behavior, wherein the actor is so wholly engrossed in his work that he seamlessly encounters the other stable processes that exist within his dao. To be non-present is to subvert the conscious desire of the ego to delineate between forms. In so doing, wuwei as a mental state can be accessed.

The Zhuangzi introduces the good life to its readers in the first few pages of the text: the Peng bird soars to new heights, free

\textsuperscript{19} This concept of non-presence is explored below, drawing on an article by Hans-Georg Möller cited below.


\textsuperscript{21} Ibid, p. 445.
to exist beyond the constrictions of the mundane. This metaphorical mindscape is to be accessed by entering a state of “non-action,” wherein the self is non-present, freeing the mind to wander in unfettered bliss. To enter this state is to live a Zhuangzian good life.
Bibliography


