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Freedom and agency in the *Zhuangzi*: navigating life's constraints*

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ABSTRACT

The *Zhuangzi*, a 4th century BCE Chinese text, is optimistic about life unrestrained by entrenched values. This paper contributes to existing debates on Zhuangzian freedom in three ways. First, it reflects on how it is possible to enjoy the freedom envisaged in the *Zhuangzi*. Many discussions welcome the *Zhuangzi's* picture of release from life shaped by canonical visions, without also giving thought to life without these driving visions. Consider this scenario: in a world with limitless possibilities, would it not be fraught, not knowing how to interpret situations? I suggest that freedom in the *Zhuangzi* is possible only if one succeeds in reorienting herself to the new 'normal'. Second, I introduce and develop the idea of working *with* constraints. This focuses on an agent's maximizing the fit between relevant conditions, on the one hand, and their capabilities, on the other. Finally, I propose that self-directed practice, an important expression of agency, is required for building capabilities that *enable* such freedom. I examine the idea of risk involved in these firsthand experiences, articulating an account of agency that sits at the heart of hard-won Zhuangzian freedom.

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The *Zhuangzi*, a 4th century BCE Chinese text, uses imagery and fantastical stories to give readers a sense of what life might be like if it were not encumbered by entrenched attitudes and values. The *Zhuangzi's* vision of wandering (遊 *you*) as a way of life suggests freedom from a goal-driven existence.

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And there is more: we can be enabled to engage more fully with the world by being appropriately responsive to its patterns and shifts. The title of the *Zhuangzi's* first chapter, "Carefree wandering" ("Xiaoyaoyou" 逍遙遊),¹ emphasizes the attitude toward one's encounters, and warns readers not to be guided by grand visions.² Across the *Zhuangzi*, many passages present vignettes of a life unrestrained by customary practices and entrenched values. The *Zhuangzi's* contrariety generates optimism that life can be freer than it currently is, if we were to act responsively in light of emergent circumstances. Much has been written about freedom in the *Zhuangzi*, especially in view of its responses to the challenges faced by humanity in the world.³

This paper contributes to existing debates in three ways. First, I reflect on *how* it is possible to live the life of freedom envisaged in the *Zhuangzi*. How does a person navigate the world if she is no longer guided by conventional standards and expectations? Many discussions welcome the *Zhuangzi's* vision of release from a life shaped by canonical visions, although their enthusiasm sometimes eclipses consideration of what life would be like *without* these driving visions and their associated norms. I pause to consider this scenario: in a world with limitless possibilities, would it not be fraught, not knowing what to look at, or how to interpret situations? I propose that freedom in the *Zhuangzi* is possible only if a person succeeds in reorienting herself to the new 'normal'.

Second, I consider the different types of constraints a person faces as part of the human condition. In my view, the text embraces freedom precisely because its authors are acutely aware of the manifold constraints humans face in their lives. Sophisticated discussions have drawn attention to the conditions that frame Zhuangzian freedom, captured especially in the terms *tian* (天, 'heavenly', conditions of life) and *ming* (命, destiny, force of circumstances).⁴ In the discussion below, I engage with some views that map out the types of responses to constraints offered by the *Zhuangzi*, including working *within* constraints (i.e. accepting them), *resisting* them, or working *beyond* them.

¹Victor Mair also offers this translation of the title (*Wandering on the Way*). Angus Graham has an interesting translation of "Xiaoyaoyou" as "Going rambling without a destination" (*Chuang-Tzu*, 43–7).

²The chapter opens with a story of a large bird, Peng, and two little creatures, the cicada and the dove, to express, amongst other things, the circumstantial factors that influence our perspectives. David Machek provides an historically-informative outline of different views on how the story sheds light on freedom. ("Is Freedom in Necessity or in Happiness?").

³In scholarly literature, there is a plethora of ways to characterise the personal transformation that ensues from the attainment of freedom, including 'equanimity' (Chong, "The Concept of *Zhen*"), 'spiritual awakening' (Ivanhoe, "Zhuangzi on Skepticism", 642–3), 'untrammelled and carefree liberation of the spirit' (Lo, "Wandering and Imaginal Realms", 75), 'transformation of the self' (Jiang, "Two Notions of Freedom", 466), 'the unhindered life' (King, "Freedom in Parts of the *Zhuangzi* and Epictetus", 106–7), 'merging with nature' (Rubin, *Individual and State*: 94, 96, 103; cited in Hall and Ames, *Thinking from the Han*, 153), and even as 'human superconductor' (Fox, "Reflex and Reflexivity", 214).

⁴See, for example, Chong, "The Concept of *Zhen*"; Chong, "Woodworker Qing"; Cook, "Zhuang Zi"; Fraser "Wandering the Way"; Jiang, "Two Notions of Freedom"; Jiang, "Isaiah Berlin's Challenge"; Liu, "Philosophy and the Good Life"; Machek, "Stoics and Daoists on Freedom"; Valmisa, "The Happy Slave".

My account seeks to add another layer to this debate by focusing on the *responsiveness* of a person in terms of how she handles constraints. I introduce the phrase 'working with constraints' to highlight the *handling* of constraints. This is not to import yet another phrase into the vocabulary of actions in a person's encounters with constraints. Rather, as higher-order concept, 'working with constraints' shifts the focus in earlier work, from *actions* taken with respect to constraints, to the nature of *agency*. A person who works with constraints undertakes tasks *responsively* to effect an optimal fit between her capabilities, on the one hand, and what the world offers, on the other. In this account, Zhuangzian agency is primary; secondary to agency is the type of action taken, ensuing from that agency. My focus is on how a person might be free to exercise initiative in choosing among courses of action.

Third, I relate this discussion of freedom, constraints and agency to questions about the prerequisites of freedom. My aim here is to express caution about how we may understand freedom in the *Zhuangzi* by giving more thought to other significant themes in the text. How do we *enable* Zhuangzian freedom? This relates to the first point, that a person could be quite disconcerted if her undertakings are no longer guided primarily by entrenched norms and practices. I suggest that extended practice in relevant contexts is necessary for understanding both the nature of the constraints relevant to an activity and a person's capacity to handle that activity. Interestingly, in the *Zhuangzi's* stories about mastery, when the issue of training is addressed, the training programme is self-directed. No teachers are involved in these stories, even though there are references to teachers in other parts of the text. I propose that the self-cultivation process, and the resulting expertise, are fundamental elements of the Zhuangzian agency that make freedom possible.

The discussion in Section 1 frames my argument by exploring the notions of the 'heavenly' (*tian* 天) and the 'human' (*ren* 人). In the *Zhuangzi*, the two terms are often juxtaposed in discussions about human action and the human condition, with the 'heavenly' often used to signify the latter, that is, the given conditions of life. In keeping with this, I propose that one important way to understand this pair of terms in the *Zhuangzi* is for its readers, qua humans, to understand the 'heavenly' with reference to the human condition. In Section 2, I focus on one way to respond to constraints, that is, to accept aspects of the human condition that humans are unable to change. This section seeks to deepen our understanding of the 'heavenly' and the 'human' by showing that, in some cases, accepting constraints can in fact be liberating. Section 3 contains the main discussion of 'working with constraints'. I first consider contemporary debates on the nature of constraints in the *Zhuangzi*. I then highlight two key features of working with constraints, responsiveness and fit. This helps to establish responsiveness as the defining feature of Zhuangzian freedom. Finally, in Section 4, I articulate the conception of agency that sits at the heart of Zhuangzian freedom by examining

the prerequisites to freedom. I consider the fragility of freedom, briefly giving some thought to cultivation, risk and success.

1. A sense of freedom in a life constrained

Although no single term in the *Zhuangzi* translates straightforwardly as ‘freedom’, it is not difficult to discern the text’s tone of anti-conformism, initiative, ingenuity, and even abandon. In the *Zhuangzi*, there is a cluster of terms that allude to freedom, such as roaming (*you* 遊), forgetting (*wang* 忘), and absence (*wu* 無).⁵ Perhaps the most palpable allusions to freedom in the *Zhuangzi* are associated with its resistance to the methods of flourishing upheld by those in official life. Within this setting, the *Zhuangzi* may be said to advocate *freedom from* the stultifying encumbrances of life resulting from officialdom’s efforts to instil order. In addition, there is a different sense of freedom, aptly captured by the phrase ‘freedom to’, which is an *active* and enabling freedom (located particularly in the *Zhuangzi*’s ideas on roaming). Both these phrases draw on Isaiah Berlin’s notions of positive and negative liberty.⁶ However, I do not want to be constrained by Berlin’s framework but rather will develop an account of freedom undergirded by the *Zhuangzi*’s view of agency.⁷ The conception of freedom I defend will be developed over this and next two sections. I begin here by contextualizing the discussion through a brief analysis of the terms the ‘heavenly’ and the ‘human’, when used together in the *Zhuangzi*.

In scholarly debates, there is a tendency to drive a wedge between the two terms, in language that suggests that *tian* (‘heavenly’) relates to a qualitatively superior, ‘mystical’ (e.g. Watson, *Complete Works*, 4–5) or ‘spiritual’ (e.g. Liu, *Classifying the Zhuangzi Chapters*, 167; Møllgaard, *An Introduction to Daoist Thought*, 20–2) immaterial mode of existence. Some views

⁵In the text, *wang* (forgetting) and *wu* (absence) are used in compounds to indicate the shedding of accepted views or practices. In forgetting, for example, the sagelike person forgets (the demands of) rightness (*wangyi* 忘義; *Zhuangzi* 2/92); and the person who has forgotten self (*wangji* 忘己) is said to have identified with heaven (*Zhuangzi* 12/41–45). *Wu* is coupled with a number of terms, including ‘use’ (*yong* 用), where *wuyong* (無用) refers to the rejection of prevailing conceptions of usefulness (e.g. *Zhuangzi* 1/42–47). Not all cases of *wu* relate to discarding aspects of conventional life. For instance, the phrase *wuqiong* (無窮) is used in a positive sense to refer to the limitless ways in which a sage may respond to situations (e.g. *Zhuangzi* 2/27–31).

The *Zhuangzi* chapter and passage references in this article (e.g. *Zhuangzi* xx/yy) are from the *Zhuangzi Yinde* (see Bibliography).

⁶Refer to Berlin’s discussion in “Two Concepts of Liberty”. Tao Jiang has discussed key parallels and differences between Zhuangzi’s freedom and Berlin’s conceptions of positive and negative liberty (“Isaiah Berlin’s Challenge”). Jiang provides a constructive and clear summary of key themes, in particular highlighting Charles Taylor’s notion of ‘exercise concept’ (“What’s Wrong with Negative Liberty?”, 1979), a concept that helps shed light on the *Zhuangzi*’s views about freedom (see also Valmisa, “The Happy Slave”).

⁷In the *Zhuangzi*, an active and enactive form of freedom is expressed in various ways, for example, to attain a vision aligned with *dao* (*dao tong wei yi* 道通為一, *Zhuangzi* 2/35), or to be in a state of vacuity (in which one is not bound by the expectations of the human world), achieved by Liezi’s teacher, Huzi (*Zhuangzi* 7/15–31), or to soar with the wind (*Zhuangzi* 1/1–13; 17–22).

suggest that dissociation from the human is a prerequisite for a life aligned with the heavenly.⁸ In my view, care needs to be taken not to polarize the heavenly and the human in such definitive and mutually exclusive ways. For one thing, it is not at all clear that the *Zhuangzi* is disdainful of all humanly-devised activities. After all, the text *endorses* certain types of humanly activity. For instance, doing well at ordinary tasks such as butchering, swimming, ferrying, and carving, is applauded.

In my discussion, I adopt the common translation of *tian* as 'heavenly' so as to reflect its broad and varied usage in pre-Han (pre 2nd c. BCE) texts. However, I do not wish to suggest that the 'heavenly' is necessarily agentive, divine or supernatural. Particularly when it is used in the *Zhuangzi's* passages that feature both the 'heavenly' and the 'human', *tian* often refers expansively to what is *given* in human experience, including: natural forces and their effects; events that are inexplicable in human terms; dynamic events that seem to have a life of their own; evidence of agency that seems to operate at a non-material level; and, most broadly, the conditions of life, manifest either in one's embodied constitution, or in the wider environment one inhabits. In the *Zhuangzi*, quite a few passages involving *tian* advocate humanity's *acceptance* of the conditions 'given' them by *tian*. We will see examples of this idea in the following section.

I now turn to the term *ren*, denoting the human. When mentioned in relation to *tian*, the *Zhuangzi's* uses of *ren* often refer to events and interactions in the socio-political domain. For instance, chapter four of the text, entitled "In the world of humanity" ("Renjianshi" 人間世), voices reservations about involvement in official life. The *Zhuangzi* is critical of the way in which not a few in official life cling staunchly to norms and practices associated with the values they held dear.⁹ The point of the *Zhuangzi* is that officialdom's efforts to order and regulate human interactions and undertakings pare down our encounters in the world because they direct our gaze to *see* only what has been sanctioned.¹⁰ The idea that such a life is *enslaving* arises in a passage featuring Confucius.¹¹ Being engaged in a quest to implement his plans for moral order, Confucius is described as being in fetters, with

⁸Eske Møllgaard describes life in the human realm as deeply pained: "What is most evident in *Zhuangzi* is dark despair and a pitiless wisdom that at times seems unbearable" (*An Introduction to Daoist Thought*, 17).

Victor Mair expresses a need for release from "worldly concerns", that is, the "machinery of government" (Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, xxviii).

⁹In one passage, the *Zhuangzi* singles out the Ru (Confucians 儒) and the Mohists (Mo 墨) in its criticisms (*Zhuangzi* 2/21–27). However, the text also speaks out more generally against the imposition of standards for human behaviour in ways that desensitize us from a fuller encounter with the world.

¹⁰Specific terms relating to the imposition of standards include ritual (*li* 禮), benevolence (*ren* 仁) and rightness (*yi* 義), as well as views on what was useful and useless (*yong/wuyong* 用/無用). See *Zhuangzi* 4/64–75; 75–83; 8/1–13; 14/40–44.

¹¹Confucius has a variety of roles in the *Zhuangzi*. Here, he is a figure that represents the antithesis of the *Zhuangzi's* paradigmatic men. In this passage, Confucius is to be pitied as he is in fetters. There are other sections of the text in which Confucius is a spokesperson for Zhuangzian insights.

his condition considered as *punishment* from heaven (*Zhuangzi* 5/24–31). What has he done wrong? The passage below gives us some clues:

The Earl of He asked, “What do you call ‘the heavenly [*tian*]’? What do you call ‘human?’” Ruo of the Northern Sea replied, “Oxen and horses have four legs; this is what I call ‘the heavenly’. Haltering the horse’s head and piercing the ox’s nose are what I call ‘human’”. Therefore, I say, “Do not let what is human obliterate what is the heavenly, do not let resolve override the conditions of life [*ming*], and do not (seek to) acquire at the expense of your name. Conscientiously watch over and never lose sight of (the heavenly); this is what I call ‘returning to what is genuine’.”¹²

(*Zhuangzi* 17/51–53. See also *Zhuangzi* 9/1–6)

Through the use of an example, the passage articulates a distinction between the heavenly and the human. On first impressions, the distinction may suggest hostility to human initiative. Note, however, that although the passage points out that haltering horses and putting nose-rings in oxen are human activities, it does not seek their cessation. The passage does not *demote* the status of human design in favour of the heavenly.¹³ Its concern, rather, seems to be with the kinds of projects in which the human *obliterates* the heavenly. What does it mean for the human to obliterate the heavenly? The character *mie* (滅), translated as ‘obliterate’, conveys the sense of extinguishing, as in water extinguishing fire. How might the human drown out the heavenly, as far as the *Zhuangzi* is concerned?

When used in contrast to the ‘heavenly’, the term ‘human’ denotes the projects that seek to standardize and regulate aspects of human life. Such projects limit our responses according to what is prescribed and, in this way, they obliterate our *fuller*, more spontaneous engagement with the world. Recall the example of Confucius who, with firm adherence to his lofty goals, is described as being in fetters. To be encumbered in this way affects both a person’s epistemological commitments and their attitudinal outlook. Such a person is *satisfied* and *convinced* that he has got it right (see Wong, “Zhuangzi and the Obsession”, and Lai and Chiu, “Ming in the *Zhuangzi Neipian*”).¹⁴ It is this close-mindedness, the complacency with which he approaches life, that impedes the fettered person’s engagement with the heavenly. Put differently, the smugness of humanity, with its visions and grand plans for the ideal life, may drown out our perception of

¹²Passages of the *Zhuangzi* are translated by the author unless otherwise specified.

¹³In another passage, a similar line is drawn, where the true person (*zhenren* 真人) does not apply his (cultivated) heart-mind to denounce *dao*, nor does he employ the human to assist heaven (*Zhuangzi* 6/9).

¹⁴There is an important set of terms the *Zhuangzi* uses to criticise adherence to entrenched views. *Shi!* (assent/approval; *shi* 是) expressed agreement with a view and *Fei!* (negation/disapproval; *fei* 非), disagreement. The text captures how some in official life expressed negativity about views that did not accord with their own, by assertions of ‘No!’, and approval with ‘Yes!’. The compound term ‘*shifei*’ expresses the attitude of a person who is complacent in this way, and whose outlook is marked by defensiveness and insularity (see, e.g., *Zhuangzi* 2/9–14; 21–7; 23/63–66).

the nature of the human condition and what it offers us. The passage's cautionary note about the human and the heavenly suggests it is important to attain *alignment* or *fit* between the heavenly and the human, a point I take up in subsequent sections. In the next section, I discuss some *positive* examples of how a person's engagement with the heavenly is *fitting*. These examples will help illustrate how, by breaking the hold of ingrained attitudes, a person is *free* to embrace the heavenly.

2. Deaths, distended necks and amputations

In this section and the next, I discuss what I have so far referred to as the 'conditions of life'. In the *Zhuangzi*, these include: environments we live in; climatic and seasonal flux; human capabilities and limitations; the social, economic and political situations of individuals; as well as an individual's qualities, such as intelligence, shrewdness, physical prowess and health. The term *ming* (命), roughly meaning the force of circumstances, is sometimes used co-extensively with *tian* (heaven), and sometimes coupled with it (天命 *tianming*). In pre-Han (pre-206 BCE) discourse, *ming* may narrowly refer to a person's lifespan. Yet, in a broader sense, it encompasses the idea of *allotment*,¹⁵ whether in relation to individuals (as in a person born with a distended neck, for example), or to humanity in general (as in mortality, for example).¹⁶

Apart from matters of life and death, there are other circumstances of life we should accept as being beyond human control, including those that determine whether we survive or perish, fail or succeed, live in poverty or wealth, hold a superior or inferior rank, are disgraced or honoured, are hungry or thirsty, or are cold or warm. We are advised in a passage in *Zhuangzi* Chapter 5 to understand these circumstances as "the transformations of events, the proceedings of [destiny]" (*Zhuangzi* 5/43–46; trans. Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi*, 36–7). The passage highlights the inexplicability of certain aspects of life, advising against attempts to obstruct them or alter their course. It also proposes that we should not be so fixated on the unchangeable circumstances of life such that they disrupt our emotional well-being.

In another passage from *Zhuangzi* 5, there are fascinating discussions about people with deformities and amputations. There are references to criminals with amputated feet, a man called "Cripple Lipless with the crooked legs", and another with a distended neck, "Pitcherneck with the big goitre" (trans. Graham, *Chuang-Tzu*, 80). As the title of the chapter "The

¹⁵The intention is not to suggest there is *necessarily* a 'giver' who deals out one's conditions. *Ming* often refers to the conditions that just *are* a part of an individual's life.

¹⁶There is a famous story that celebrates the equanimity of Zhuangzi upon his wife's death. He explains this in terms of his acceptance of *ming* (*Zhuangzi* 18/15–19). The story emphasizes how Zhuangzi cannot undo his wife's death, but he may change his *attitude* to it.

signs of fulness of power” (德充符, *de chong fu*) implies, a fulfilled life is possible in spite of perceived abnormalities and defects. But that is only part of what is suggested. As these figures have not perceived their ‘handicaps’ as deficiencies, they have achieved outcomes that ‘normal’ people do not enjoy! The highlight of their lives is not that they have had achievements *in spite of* their ‘deficiencies’. Rather, in not *seeing* their ‘deficiencies’ as deficiencies, they have not been hampered by a need to *measure up* to the norm. The person with the distended neck – a neck as large as an earthenware jar – excelled at advising Duke Huan of Qi such that, when the Duke looked at ‘perfectly formed’ men, their necks looked too scrawny. The story celebrates the extraordinary virtuosity of the person with the distended neck, whose excellence stands out in such a way that others’ preoccupations with normality (of bodily form, in this case) now appear groundless (*Zhuangzi* 5/49–55). The reader is keenly aware that these people are deformed *only* in the conventional sense, as the *Zhuangzi* uses them to interrogate conceptions of normality.¹⁷

These figures have *accepted* their bodily form (the heavenly) and are not trying to shape it to fit with conventional expectations (the human). *Unfettered*, their liberation from fixation on what is not attainable allows them to attend more fully to what their circumstances *actually* offer. As noted previously, among the stories of the ‘deformed’ people are criminals who have had their legs amputated. Their amputations are not of *tian’s* doing and, indeed, some of the discussions about the criminals raise the question of blame.¹⁸ Yet, as with those born with ‘malformed’ physiological conditions, they have accepted their circumstances and, not impeded by fixation on the mutilations inflicted on their bodies, have achieved optimal outcomes. In this way, the *Zhuangzi* urges readers to accept what they are not in a position to change.

Poignantly, though the figures are ‘handicapped’ according to conventional expectations, they are in fact *freer* than those who abide by those expectations. By embracing their given conditions, they are *enabled* to move on. In some ways, what is recommended in these stories seems commonsensical: our expectations should be aligned with our capabilities and circumstances and not the other way around. *Fittingly*, Pitcherneck can excel in service. Those who expect Pitcherneck to have a ‘normally-shaped’ neck are obliterating the heavenly with the human. Wittily, the text turns the tables on

¹⁷Perkins provides a discussion of the figures in *Zhuangzi* 5, used to undermine conceptions of normality. He discusses the harms and dangers brought about by the imposition of ideals of normality, by those who use heaven as part of their rhetoric to exclude those who do not conform to these ideals (*Heaven and Earth*, 158–65).

¹⁸The idea of criminality raises interesting questions. How *could* the text applaud them? The stories in *Zhuangzi* 5 focus on the present: *now*, being crippled, how do these people proceed with life? For fascinating discussions of the figures in *Zhuangzi* 5, see Galvany, “Radical Alterity”; and D’Ambrosio, “The *Zhuangzi*”.

the matter of who is in fact handicapped. It uses the imagery of physical handicap to interrogate the emotional-intellectual handicaps of those who adhere slavishly to their normative visions.

In drawing this section's discussion to a close, I would like to highlight a distinctive feature of the *Zhuangzi's* approach to the *givens* in life. We have seen in the examples above that not all the conditions that encompass human life have *inescapably* negative consequences. The stories of the figures in *Zhuangzi 5* show that the parameters that circumscribe individual lives or human life more generally can also present opportunities, especially if we do not *already* see them as liabilities. These figures have not merely acquiesced by accepting the inevitable. They have liberated themselves from the shackles of hankering after 'normal' human physiques and capabilities. They have worked *responsively* with constraints, accepting their 'deformities' and amputations rather than resisting them. Understanding the fit between the human and the heavenly has freed them to forge novel paths. To further explore responsiveness to constraints, I discuss some attempts to resist or work around constraints in the following section.

3. Working with constraints, *responsively*

In what is possibly the most extreme rejection of ritualistic formalism in the *Zhuangzi*, a scribe arrives to compete in a drawing contest with alarming disregard for the occasion. He comes late to the event, skips the queue, selects a stall for himself, and was subsequently found naked in his stall (*Zhuangzi* 21/45–7). Yet, strangely, he is praised by an official as a true scribe. Moreover, the story does not describe the scribe's skill or any scribing activity undertaken by him. Noting this, Hans-Georg Moeller suggests that the aim of this story is to highlight that the scribe has achieved "some degree of vitality in a society experienced as a system of control, regulation, discipline, and as contingent fate ... " ("The Naked Scribe", 256). The dress, etiquette, customs and comportment – contextual elements that are part of the elegant and elevated cultural form of scribing – are flouted by the scribe. I propose that this story may be taken as a counter-example to the scenario of Confucius in fetters. The scribe asserts his *freedom from* the cultural conventions his peers subscribe to. Yet what he is *free to* do, we are not told; perhaps this is intended to signal the limitless possibilities arising from his shedding of convention.

To further explore the idea of working with constraints, we turn to the main story in *Zhuangzi 4*, the chapter entitled "In the world of humanity". This story covers an extended interchange between Confucius and Yan Hui (顏回), Confucius' favoured follower (*Zhuangzi* 4/1–24). Yan Hui informs Confucius of his upcoming employment with the difficult Prince of Wei. In this passage, the character Confucius plays the role of a Zhuangzian spokesperson. Confucius attempts to dissuade Yan Hui from taking on the mission.

The *Zhuangzi's* Confucius speaks of the role's dangers given the incompatibility of Yan Hui's own moral commitments with the deeply corrupt ways of the Prince.

Undeterred by Confucius' warnings, Yan Hui defends his preparedness for the task. He explains that his strategic plan is to be "inwardly upright, outwardly flexible, completing tasks using the precedents of antiquity" (*Zhuangzi* 4/17–18). According to our analysis, Yan Hui is proposing to work *within* constraints by outwardly conforming with the Prince's demands, while inwardly maintaining his actual moral commitments. This is not in itself problematic. We will see below that the problem lies in Yan Hui's approach to the situation.

Confucius spurns Yan Hui's plan. He criticizes Yan Hui for his firmly-held doctrines on advising the Prince prior to experiencing what the actual situation might call for (*Zhuangzi* 4/23–4). In pre-planning his actions prior to his encounters with the Prince, Yan Hui *denies* himself the opportunity to be responsive. Confucius as a Zhuangzian spokesperson here is critical of Yan Hui for not aiming to work responsively *with* constraints in serving the Prince of Wei.

As the conversation continues, Yan Hui seeks Confucius' counsel on the right approach to take in serving the Prince. Confucius advises Yan Hui to "fast the heart-mind" (心齋; *Zhuangzi* 4/24–34). Of the effects of fasting the heart-mind, Confucius says, "The [heart-]mind is halted at whatever verifies its preconceptions" (*Zhuangzi* 4/26–7; trans. Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi*, 26).¹⁹ Fasting the heart-mind is a process that halts the *fixations* of the ingrained heart-mind so that a person may encounter a situation without being held hostage to preconceived outcomes. In the context of this discussion, eliminating the desire to realize fixed, pre-established visions, allows a person the opportunity to be responsive to a situation's constraints and contingencies. As the interchange between Confucius and Yan Hui continues, Confucius tells Yan Hui that a person who has successfully fasted his heart-mind may "play in the ruler's cage" and use strategies such as, "when the ruler is receptive, do your own crowing, but when he's not, let it rest" (*Zhuangzi* 4/29–30, adapted from the translation by Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi*, 26).

There are interesting discussions of the imagery of playing in the ruler's cage in scholarly literature. For instance, Scott Cook suggests that the freedom offered by the *Zhuangzi* is somewhat restricted, as it is "freedom that roams in between constraints" ("Zhuang Zi", 540). Cook also draws on the story of butcher Ding, who carves oxen with amazing precision and elegance (*Zhuangzi* 3/2–12). Cook refers specifically to the butcher's manipulation of his knife to move in the space between the joints when carving an ox, rather than cutting or hacking. Ding is restricted by the bones of the joints, yet free to move in that space ("Zhuang Zi", 537–8).

¹⁹See also Ziporyn's translation notes (*Zhuangzi*, footnote. 4, p. 26).

Using the same two images – the ruler’s cage and the space between the joints – Tao Jiang presents a more complex analysis of the situation apropos of freedom. He notes that: “When operating within the cage of the state, the Zhuangzian imagination is devoted to the discernment of potentials that lie in the invisible or even the undesirable realms of the world” (“Isaiah Berlin’s Challenge”, 84). Jiang proposes two paths relating to different types of freedom, one working beyond, and the other within, constraints: “[t]he transformed, daemonic self, when negotiating with the world, takes one of two routes, either beyond the norms and boundaries or within them” (“Isaiah Berlin’s Challenge”, 77).

Jiang’s analysis comprises several elements; I mention two relevant ones here. First, his idea of working beyond or within constraints have only a secondary role in my account. These phrases are important to help us think about possible actions in light of constraints. However, my account takes the inquiry a step further back by considering how a person *sees* or understands constraints, focusing in particular on how the ‘human’ is understood in relation to the ‘heavenly’. Thus, in working responsively *with* constraints, a person has not only the two options mentioned by Jiang, but a potentially limitless number of ways to respond: she may accept those she is unable to change, or circumvent or flout them, or fittingly manipulate particular aspects of the situation, or formulate longer-term plans to develop capabilities to handle similar constraints in the future, or more. The actions a person may take *responsively* are partly situation-dependent and therefore defy theorization. The idea of *fit* is an integral part of this account. ‘Fit’ is the *measure* of whether one’s chosen actions (the ‘human’) appropriately address constraints (some of which are associated with the ‘heavenly’) in the contexts in which they are encountered. Recall the passage discussed in Section 1, where the advice is not to let the human obliterate the heavenly.

Let me now say a little more about responsiveness and fit in relation to the second relevant aspect of Jiang’s analysis. This lies in Jiang’s idea of an individual’s ‘discernment of potentials’ (“Isaiah Berlin’s Challenge”, 84), which is an important feature of responsiveness. In my account, as a higher order concept, ‘responsiveness’ captures the complex process of perceiving and discerning the salient factors of a situation, understanding how these may be harnessed, or how they are restrictive, and performing actions (informed by such awareness) to optimize outcomes.²⁰ The *Zhuangzi*’s aversion to outcome-driven actions does not imply that *no* outcomes should ever be sought,²¹ but rather that outcomes determined prior to the event – a *fixation* on particular goals – will tend to hinder our perception of

²⁰The text does not provide sophisticated angles on this complex process, but I touch on the vocabulary of the *Zhuangzi* that is relevant to this point, in the next section.

²¹After all, the butcher aims to carve well, and the swimmer aims not to drown. However, it is one thing to carve well, and another to carve with one particular outcome in mind. The projects that seek to

opportunities that might arise in our contexts of engagement. The idea of responsiveness is expressed in the character *ying* (應), manifest in the imagery of sagely attainment. Such attainment is likened to a rotating pivot that is able to respond limitlessly because it is not bound by the perspective of any one doctrine (*Zhuangzi* 2/27–31). The nature of *ying* is aptly illustrated, for example, by the story of the wheelwright, who is *not* guided by the standard compass and square used in carving: “I feel it in my hand and respond [*ying*] to it with my heart-mind” (*Zhuangzi* 13/72).²² The wheelwright’s approach to carving stands in stark contrast to the strategy developed by Yan Hui, who has not allowed himself the opportunity to be responsive.

Yet, responsiveness does not come easy. I propose that an important aim of the *Zhuangzi*’s mastery stories is to articulate *how* responsiveness may be developed through extended practice. In the *Zhuangzi*, responsiveness is both required by, and refined in, practice. Practice helps develop a person’s attentiveness and sensitivity to salient considerations in each type of activity.²³ More detailed examples of how this happens are provided in the next section.

For now, what about the idea of fit? Perhaps the best way to understand it is through a story in the *Zhuangzi* which provides an example of how it might work. Qing is an accomplished bellstand carver whose bellstands are marvellous creations, such that they are said to be the work of spirits (*Zhuangzi* 19/54–59). When asked how they are so, Qing explains that he personally selects the best trees – the ones *fit* for making bellstands with. To do this, he fasts, progressively, to rid his focus on praise, reward, rank or salary; on honour, disgrace, skill or its lack; and, finally, on his four limbs and body! Qing then enters the forest and observes the ‘given’, the heavenly nature (*guan tian xing* 觀天性), of the trees. He will use a tree only if it has an excellent form for bellstand-making. In this way, he proclaims, he “matches heaven with heaven” (*yi tian he tian* 以天合天).

I make two remarks concerning how the details of this story relate to the idea of fit in the *Zhuangzi*. First, note that the theme of matching heaven with heaven is different from that of the fit between the heavenly and the human. Whereas the latter is the more common focus in the *Zhuangzi*, I suggest that Qing has exceeded the alignment of the human with the heavenly. Through fasting, Qing has taken on the mantle of the heavenly, with his actions fittingly aligned with the heavenly. If he only sees trees that do not lend themselves to the making of superior bellstands, *responsively*, he leaves

regulate human behaviour are anchored in their respective ideals and thus run the risk of not being sufficiently context-sensitive.

²²Lisa Raphals presents a fascinating analysis of the wheelwright’s performance *without* the compass and square (“Wheelright Bian”).

²³See Lai and Chiu, “*Ming* in the *Zhuangzi* Neipian”; Lai, “The Cicada-catcher”; and Lai, “Receptivity, Reason and Responsiveness”.

them alone. Although the story's line differs slightly from our focus on the *human* and the heavenly, I propose that the difference is only one of degree: Qing's situation is an idealized version of the ideas of responsiveness and fit we are considering.

There is a second aspect of fit, and this concerns Qing's making himself fit for the activity by fasting his heart-mind. Whereas, in the previous section, we discussed figures who accepted their various conditions, Qing's fasting, by contrast, seeks to bring about change in his own person. This is also the case for the cicada-catcher and others (as we will see below). There is a significant difference between the figures in *Zhuangzi* 5, on the one hand, and Qing, on the other. An amputated leg cannot be re-attached (not, at least, in Zhuangzi's time) but we can train ourselves to be better at handling a knife, or manipulating a pole, or in swimming. Qing appropriately *prepares* himself for the task at hand.

At this point, we must ask if what the Zhuangzi seeks is a uni-directional agent-to-world fit. In other words, what we have looked at so far seems to require of humanity that it must *always* be aligned with the heavenly and, moreover, that what belongs to the 'heavenly' should not be altered. Is this the case? I suggest not, as many of the *Zhuangzi*'s masters are *also* enacting a world-to-agent fit in their activities. They are, after all, carving oxen, making wheels, catching cicadas, making bellstands, haltering horses and putting nose-rings on oxen.

It should now be clear that the idea of 'working with constraints' is significantly different from the other proposals about constraints discussed earlier. Acting within or beyond constraints are *outcomes* of responsive agency. By contrast, 'working with constraints' involves a person's responding *fittingly* to a particular set of constraints faced, by employing their capabilities in light of the situation. To work responsively with constraints is to exercise Zhuangzian freedom.

How do we develop the capacity to be responsive? The final section considers some stories that convey how some masters have honed their capacities for working with constraints. In analysing these, I take the opportunity to identify some characteristics of Zhuangzian agency.

4. Stress, freedom and agency

The enlightened person in the *Zhuangzi* enjoys equanimity that results from his liberation from entrenched ways.²⁴ His enviable composure arises from a sense of *relief* in not being bound to entrenched practices, as well as a spirit of

²⁴Chong, "The Concept of *Zhen*"; Chong, "Woodworker Qing"; Fraser, "Wandering the Way"; Liu, "Philosophy and the Good Life"; Machek, "Emotions that Do Not Move"; Olberding, "Sorrow and the Sage"; Valmisa, "The Happy Slave"; Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi*.

openness in his undertakings.²⁵ However, discussions to date have not acknowledged that a person who has walked away from ingrained ways of seeing things may find himself in an extremely stressful position, as he now has the responsibility to devise responses to situations, rather than rely on the familiar. Perhaps a life of abiding by entrenched practices – of working within the bounds of the familiar – is less troublesome!

In this final section, I focus on self-directed engagement – an important feature of responsiveness – as a hallmark of Zhuangzian freedom. It seems that the figures lauded in the *Zhuangzi* prefer *not* to have a quieter life by simply treading in the familiar. Perhaps they seek fulfilment in excelling in the activities they undertake; their accomplishments exceed by far the formulaic or the merely mechanical. My view seeks to extend those recent discussions that highlight the active or enabling nature of freedom in the *Zhuangzi*.²⁶ I do so by asking *how* a person can develop relevant capacities to act freely.

The *Zhuangzi*'s stories of mastery often allude to the extended period over which the master has practiced and thus acquired his skills. We know the butcher has been carving oxen for at least nineteen years, as he tells us that his knife has not needed sharpening for that period (*Zhuangzi* 3/8). The swimmer is deeply familiar with the water at the foot of the cascades (*Zhuangzi* 19/49–54). At seventy, the wheelwright is still carving wheels. Extended practice is required for a number of reasons. Apart from building up one's capabilities for performing an activity, it also helps a person understand how far she can push her capabilities.²⁷ Practice also helps a person establish familiarity with the *typical* contexts within which the activity takes place (e.g. cicada-catching in among the trees), as well as *atypical* ones (e.g. cicada habits in unusually humid conditions). The *process* of repeatedly undertaking the activity is important to help a learner understand her strengths and weaknesses in relation to the activity.²⁸ This developmental process is a prerequisite for understanding the *fit* between the context of engagement, and one's capacity to undertake a task situated within that context. I discuss two stories below, the cicada-catcher and the swimmer,

²⁵See Fraser, "The Ferryman"; Liu, "Philosophy and the Good Life"; Valmisa, "The Happy Slave".

²⁶Fraser, "The Ferryman"; Liu, "Philosophy and the Good Life"; Moeller and D'Ambrosio, *Genuine Pretending*; Valmisa, "The Happy Slave".

²⁷A relevant term for understanding what is *wanting*, for an individual to complete an action or a project, is 待 (*dai*), meaning to *await* something, perhaps a sign, a decree, or an event. In the *Zhuangzi*, *dai* is part of the vocabulary that highlights recognition and acceptance of what life hands out to humanity. The term is associated with being aware of one's dependencies as, for instance, in recognising one's allotted lifespan (*Zhuangzi* 20/50–61; 21/14–24). Refer to the illuminating discussions of *dai* by Fraser ("Wandering the Way", 551) and Ziporyn (*Zhuangzi*, 213–4).

²⁸The comments of Timothy Ingold on the centrality of practising within an environment, in order to develop fluency, speak to this point. Ingold states, "One learns to perceive in the manner appropriate to a culture "by 'hands-on' training in everyday tasks whose successful fulfilment requires a practised ability to notice and to respond fluently to salient aspects of the environment" (Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment*, 166–7).

to illustrate how someone might embrace the approach of carefree wandering, during which their actions are not necessarily guided by conventional norms or targets. To express this differently, such a person needs to be *trained* in relevant ways to be free.

In the cicada-catcher story, Confucius comes across a hunchbacked cicada-catcher, “catching cicadas with a sticky pole as easily as though he were grabbing them with his hand.” (*Zhuangzi* 19/17–18). For those selling cicadas as their livelihood, it was common practice to catch cicadas with a pole. The task involved using sticky adhesive at the end of the pole, that would attach to cicada wings. In this story, Confucius plays yet another role, where he seeks to be instructed by the cicada-catcher, who has a fairly ordinary vocation. Intrigued by the hunchback’s successes, Confucius asks, “Does the master have skill? Is there *dao*?”, to which the cicada-catcher replies:

I have *dao*. For (the first) five or six months I practised with two pellets piled up (on my pole). If they don’t drop, I will lose very few cicadas. When I could balance three pellets without dropping them, I would only lose one cicada in ten. When I was able to balance five pellets without them falling off, (I could catch cicadas) as if I was picking them up with my hand. I position my body like a gnarled tree trunk and I hold my arm like an old dry branch. No matter how expansive heaven and earth are, and how innumerable things are, I am aware of nothing but cicada wings. Neither turning nor leaning, I do not let the ten thousand things take the place of cicada wings. How can I not succeed in taking them?

(*Zhuangzi* 19/17–21)

The cicada-catcher has accomplished a self-directed training programme of balancing balls at the end of his pole. We are not told how this is relevant for building cicada-catching skills. However, we may surmise that, in balancing balls with the pole, he develops *a feel* for the pole which, in turn, optimizes his capacity for using it to catch cicadas. There is more. Cognisant of cicada habits (say, their aversion to perceived threats), he holds his body to resemble a trunk and his arms like branches, so as to situate himself in a non-threatening way for cicadas, *within their habitats* (part of the ‘heavenly’). Responding to what he has observed of cicada habits, the cicada-catcher develops his control of the pole, and his positioning of himself; he trains his body to meet, not resist, the conditions he is not in a position to alter.

Now, he no longer needs to be mindful of pole-handling and his own body positions. In this way, the cicada-catcher may decrease his stress levels by attending only to the more situationally-dependent contingencies, such as cicada wings. Here, we get a sense of how a person who does not adhere to entrenched expectations is *free* to develop a firsthand way – a *dao* – of responding to the limitless possibilities afforded by any one situation.²⁹

²⁹What also helps bring home the point about the importance of self-directed learning in this story is how, at the end of the story, Confucius *teaches* his followers what they should learn from the

This picture of working *with* constraints situates Zhuangzian freedom within the text's conception of agency. Returning to the question of fit, we see in both the cicada-catcher story and that of Qing the engraver, the masters' attempts to develop their capabilities in order to perform their activities skilfully. We have now seen how some of the figures in the *Zhuangzi* can prepare themselves to work responsively *with* constraints. From this angle, we might begin to ask more probing questions about the stories, for example, did the cicada-catcher develop his hunchback over time because cicada-catching requires that he crouch in among the trees? Or does his being a hunchback make him a *better* cicada-catcher? Whence the hunchback? We are not told, and this prompts more questions about human agency in the world. The opportunity to cultivate oneself to better handle a task is an expression of the text's belief in human plasticity and creativity. In the masters' responsive encounters with the world, they also have the freedom to *shape* their agency.

In the second story, I want to discuss in this context, Confucius and his followers are overawed by a swimmer's success in navigating dangerous waters. They witness a man jumping into treacherous waters at the base of imposing cascades. Thinking that the man intends to take his own life, Confucius is taken aback when he finds out that the man was merely having a swim!

Confucius was seeing the sights at Lu-liang, where there were cascades of thirty fathoms with sprays of forty *li*,³⁰ such that no fish, turtles or other water creatures could swim in it. He saw a man swimming in it and believed that the man was in some kind of trouble and intended to end his life. Confucius hastened his followers along by the cascades to pull the man out. But after the man had swum a couple of hundred paces, he came out of the water and began strolling along the base of the embankment, his hair streaming down, singing a song. Confucius ran after him and said, "I thought you were a ghost, but now, up close, I see you're a man. May I ask if you have a way (*dao*) of treading water?"

(*Zhuangzi* 19/49–52, adapted from the translation by Watson, *Complete Works*, 204–5)

Confucius is portrayed in this story as a tragicomic figure who fears for the life of the swimmer. Oblivious to Confucius' apprehensions, the swimmer climbs out of the water, with his hair down, singing and strolling. Like the Confucius figure in fetters, here, Confucius' anxieties arise from his fear of the unknown.

cicada-catcher's example: "He keeps his will undivided and concentrates his spirit—is this not what we say about the venerable hunchback?" (*Zhuangzi* 19/21, adapted from the trans. by Watson, *Complete Works*, 200).

Although Confucius might be right that the cicada-catcher's attentiveness should be emulated, many other relevant aspects of the cicada-catcher's success have been filtered out. The training programme has been developed *by* the cicada-catcher, *for* the cicada-catcher. Has Confucius missed a point about firsthand familiarity and expertise, a key component of Zhuangzian agency? Will the cicada-catcher's programme suit those who are not hunchbacks?

³⁰里: a traditional unit of distance measurement which varied across time periods in ancient China.

He sees the cascades and waters as dangerous and threatening. He exhibits symptoms of a narrow and closed mind, where time and energy are spent reinforcing the familiar and buffering oneself from what is new and challenging (see Galvany, "The Swimmer"). Being an eyewitness to this event has taken Confucius out of his comfort zone. In response to Confucius' question, the swimmer says:

I have no (personal) way (*dao*). I began with what was given, developed what was natural (to me), and reached completion in keeping with destiny [*ming*]. I go under with the swirls and emerge with the eddies, following the way [*dao*] of the waters without developing one of my own. That's how I can tread water.

(*Zhuangzi* 19/52–4, adapted from the trans.
by Watson, *Complete Works*, 204–5)

According to the swimmer, his self-developed programme began by his *accepting* some of the given conditions (including, for example, the force of the cascades). It is not within his capacity to alter these conditions. *Fittingly*, he develops his capabilities for swimming at the base of *these* cascades. Given the perilous nature of the waters here, if he were to develop a plan for overcoming the swirls and eddies of this pool, his life could be in grave danger. I suggest this is why he says he has no *personal dao*, that is, unlike Yan Hui, who has plans for working with the Prince of Wei, the swimmer has no formulated plan. Rather, the swimmer follows the water's *dao*, himself having no *dao* that would *contest* the water's *dao*.

Has the swimmer surrendered to the *dao* of the water? In one sense, he has. Yet, in another, his *active* decision *not* to contest but to align with the *dao* of the water is not technically a 'surrender'. His success in swimming in these waters is possible only because he has, like the cicada-catcher, worked *with* constraints to develop what his body is capable of, aligned with the movements and the force of the cascades and the pool. This same strategy of going along with the water's *dao* may not work, for instance, if the swimmer was swimming in a calm lake, for there would be no swirls and eddies to carry him the same way.

The story of the swimmer also prompts questions about the different levels of stress faced by Confucius and the swimmer. The swimmer's nonchalance – marked by his walking in wet clothing, hair unbound – is contrasted with Confucius' anxiety about the dangerous waters.³¹ The swimmer is attuned to the environment of the cascades *because*, being open to the nature of water, he has acquired insights into its characteristics. Over the years, as he has cultivated his bodily manoeuvres at the base of these cascades – in order to

³¹The juxtaposition is particularly fascinating as, in the Confucian tradition, water is a symbol of loyalty and trustworthiness (*zhong xin* 忠信). In Daoist philosophy, by contrast, water is a symbol of nourishment and adaptability. See the discussion in Galvany on the symbolism of water in this story ("The Swimmer").

have no *dao* – he does not share Confucius’ anxieties. By contrast, Confucius’ encounter with the cascades is mediated through preconceived notions of safety and danger, which effectively prevent him from being acquainted with this environment. Is this another example of Confucius’ being in fetters?

Yet, Confucius is partly right about risk. Certainly, Confucius would have been unlikely to have survived had *he* jumped into those waters! Moreover, the story does not suggest that the swimmer does not appreciate the risks of swimming in these waters. While the risks are ever-present, the story highlights how the swimmer is *at ease* because he is familiar with his environment, not letting his encounter with the waters be determined by conventional expectations of danger. Like the other masters of the *Zhuangzi*, he does not fall back on familiar, entrenched *daos*. Where there is greater emphasis on initiative, we must also recognize that a person qua agent is more *exposed*: just as opportunities arise, so do risks. In the stories of skilful mastery, the threat of failure or danger lies just beneath the surface of the activities, whether from chisels that slip, knives that miss their targets, or currents that drown swimmers and boatmen. *Vulnerability* is an ever-present feature of Zhuangzian freedom. Yet, a person who is free in the Zhuangzian sense may reduce their vulnerability by developing greater awareness of their contexts of action and by cultivating relevant capabilities.

5. Conclusion

The new angle on Zhuangzian freedom offered here highlights risk as an important corollary of freedom. In doing so, it brings out the complexity, and sophistication, of the *Zhuangzi*’s understanding of what we call ‘freedom’. Freedom is neither simply the opportunity to exercise initiative or discretion, nor is it just a matter of working beyond or within constraints. A person who *works with constraints* charts a course of action through having developed her capabilities, so as to achieve optimal outcomes in given conditions. This idea of fit helps explain the alignment between a person’s *capabilities* (the human) and the conditions present in the world (the heavenly), a set of terms I explored in Section 1. There, I elucidated how humans sometimes erect grand plans that they adhere slavishly to, and which hinder their perception of the realities of the human condition. By contrast, an attitude that is open to what the world offers (discussed through examples in Sections 2, 3 and 4) allows a person to appreciate the nature of constraints they face, and thus enables them to be responsive to the salient conditions of the task at hand.

My discussion of freedom and constraints in the *Zhuangzi* has sought to shift the focus of existing debates, moving it from options for dealing with constraints, to the nature of Zhuangzian *agency* that responds fittingly to constraints. The nuanced view of freedom offered here reflects the

Zhuangzi's appreciation of human life and its recognition of the limits and possibilities of the human condition. In working with constraints, we carve our own *daos*. The *Zhuangzi* optimistically offers models of those who have taken the opportunity to develop their capacities to better navigate the world. In the text's encounters of the 'human' with the 'heavenly', we find compelling examples of human resourcefulness as well as the encouragement to shape our own agency. Herein lies Zhuangzian freedom.

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