SEVEN

Zhuangzi’s Understanding of Skillfulness
and the Ultimate Spiritual State

Lee H. Yearley

Introduction

Few books existing anywhere are both as compelling and as mysterious as is
the Zhuangzi; it simultaneously draws one’s attention and eludes one’s grasp.
Readers are swept along—at times almost swept away—by the book, and
yet often feel that what moves them is difficult to grasp much less articulate.
They sense that something ineffable is being presented or even thrust upon
them. They realize that Zhuangzi strains, if gracefully, to present through
language a vision he thinks is beyond language; they understand the book
truly represents a raid on the inexpressible. Given this, any interpreter must
worry that translating Zhuangzi’s ideas into one’s own prosaic world and
pedestrian prose will deform what is crucial. Nevertheless, attempts at trans-
lation are necessary, if only to guide readers to the work and help orient
them.1

Let us begin, then, but begin with a brief academic note. The book, the
Zhuangzi, is surely the product of many different authors and their ideas,
quality of mind, and depth of spirit differ considerably. But a persuasive (if
not always fully convincing) argument can be made that at least the first
seven of its thirty-three chapters are largely by one hand, and that aspects of
that person’s work appear elsewhere in the book. We will focus on the vision
presented in those places and not examine the work’s other visions, even though some of them are of considerable profundity. Numerous technical problems arise, however, even within this one strand of the Zhuangzi. Translation and textual difficulties abound, but perhaps most important, one must always worry whether any interpretation witnesses more to the ingenuity of the interpreter than to the actual message of the author.  

Nevertheless, we can describe with at least some confidence the spiritual vision of a writer whom we will call Zhuangzi. That Zhuangzi probably lived in the late fourth century B.C.E.; he may have been brought up a Confucian and then become a Yangist—a school that argued for the pursuit of private tranquility rather than public service. Later events, however, such as a personal crisis, contact with Logicians, and his own ecstatic experiences seem to have led him to find his own highly distinctive way.  

Our examination will focus on Zhuangzi’s depiction of the ultimate spiritual state. His more direct depictions of that state, as we will see, are very evocative. They are also often quite mysterious. Therefore we will fill them out by analyzing his more understandable portrayal of skillful activity. Such activity both reflects and points to the highest state, and examining it provides us with a reasonably accessible avenue into his often elusive ideas on spirituality.

Before beginning that inquiry, however, we need to examine briefly two relevant features of the context within which Zhuangzi’s ideas about spirituality are set. One is his views on the self and the other his views on the character of human knowledge.

**Zhuangzi’s Notion of the Three Levels of the Self**

Any reliance on a neatly defined model of the self will misrepresent significant aspects of Zhuangzi’s thought, given his notions about the futility of normal kinds of analysis, his seeming commitment to the abolition of dichotomies, and his method of presenting ideas. If used with appropriate caution, however, such a model does help us to understand and sort out some important ideas in him.

In Zhuangzi’s picture, permutations of which appear in many Chinese thinkers, the self can be moved by three kinds of “drives,” three desires to act or impulses to move: dispositional drives, reflective drives, and transcendent drives. Dispositional drives are those strong movements to action that are triggered by specific circumstances. Some of these drives arise from biological or “natural” sources—hunger, for example. Others arise from social conditioning, conditioning that may or may not be thought to develop those “natural” sources—deference to elders, for example. In both cases, if particular stimuli appear then specific responses are activated. The sight of
food or of an elderly person produces in me a specific desire and action. I am disposed, then, to react without thinking to certain occurrences.

Reflective drives manifest the desire to have different drives than the dispositional ones that normally and easily operate. For example, my dispositional drives may make me prone either to anger quickly or to defer inappropriately. Yet I may, on reflection, desire to be a different sort of person: one whose anger comes only slowly and whose deference appears only when warranted.

Reflective drives will, then, introduce conflict into my life. My quick anger or ease deference, for instance, now produces a division within me. Part of me moves easily toward the action, but part of me is dissatisfied with that movement. Reflective drives may also, however, lead me to change my actions. They may lead me either to overrule the dispositional drive when it appears or to undertake a process of self-cultivation that results in my having different dispositional drives than I now have. That is, I may through sheer will power abort my overly quick anger or I may through cultivation reform myself so that, in time, that kind of anger rarely arises. Reflective drives, then, are characterized by the presence of conflict, struggle, and possible changes in action.

Transcendent drives generate activities that exceed the normal capacities of the self and seem to arise from beyond it. They produce abilities that surpass normal abilities and transform normal actions. When empowered by transcendent drives I find, for example, that I am so finely tuned to circumstances that my anger or deference appears, on reflection, always to be appropriate. Moreover, I find myself able to perform easily and well tasks that previously seemed to be far beyond my normal capabilities.*

Transcendent drives resemble dispositional drives in their strength, spontaneity, and lack of reliance on normal thought. Their content differs however, notably in how far the capabilities expressed surpass those found in dispositional drives. Furthermore, transcendent drives can operate only because reflective drives have led to fundamental changes in the self; those changes allow the drives to operate.

Transcendent drives may, then, resemble or draw on either of the other two kinds of drives. Finally, however, they dissolve both dispositional and reflective drives and thus cause the normal self to disappear. They allow powers such as the 神 shen, "daemonic",—powers we will examine later—to possess a person and therefore they help bring to a person the highest possible spiritual fulfillment.5

This tripartite division of dispositional drives, reflective drives, and transcendent drives illuminates, I think, both Zhuangzi’s spiritual vision and the

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* Compare Yearley’s "transcendent drives" with Enzo’s "spirit-like impulses" (p. 135) and with Berkson’s description of the dao as “acting through” the sage (p. 119). — Eds.
Zhuangzi's Understanding of Skillfulness

importance of skillful activity to him. It helps us see, for example, just how Zhuangzi differs from those Daoists who simply distinguish between a social self and a natural self. Those Daoists think the social self (the product of social training) is that from which one should escape and the natural self (one’s “original” pure character) is that to which one should return.

Zhuangzi’s position is, however, considerably more complicated than is this simple view, and this model helps us see the differences between them. Unlike the simple view, for example, Zhuangzi distinguishes between two kinds of social selves: the dispositional and the reflective. He tends to scoff (as would most Daoists and even some Confucians) at behavior generated by those dispositional drives that arise from social conditioning. But he often shows respect for actions that arise from reflective drives, although he can criticize the struggle that accompanies those actions. His respect is especially pronounced if, in his view, the person is fated to reach no higher level—a situation that, for him, Confucius exemplifies (79, 90; cf. 128–134; also note 17).

Even more important, this model helps us see that, unlike certain other Daoists (some of whose ideas appear in the Zhuangzi), Zhuangzi’s spiritual fulfillment does not consist in the childlike gratification of “natural” or instinctive dispositional drives. Rather he wants people to be animated by transcendent drives. Zhuangzi is well aware, as his portraits of heedless rulers show, of the problems that can arise in lives controlled by instinctive dispositional drives (66–72; cf. 200–217, 234–243). Furthermore, he understands well the difficulties in distinguishing accurately between the instinctive and the habitual. Finally, he does not think it makes philosophical or religious sense to rely on the notion of a simple, instinctual, nature contact with which can save one.

Zhuangzi’s final goal, then, is to activate transcendent drives, and they can appear only after reflective drives have remade the self’s dispositional drives. As we shall examine more fully later, the importance both of the training that underlies this remaking and of the state it produces clarifies why skillful activity points to the perfected spiritual state. That is, skills differ from dispositional drives because they arise from training and involve an attentive responsiveness to situations. They also, however, differ from reflective drives because they involve none of the division that arises from the mind adhering to ideals that conflict with simple drives.

Skills differ, then, both from the blind impulses manifested in dispositional drives and from the conflicts manifested in reflective drives. Therefore, examining skills can provide us with an illuminating way to understand Zhuangzi’s spirituality, even if finally they can just point to the state that transcendent drives produce. Before turning to how Zhuangzi actually describes skills and that to which they point we need, however, to look briefly at the other subject that provides a general context for his ideas: the character of human knowledge.
Zhuangzi’s Picture of Normal Ethical Knowledge and the Implications He Draws From It

Underlying Zhuangzi’s picture of spirituality are his views on what constitutes normal human knowledge, especially ethical knowledge, and how that knowledge affects actions. We will treat here only certain aspects of this complicated and controversial subject and keep as simple as possible a necessarily somewhat technical discussion. Let us begin by recounting an old Chinese story, perhaps of Daoist origin, that captures well some of the flavor, purposes, and ideas in Zhuangzi’s approach to knowledge.

The story concerns a poor farmer who lives near a village in north China. One day a wild horse strays into his farm and is captured. The villagers rush to congratulate him on his improved situation, but the old man only replies, “How do I know if it is a good thing or if it is a bad thing?” The following week the horse escapes, and the villagers return to express their sorrow. The old man, however, only replies, “How do I know if it is a good thing or if it is a bad thing?” Within three weeks the horse returns accompanied now by a strong and beautiful stallion. Again the villagers appear and again they congratulate him on his improved circumstances. But his response remains as it was before.

The old man’s only son, enamored of the new stallion, begins to ride it. One day, however, he is thrown and crippled. Lamenting the son’s injury the villagers reappear, but the old man’s reply can by now be predicted. Two months pass, and barbarian hordes invade the country. All the able bodied young men in the district are forced to join the army; only the old man’s crippled son is excused. Fearful for the life of their sons, the villagers come again to the old man to declare how lucky he is that his son was thrown and is crippled. The old man, however, simply replies “How do I know if it is a good thing it or if it is a bad thing!”

Various points can be drawn from this story. Most important here is that the old man’s confessions of ignorance rest on his sense that the evaluation of situations depends on the perspective employed. Such a viewpoint reflects Zhuangzi’s belief that knowledge is “perspectival.” That is, most important distinctions between the good and the bad arise from and depend upon the position, the perspective, from which a person views the world. Moreover, no fully objective way exists to decide which of the conflicting perspectives is correct because any decision is bound to reflect a perspective. (It will, for example, either just reflect one of several conflicting perspectives or introduce yet another; see especially 60.) Given this, people ought simply to confess ignorance, a confession that has, Zhuangzi thinks, massive implications because knowledge is what guides most action and forms most attitudes. The old man’s attitudes and activities differ so much from those of the villagers, for instance, because he thinks he lacks knowledge.
Put one way, Zhuangzi’s approach manifests a powerful incapacity to understand, a nurtured inability to understand what seems so evidently true to most people about how to live. That is, he has trained himself, and hopes to train us, to possess an incapacity to understand much of what is obvious to virtually everyone else. This incapacity is far from either naïveté or intellectual dullness, although it can seem like that to the uninitiated. Rather it involves the acuity and courage continually to query cherished beliefs about the seemingly obvious. Moreover, it can be developed only through a kind of intellectual asceticism, the voluntary surrender of the guidance knowledge gives us in order to be open to what better can replace it.

There are many technical issues, and some heated debates, surrounding both the philosophical and theoretical details of Zhuangzi’s account. They are well analyzed in recent works, including pieces in this volume, and I will not attempt to engage those issues here. For our purposes what is crucial, and relatively uncontroversial, is Zhuangzi’s idea that almost all ethical language encases a set of distinctions that produces attitudes that inform actions. Ethical language, then, helps to regulate behavior and emotional reactions. Moreover, different communities, or groups within communities, will often have different kinds of ethical languages and therefore will produce and validate different, even conflicting, kinds of actions and attitudes (49–51, 100–108).

Such differences are likely to appear because these learned discourses, Zhuangzi emphasizes, build on dichotomies: they rest on oppositions, such as that between the beautiful and the ugly. This web of oppositions forms thought, attitude, and action and gives groups of people a distinctive identity. For example, one group’s language declares tattoos beautiful and their lack ugly, and its members think, feel, and act accordingly. Those without tattoos are considered imperfect specimens of the human race and treated as such. Another group, however, employs the same general opposition—the beautiful and the ugly—but thinks tattoos ugly and behaves accordingly.

For Zhuangzi, then, ethical knowledge involves the application of distinctions that arise from a system of describing and evaluating that people are taught when they learn a language. These distinctions focus desires, engender goals, and develop attitudes: to be taught, for instance, that selfishness is bad and compassion is good leads people to feel bad when they are selfish and to pursue compassion. When people “know” in this realm, therefore, they make distinctions that engender attitudes that cause actions. What people pursue, fear, and hope for arises from the distinctions built into the discourse that a group gives to its members.

All this implies, Zhuangzi thinks, that 謹 biam, “disputes”, between significantly different linguistic communities cannot be resolved, at least if they concern issues such as the character of selfishness or benevolence. Indeed, Zhuangzi does not even seem to think it worthwhile to consider
those ways in which people might mediate such disputes. No nuanced discussion occurs, for example, about how people might either analyze the validity of arguments used or evaluate the evidence cited. All such disputes, for him, seem to be about those kind of differences that most of us would admit do not allow for any adjudication, or at least any easy adjudication. Examples would be differences either in taste—such as my predilection for bright colors or spicy foods—or in fundamental presuppositions about the character of the human good—such as my claim that just people can suffer no real harm no matter what may appear to befall them.

These ideas lead Zhuangzi to insist that in the ethical area one cannot possibly know with real certainty whether or not the normal knowledge that guides one’s life is true. His position is not the simple and finally untenable “we know nothing.” Rather it is the more complex and subtle, “we do not know if we do know or if we do not know.” As Zhuangzi writes when considering the notion that life is better than death: “How do I know that to take pleasure in life is not a delusion? How do I know that we who hate death are not exiles since childhood who have forgotten the way home? . . . How do I know that the dead do not regret that ever they had an urge to life?” (58–59). He neither answers such questions nor thinks he can answer them; he simply does not know.9

Zhuangzi’s position, as noted, contains strengths and weaknesses of a technical sort, but most important to us is how it produces the context for his depiction of a spiritual fulfillment that differs from what normal life provides. A further feature of that context must be examined, however, before we turn to his actual depiction. A person might (as I think did some Confucians) accept most of Zhuangzi’s ideas about ethical knowledge and still operate in a fairly normal manner. Such a position involves suspending one’s judgments about the ultimate truthfulness of many ethical ideas but still choosing to live within the confines of a single community’s discourse.

Reasons for adopting this position are many. They can range from theoretical judgments about what it is possible and necessary for humans to understand to practical judgments about the relative adequacy of a community’s ideas. A crucial reason to adopt the position, however, rests on the judgment that humans have pressing problems, problems that demand some kind of solution. A person “solves” such problems by using whatever materials and procedures are available, helpful, and have plausible warrants.10

Zhuangzi rejects what could be called this “pragmatic approach” because he thinks both that normal life contains monumental problems and that a grand spiritual fulfillment is possible. This dialectic of great need and glowing

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* See editors' note on page 76. Eds.
fulfillment places Zhuangzi’s spirituality within what I will call a “discontinuous” or “nonameliorative” type of religion. Such a religious viewpoint is fundamentally discontinuous with normal life and expectations. It seeks far more than an amelioration of the problems ordinary life produces.

In an ameliorative or continuous religion people work within the framework provided by normal life, but in a nonameliorative or discontinuous religion they make a substantial break with normal life. The former aims to deepen and extend the best ethical and religious ideas people have. The latter is suspicious of any attempt only to build on or to fix what is already present, and therefore of any attempt to bring comfort to decent people, to make the world safe for well disposed people. The former applies bandages, if you will, to what is perceived as minor wounds, while the latter calls for major surgery. The former labels that kind of major surgery mutilation while the latter labels the application of bandages malpractice.

Zhuangzi is aware of possible problems in his approach. In a memorable passage that seems to reflect his ideas (as well as his notion that when you enter this way you lose all ways, and in a sense get lost), he speaks of what happens to the man who goes to Handan to learn their wonderful way of walking. He both fails to learn the Handan walk and forgets his own. The result is that he crawls home. Moreover, Zhuangzi unabashedly seems to accept one implication of this kind of view: the notion that a clear hierarchy of spiritual fulfillment exists and that some, even many, are fated never to reach the highest level. (See, for example, 78–79; 96–98; the hierarchy is not, of course, tied to normal standards of excellence.)

One crucial reason for Zhuangzi’s position is his understanding of what occurs in normal life. The usual mood of Zhuangzi’s writing is buoyant. His critique of normal life is never as prominent as in most forms of Buddhism or Christianity, two noteworthy examples of discontinuous or nonameliorative religions. Moreover, he never assumes that irresolvable conflicts between fate and human hope represent a tragedy (17, 23, 79). Nevertheless, for him, normal life often presents a panorama of futility. As he says: “Is it not sad how we and other things go on stroking or jostling each other, in a race ahead like a gallop which nothing can stop? How can we fail to regret that we labour all our lives without seeing success, wear ourselves out with toil in ignorance of where we shall end? What use is it for man to say that he will not die, since when the body dissolves the heart dissolves with it? How can we not call this our supreme regret? Is man’s life really as stupid as this?” (51). Zhuangzi asks us to recognize the unhappiness that can haunt most people’s lives. He asks us to see how our highest hopes crash on the rocks of our own ineptitude or the world’s harsh realities; how our most gratifying relationships often die at our own hands through clumsiness or inattention; how our often trivial work sucks the vitality from us; how our goals, once attained, often turn out to be fragile or to taste bitter; how prey we are to
having all we most treasure taken away from us against our will; and finally how our own and others’ death can make all our hopes, fears, and loves seem senseless.

Such a recognition can, he thinks, help at least some people seek a different and better way. To the characteristics of that way we may now turn. We will analyze first his general but often cryptic presentation of it and then consider his portraits of skillful activity and that to which it points.

**Zhuangzi’s Figurative Depictions of the Ultimate Spiritual State**

A few hints exist in Zhuangzi that the ultimate spiritual state involves a withdrawal into impassivity (see, for example, 95, 89–90). Nevertheless, he usually pictures it as a state of centered and adaptive responsiveness where the mind’s normal movements are replaced by movements that arise from transcendent drives. Such a state differs radically from normal human responsiveness with its reliance on ordinary language’s dichotomies and its utilization of dispositional or reflective drives.

The desired state is a form of intraworldly mysticism, and it differs from most Western and many South Asian forms of mysticism. Practitioners of intraworldly mysticism seek no union with an Ultimate Reality. Instead they seek a way through the world, a reorientation of perspective that allows them to see and act within the world.¹¹

One of Zhuangzi’s simpler, if also most brief and abstract, formulations of the desired spiritual state focuses on how it lacks the apparently normal essentials of being human. That is, the state lacks the “judging that’s it, that’s not” that arises from following the discriminating mind manifested in one’s dispositional or reflective drives. As he says, “What I mean by being without essentials is that the man does not inwardly wound his person by likes and dislikes, that he constantly goes by the spontaneous and does not add anything to the process of life” (82). In such a state, people follow what is “so of itself,” obtain a state of natural spontaneity that takes no unnatural action, and thus actualize the ability to perform successfully their specific function.

This brief, abstract picture of the ultimate spiritual state is filled out in fuller and more evocative depictions. In these portraits Zhuangzi employs metaphors or images rather than normal language because the ultimate state represents an alternative to the oppositions that underlie such language. Indeed, his most compelling images are brilliant attempts to create verbal pictures that pair apparently contradictory items: intruding and being at home; “it” and “other,” the mind’s animation and a mirror’s material character.
One especially evocative image characterizes the desired spiritual state as the axis at the center of a circle, the motionless center of a rotating wheel. The image builds from the idea that normal knowledge rests on dichotomies. Those dichotomies, such as that between the beautiful and the ugly, are noted in the passage as the “it” and the “other.” “What is It is also Other, what is Other is also It.” There they say ‘That’s it, that’s not’ from one point of view, here we say ‘That’s it, that’s not’ from another point of view. Are there really It and Other? Or really no It and Other? Where neither It nor Other finds its opposite is called the axis of the Way. When once the axis is found at the centre of the circle there is no limit to responding with either, on the one hand no limit to what is it, on the other no limit to what is not” (53). In this image, fixed dichotomies are replaced by something that moves continuously, adapts constantly to whatever occurs, and yet also responds from a center. Just as with the motionless center of a rotating wheel, the reactions noted here move from a steady center, but they fluidly and adaptively respond to whatever happens.

This state resembles, as it is put elsewhere, “the centre of the ring where becoming veers with circumstances.” Such a state can, however, only be depicted adequately by piling apparent contradictions or paradoxes on each other. For example, to be in this state is to be in a situation where: “Other things and ... [a person] had no end nor start, no ‘How long?’ and no time. To be transformed day by day with other things is to be untransformed once and for all... [For such a one] there has never yet begun to be Heaven, never yet begun to be man, never yet begun to be a Beginning, never yet begun to be things” (110–11). Other images of the perfected state clarify at least somewhat these last paradoxes, even though they also attempt to move beyond the dichotomies found in normal language. One such image, which may refer both to the sage’s mind and the Dao’s action, depicts something that is “at home where it intrudes” and therefore manifests peace within strife or tranquillity within disturbance. “That which kills off the living does not die, that which gives birth to the living has never been born. As for the sort of thing it is, it is there to escort whatever departs, is here to welcome whatever comes, it ruins everything and bring everything about. Its name is ‘At home where it intrudes.’ What is ‘at home where it intrudes’ is that which comes about only where it intrudes into the place of something else” (87). At the highest spiritual level, for Zhuangzi, a process exists where apparent opposites such as coming and going or destroying and completing are combined. Strife, disturbance, and intrusion mix with tranquillity, peace, and “at homeness.” All these oppositions that define normal life occur here, then, as complementary interactions defined by and contained within a more comprehensive reality.

The images noted so far attempt to describe, or point to, the actual process that occurs in the ultimate spiritual state. Another set of images are
illuminating because the focus is less on the actual process and more on the conditions that make it possible. Especially prominent in these portraits is an emphasis on people freeing themselves from those pursuits that arise from normal knowledge’s dichotomies. For example, it is said that one should keep oneself 虚 xu, “tenuous” and use the mind as a mirror. “The utmost man uses the 心 xin, ‘heart’, like a mirror; he does not escort things as they go or welcome them as they come, he responds and does not store” (98).12 A mirror simply reflects whatever is presented. It applies no framework of interpretation, makes no judgments of appropriateness, and possesses no desire to pursue or grasp. Interpretations, judgments, and desires all rest on the dichotomies encased in normal language. Mirroring, which lacks all of them, can therefore point to the desired state. Moreover, mirroring also captures that 論 lùn, “rational sorting”, that, unlike other rational operations, Zhuangzi commends and thinks underlies genuine responsiveness. Sorting presents a coherent, objective picture of how things relate, but it does not grade, does not place things in terms of their relative values. (See 12, 48.)

The ability to mirror, as well as the other needed abilities, can be reached by the 心齋 xīn zhāi, “fasting of the mind”. The usual reference of the character zhāi “fasting” is to the voluntary surrender of physical nourishment that occurs before religious sacrifices; mental fasting, however, is described in the following way: “Unify your attention. Rather than listen with the ear, listen with the xin ‘heart’. Rather than listen with the heart, listen with the 氣 qi, ‘energies’. Listening stops at the ear, the heart at what tallies with the thought. As for ‘energy’, it is the 虚 xu ‘tenuous’, which waits to be roused by other things. Only the Way accumulates the tenuous. The attenuating is the fasting of the heart. . . . [When] the channels inward through eyes and ears are cleared, and you expel knowledge from the heart, the ghostly and 神 shén ‘daemonic’ will come to dwell in you, not to mention all that is human” (68–69, cf. 71, 92). This practice is commended to Yan Hui, a person full of high-minded hopes and intricately conceived plans, who seeks to counsel an errant lord. He is advised that a process initiated mainly by the surrender of the mind’s normal nourishment, its diet of distinctions and dichotomies, will enable him to go beyond the mind as a tallying and organizing faculty. That surrender, in turn activates “transcendent” qi “energy”, the pool of energetic fluid out of which things condense and into which they dissolve, and also both the 道 Way and the 神 “daemonic”. When this occurs, Yan Hui will be moved by transcendent drives. He will reach a state where Heaven rather than he is the agent, and he will say the appropriate words as easily as a bird sings (69).13

Zhuangzi wants people, then, to surmount their usual reliance on normal discourse’s dichotomies by a fasting of the mind that enables them to reach a higher state. Defined by its overcoming of contraries, this state resembles the motionless center of a rotating wheel that is at home where it intrudes,
manifests a mirrorlike mind, and draws on transcendent drives. Qualities such as adaptive responsiveness, harmonious interaction, and reactive coordination characterize it.

The difference between this state and people’s normal state is illuminated by Zhuangzi’s use of two phrases that designate two possible approaches to thought and action: the yinshì “adaptive that’s it” and the weishi “contrived that’s it” (11, 25–26, 52–4, 104, 106–7, Graham 1969–70, 143–144, Graham 1982, 6–7). The adaptive approach, which resembles skillful activity, embodies the continuing adaptation of it and other. This approach relates feelings, judgments, and actions to changing circumstances. The contrived approach, in contrast, reflects the normal way of making and following distinctions. It acts according to those fixed principles that embody a specific group’s sense of what is correct. The two approaches, then, differ fundamentally. To use the adaptive approach is to base responses on changing circumstances and to make relative judgments that accord with shifting conditions. To use the contrived approach is to act on inflexible principles and to remain unresponsive to varying, shifting circumstances.

Most people use the contrived approach; they act from dispositional or reflective drives. Accepting the rule that one should defer to elders, for example, their deference is motivated either by conscious choice or by inclinations that arise from socially formed dispositions that manifest the rule. Such actions rest on the learned dichotomies a cultural discourse incarnates: that is, the idea that deference to elders is good and therefore to be pursued, and that its opposite is bad and therefore to be avoided. Adaptive actions, however, rest neither on the choices nor on the dispositions that manifest such dichotomies. Rather, they effortlessly adapt to the external situation.14

Such perfected actions are designated by a set of abstract terms: they are spontaneous (自然 ziran, “natural action”, “so of itself”), illustrate natural action (無為 wuwei, “inaction” or “taking no unnatural action”), and manifest a contact with real power (德 de, “virtue”), the shen “daemonic”, Tian “Heaven”, and Dao the “Way”. Some of these terms are given their most substantial depictions, depictions often fraught with metaphysical connotations, outside that part of the Zhuangzi we are examining. Nevertheless, all of them can be taken to refer to significant parts of Zhuangzi’s spiritual vision.15 We can best understand both the terms and the vision by turning now to probe Zhuangzi’s presentation of skillful activity.

The “Skill Stories” in the Zhuangzi

A wide range of activities can be called skillful. Only some, such as playing chess, exemplify the category of skillfulness, however, while others barely fit
into it, for example playing tic-tac-toe. Our concern is with the more exemplary cases as usually only they illuminate Zhuangzi’s idea of spirituality.

Many stories about exemplary skills appear in the Zhuangzi we read about, for example, a butcher, an archer, an engraver, a ferryman, a buckle maker, and even a catcher of cicadas. In these exemplary cases, people act skillfully when they can, at will, proficiently perform actions that have, at minimum, certain characteristics. That is, the actions reflect the mastering of techniques that overcome difficulties inherent in the activity. Moreover, they reflect the particular standards of excellence the activity exemplifies. Finally, they can be evaluated accurately only by people who have considerable experience with the activity. The skillful chess player, for example, can at will proficiently perform moves that manifest a mastery of techniques that overcome difficulties inherent in the game. Moreover, those moves reflect the game’s specific standards of excellence, and their excellence is acknowledged by other experienced players.

Skillful activity has features, including those just noted, that imply much, and in virtually all the skill stories in the Zhuangzi those wider implications are made clear. The narratives in these stories either emphasize the described activity’s more general meaning or explicitly state that the activity transcends what most people would identify as normal skillfulness (63–64, 135, 137). Moreover, many images or ideas that appear in these stories are drawn from Zhuangzi’s depiction of the ultimate spiritual state: for example, the axis at the center of a circle, the fasting of the mind, the acquisition of a mirrorlike mind, the utilization of qi “transcendent energy”, and the attaining to the shen “daemonic”.

Skillful activity, then, clearly points to the highest spiritual state. Given that let us discuss a few of the skill stories, saving for later a theoretical examination of exactly why skills help us to understand the highest state. A discussion of these stories is also helpful because it allows us to see how Zhuangzi actually portrays the idea of skill, as well as to taste the inimitable flavor of his presentation.

Probably the most famous of the skill stories, and the clearest one to appear in the first seven chapters, is the story of Cook Ding carving an ox:
stop, the daemonic I desire to run its course. I rely on Heaven’s structuring, cleave along the main seams, let myself be guided by the main cavities, go by what is inherently so. A ligament or tendon I never touch, not to mention solid bone. . . . [At a] joint there is an interval, and the chopper’s edge has no thickness; if you insert what has no thickness where there is an interval, then, what more could you ask, of course there is ample room to move the edge about. That’s why after nineteen years the edge of my chopper is as though it were fresh from the grindstone. However, whenever I come to something intricate, I see where it will be hard to handle and cautiously prepare myself, my gaze settles on it, action slows down for it, you scarcely see the flick of the chopper—and at one stroke the tangle has been unravelled as a clot crumbles to the ground. (63–64)

When Cook Ding cuts, the meat seems almost to part of itself. His rhythmic strokes, guided by the daemonic rather than normal perception, follow the natural makeup of the meat. This allows him to preserve his chopper’s sharpness, find an easy solution to a complex task, and move in an aesthetically pleasing fashion. Moreover, his actions bring satisfaction to him, beauty and wonder to an observer’s eye, and the completion of a difficult task in an effortless way. These actions reflect the eloquent plea, found in the story’s probable preface, to imitate the motionless center of a rotating wheel and thereby to possess Heaven, its light, and the daemonic. Such a state, as Cook Ding’s actions make clear, brings a far greater treasure than that brought by normal sight, hearing, and thought (see 11).

Various explicit or implicit aspects of this story are developed in other skill stories. (Some of those skill stories, however, contain developments that fail to reflect Zhuangzi’s ideas, and therefore we will not discuss them.) One aspect of the story about Cook Ding is developed in the story about the Wheelwright Pian. In order to show, among other things, the insignificance of books, the wheelwright describes the crucial and incommunicable “knack” truly skillful action involves: “If I chip at a wheel too slowly, the chisel slides and does not grip; if too fast, it jams and catches in the wood. Not too slow, not too fast; I feel it in the hand and respond from the heart, the mouth cannot put it into words, there is a knack in it somewhere which I cannot convey to my son and which my son cannot learn from me” (140). Such knacks are crucial in skills. Indeed, to have such a knack is to be at home where one intrudes; that is, to feel at home when the chisel intrudes into the wood. Moreover, this knack manifests well the distinctive kind of knowledge that is involved. The knowledge is defined by three elements: an adaptive responsiveness to change, a unification of the physical and the mental, and a resistance to being communicated by normal means.

To reach such a state of knowledge a person needs to possess a clear
sighted and detached calm, a mirrorlike mind. Such a mind forgets the
dichotomies that produce normal fears and hopes. An important aspect of
this kind of calm is presented, in another story, when an inquirer asks whether
he can learn to handle a boat like a ferryman who acts "as though he were
daemonic." The questioner is told that:

A good swimmer picks it up quickly because he forgets the water.
As for a diver, he would handle a boat deftly even if he had never
seen one before, because he looks at the depths as at dry land, at
the capsizing of a boat as at his carriage sliding backwards. Though
ten thousand prospects of capsizing or sliding go on spreading out
before him, they cannot intrude into the place where he dwells.
Why would he be ill at ease anywhere? Play for tiles, and you're
skillful; play for belt-buckles, and you lose confidence; play for gold,
and you're flustered. Your skill is the same as ever, but if you are
attaching importance to something you are giving weight to what
is outside you, and whoever gives weight to what is outside him is
inwardly clumsy. (136–137)

The process for obtaining appropriate detachment from the hopes and fears
that normally animate people, as well as the results of it, are described at
greater length, and with more technical language, in the case of the Engraver
Qing. When asked by the Lord what secret allows him to make a bell stand
with a daemonic, ghostly quality, he replies:

When I am going to make a bell stand I take care never to
squander qi "energy" on it, I make sure to fast to still the xin "heart".
After fasting three days, I do not care to keep in mind congratula-
tion and reward, honours and salary. After fasting five days, I do
not care to keep in mind your blame or praise, my skill or clumsi-
ness. After fasting seven days, I am so intent that I forget that I
have a body and four limbs.

During this time my lord's court does not exist for me. The
dexterity for it concentrates, outside distractions melt away, and
only then do I go into the mountain forest and observe the nature
of the wood as Heaven makes it grow. The aptitude of the body
attains its peak; and only then do I have a complete vision of the
bell stand. . . . So I join what is Heaven's to what is Heaven's. Would
this be the reason why the instrument [the bell stand] seems
daemonic? (135)

The process described here resembles the fasting of the mind that allows
Yan Hui to obtain a quite different skill—the skill of counseling a lord and
both making understood his message and preserving his life. Through such
"fasting" he overcomes normal intentions and allows transcendent drives to
possess him (66–69). In both cases the presence of transcendent drives allows a person to accomplish difficult tasks in a potentially hostile environment, the hierarchical world of courtly intrigue and the often brutal exercise of power.

This ability is evocatively displayed in the story of a man who swims beneath a three-hundred foot waterfall in the forty miles of turbulence the waterfall produces, turbulence that even fish do not inhabit. The story is perhaps the most obviously symbolic of all the skill stories, and it almost surely includes some terminology that carries more abstract, even metaphysical connotations than does virtually all of Zhuangzi’s usual terminology. Nevertheless, the image is an especially striking one, swimming gracefully and easily through waters too rough for even fish. Moreover, the swimmer’s answer to the question of how he can stay afloat is worth noting: “I enter with the inflow and emerge with the outflow, follow the Way of the water and do not impose my selfishness upon it. This is how I stay afloat in it. . . . It is so without me knowing why it is so—it’s destined for me” (136). The swimmer’s skill allows him to thrive in a realm that bring destruction to the nonskillful. Acting from higher forces rather than from normal human rules and dispositions, he moves spontaneously, harmonizes with a changing world, and is swept along by an inflow and outflow that manifests the higher Way.

Such a state resembles that commended to a Duke who, like Yan Hui, is about to begin a political mission. He is told to surrender his attachment to self-interest and morality and to follow instead the inevitable, the ordained; that is, to seek in any particular situation whatever single course perfectly fits it. “To let the heart roam with other things as its chariot, and by trusting to the inevitable nurture the center of you, is the farthest one can go. . . . The important thing is to fulfill what is ordained for you, and that is the most difficult of all” (71). To discover the inevitable in a situation, to be swept along by the flow of the ordained, is to be possessed by transcendent drives. Reaching that state is difficult however. It involves being unencumbered by the distinctions of normal ethical knowledge, and therefore remaining unmoved by ordinary dispositional and reflective drives. Skillful action both reflects such a state and points to its ultimate manifestation.

These skill stories point, then, toward the highest possible spiritual fulfillment. To grasp more fully both what skills are and why they can point to this higher state, we must investigate further the characteristics of normal skillful activity, and to that topic we may now turn.

The General Conception of Skillful Activity

To understand more fully the conception of skillful activity we will examine how such activity differs from most normal activity, especially how it manifests a distinctive kind of knowledge and sort of disposition. We can then
analyze certain characteristics of skillful activity that point clearly to the spiritual state Zhuangzi commends.\textsuperscript{18}

An important distinction can be made between two kinds of action. Let me put the distinction abstractly and sharply and then turn to concrete examples whose textured character introduces needed complexities. One kind of action, such as skillful actions, are “performances.” Another kind, such as most normal actions, are “processes.” (The distinction between performances and processes is drawn from the Aristotelian tradition; in Greek the distinction is between \textit{kinesis} and \textit{energia}, in Latin between \textit{motus} and \textit{operatio}.\textsuperscript{19})

A process is defined by the pursuit of a goal. The agent, that is, aims to progress toward a goal and fulfillment comes only when the goal is obtained. Moreover, the agent may obtain the goal by means other than those found in the process. Finally, the pleasure received involves the satisfaction, and other possible rewards, that occur when the agent finally possesses the goal sought. A performance, in contrast, is defined by the fact that each part of the activity is complete in itself, that each step has its own integrity. Fulfillment, then, is present at any stage. Moreover, the agent may obtain such fulfillment only by means of the performance. Indeed, the pleasure involved in the ongoing performance and the pleasure involved in reaching the goal of the activity are so intimately connected that one cannot describe one without describing the other. Finally, such pleasure is not characterized by passing, perhaps intense feelings. Rather it has certain very distinctive marks: for example, effortless concentration, lack of fatigue, quick passage of time, and a disinterest in doing anything other than what is now being done.

Building a rabbit hutch for my child’s rabbit is a process; my pleasure is complete only when the hutch is complete. But listening to a symphony is a performance; my pleasure is complete at any particular moment. Moreover, I may decide to obtain the rabbit hutch by purchase rather than by construction, but no way exists to obtain what is involved in listening to a symphony other than by listening to it. With a performance, I feel fulfillment and a distinctive pleasure as I proceed and can obtain that particular fulfillment in no other way. With a process, however, only the project’s successful completion brings fulfillment and that goal may be obtained by other means.

This abstract distinction clarifies, I think, important differences between two kinds of activities. Also important to us, however, is that the distinction clarifies the ways in which we can approach the same kind of activity; that is the differing attitudes we can have to it. Playing chess, for example, is a process if I aim simply to win, but it is a performance if involvement in the game is what basically animates me.

Put in a different if related way, my chess playing can be motivated either by internal goods or external goods. Playing well is an internal good,
one that arises only from my actions, from my excellence as a practitioner of this specific kind of activity. Winning and what may come with it, such as money or praise, is an external good. Others give it to me because of the result of the game, a result that may be due to factors that have little to do with my own playing, factors such as my opponent’s mistakes. Moreover, the pleasure I obtain differs considerably depending on which of the goods I aim at. The pleasure of receiving honor or money is far different from the pleasure of, say, effortless concentration and the full engagement of valuable human powers.

Zhuangzi never explicitly makes these distinctions, but they clarify his ideas about skill. That is, he thinks most normal actions are processes animated by the pursuit of external goals. Both skillful actions and spiritual actions, however, are performances animated by the possession of internal goods. Moreover, he also thinks that processes may become performances if people take the correct attitude to them.

Indeed, the possibility of people making such a change in the character of their action is at the heart of Zhuangzi’s message. My construction of the rabbit hutch may become a performance when the goal of possessing a rabbit hutch becomes less important to me than the activity of building one or when the external good of winning a chess match is replaced by the internal good of playing chess well. Changing normal actions, which are processes with external goods, into skillful actions, which are performances with internal goods, is for Zhuangzi both possible and crucial to our spiritual development.

A further point that can be drawn from these distinctions also helps clarify Zhuangzi’s general perspective. Skillful activity can arise only if social institutions provide the means necessary for people to obtain the techniques, attitudes, and opportunities that allow skills to be actualized. One can learn to play chess only if specific things are available, things ranging from chess pieces to an understanding of the traditions that convey the rules and ethos of the game. Institutions, however, usually also contain forces that make prominent the ideas that external goods are more important than internal goods, that processes rather than performances are crucial to human well being.

A clear if sad example of this is the institution of modern higher education. It makes possible the training that enables people to engage in acts that contain internal goods, performances such as reading the Zhuangzi. It also, however, generates a context in which external goods, and thus processes, are thought to be most important. Receiving a grade for the paper on Zhuangzi or a degree for the work done on various papers becomes the most acceptable way to think about one’s education.

Social institutions, then, provide the nurture necessary for performances and for the possession of internal goods, but they also tend to guide people
to think about them as processes defined by the external goods produced. Zhuangzi's ideas about how one should deal with social institutions, including motifs such as the "use of the useless" reflect, I think, his sense that such institutions are both crucial and dangerous. They are crucial because they make possible the training that underlies performances and the possession of internal goods. They are dangerous because they undermine what they make possible by emphasizing the significance of processes and external goods.

Other features of these distinctions between kinds of actions, the goods that accompany them, and the institutional settings they presuppose become even clearer when we discuss how skillful knowledge differs from normal knowledge and how skillful habits differ from normal habits. Our knowledge can be roughly divided into a "knowledge that" (normal knowledge) and a "knowledge how" (skillful knowledge). You may know that cars have spark plugs or that Zhuangzi said you should have a mind like a mirror. But you may also know how to replace your car's spark plugs or how to have a mind like a mirror. To know that something is so is to have information, to obtain it suddenly, and to judge its worth by the criterion of truth and falsity. To know how, on the other hand, is to possess an improved ability to do something, to obtain it gradually, and to evaluate your possession of it by whether you act deftly or clumsily. (See Ryle 1949, 25–61.)

We understand relatively well how we acquire knowledge that, but the acquisition of knowledge how is often a mysterious process. We do know the latter always involves a time consuming mastery of techniques in which initial attempts are awkward and require sustained effort while later ones are graceful and easy. Nevertheless, formulating exactly how we learn the skill or even exactly what we have learned is often virtually impossible. Books are usually of little help—as anyone can testify who attempts to acquire a skill such as tennis by reading. Moreover, too much conversation about the skill or reflection on it may even actually impede the attempt to master it.

We do, nevertheless, acquire such "knowledge how" and when we do, we acquire a disposition, a tendency to respond in specific ways when certain situations arise. We usually speak of all these acquired dispositions as habits, but significant distinctions exist among kinds of dispositions. Some of these distinctions we discussed earlier, but most important here is the difference between those dispositions properly called habitual and those properly called skillful.

Both are acquired, lead to spontaneous actions, and involve an intimate relationship between the mind and the body. Despite these similarities, however, the acquisition and the operation of the new abilities differ in important ways. A toddler acquires the habit of walking, but a rock climber acquires the skill of climbing. Both learn to move over the earth, but mindless repetition marks the toddler's acquisition, while the cultivation of intelligent awareness marks the climber's acquisition. Moreover, the climber's
attentive and adaptive movements up a cliff differ from the toddler’s heedless movements over the ground. Habits are acquired by conditioning, by a continuous repetition in which every performance virtually replicates every other performance. Furthermore, once conditioning is complete little attention is needed for correct performance. A skill, in contrast, arises from training not conditioning; it combines repetition with the stimulation of judgment by criticism. Furthermore, the activity involves constant alertness and the careful adaptation of acts to changing situations.

The ideas of pure habit and pure skill are abstractions that mark the two extremes of one continuum, and many activities will fit on neither extreme. For example, the toddler on rocky ground tends toward skill while the climber on an easy ascent tends toward habit. Indeed, the placement on the continuum of even apparently similar actions may depend on circumstances. When practicing basketball alone my jump shot from six feet is a habitual action. But that same shot taken in a game when I am closely guarded is a skillful action. Nevertheless, the distinction between skill and habits is revealing. Unlike habits, skills are acquired dispositions that arise from training and show attentiveness and adaptation.

Skillful actions, then, utilize “knowledge how” not “knowledge that” and operate from a distinctive kind of disposition. Moreover, they are activities not processes and manifest internal not external goods. These general features both distinguish skillful actions from other actions and point to the spiritual state that Zhuangzi commends.

These general features also underlie six more specific characteristics of skillful activity, and examining them can reveal much about the final spiritual state. Let us turn then to a description of each characteristic, using as examples two activities with which many may be familiar: one is physical, skillful tennis; the other is intellectual, skillful conversation. We will also, with each characteristic, refer to where it appears in the Zhuangzi.

The Six Characteristics of Perfected Skill Activities

One such characteristic is the kind of mental attentiveness that responds adaptively to changes in the outside world. This attentiveness produces very distinctive kinds of responses, and it is helpful to begin by enumerating what these responses are not. They are neither reflex actions—as when you react to touching a hot object—nor simple habitual actions—as when you tie your shoelaces. But they also do not resemble acts that arise from dispositional drives—as when hunger leads you to eat or a feeling of deference leads you to surrender a seat to an elderly person. Nor do they resemble acts that arise from consciously following rules—as when you fill out an income tax form or undertake any of the actions caused by reflective drives.
Instead, these skillful reactions manifest a special sensitivity to changing circumstances, an instantaneous responsiveness that accords with the general rules of an activity but is not simply guided by them. Skillful people, that is, see and move with changes, always adapting to them, never asserting themselves against them. For example, in a conversation you shift your approach as the other person’s mood or argument changes, attentively adapting yourself to the contours of the ideas and feelings presented. Similarly, in tennis you quickly recognize and respond to your opponent’s movements and shots without going through the normal processes of mental calculation (63–64, 138, 140).

Another characteristic of skillful actions is that although they are easier to produce than unskillful or normal actions, they reach their goals more effectively than do those kinds of action. That is, a notable gain in power and efficacy occurs but it occurs without the addition of effort. Skillful actions appear to tap a new source of power, one that generates a new flow of energy that exceeds what could be produced by either brute strength or willful application. For example, a skillful tennis serve expends little effort but produces speed and accuracy. In contrast, an unskillful serve arises from labored effort but generates little of value. Similarly, skillful conversation brings almost effortlessly obtained results, results that go far beyond what mere exertion could produce. Ease, power, and efficacy all combine, then, when a skill is in full flower (63–64, 106, 136, 137).

These two characteristics manifest still another attribute of skillful activity: the unification of the mental and the physical. Indeed, clear distinctions between the physical and the mental are extremely difficult to make when skills operate. Mind and body interact too subtly to see either one as an easily separable entity that commands or is commanded. Rather each is simply and easily informed by the other. In tennis, for example, the instantaneous strategic adjustments made as you feel the ball on the racquet or see your opponent change positions cannot adequately be divided into physical and mental activities; they appear to be one unified action. Similarly, in skillful conversation spoken words and bodily movements form too intimate a unity to allow one to speak easily of two distinct entities.

In instances like these, physical actions specify the mental’s presence and mental actions are made manifest through physical movements. Each informs and signals the presence of the other. Moreover, this unification finds expression in, and may even also produce, the paranormal phenomena that appear in skill activities. A common example of such phenomena is the sense that the normal flow of time has stopped, that the speeding tennis ball, for instance, is virtually fixed in place (63–64, 81, 135–138, 140–141).

Skillful actions with these characteristics also both arise from and manifest a personal tranquility. That is, one must effortlessly concentrate on the activity itself, and that involves forgetting normal concerns and goals as well
as possessing a settled but active mind and a stable if vigorous physical state. For example, you play tennis badly if you worry too much about your everyday problems, your play's appearance, or even the possibility of victory. You must instead forget much of what usually animates you and obtain a settled simplicity that focuses only on correctly hitting the ball. Similarly, skillful discussion occurs when you focus on the play of conversation rather than on your normal concerns, whether they be the meeting of deadlines or the desire to be seen as a gifted conversationalist (134, 135, 136–37, 141, 142).

Skillful activity, then, manifests and even rests on equanimity. It also, however, feeds whatever tranquillity is present. If little is present, skillful activity will nurture it. If more is present the activity will deepen it. You may, for instance, begin your tennis game or conversation haunted by turbulent feelings or thoughts. Soon, however, the rhythm of playing or talking begins to triumph and a sense of stillness, peace, and effortlessness increases. Your stroke or conversation becomes more rhythmic, your mind more settled, and that in turn produces a general sense of tranquillity (136, 137).

Finally, skill activities, at least at their most refined, can make you feel part of the larger rhythm of some meaningful whole. This occurs in part because skills manifest in intensified form all those characteristics that distinguish activities from processes, characteristics such as the presence of fulfillment at any stage or the animation by internal not external goods. It also arises, however, from the attentive responsiveness and adaptation to change that characterizes skills. When two people are involved, as in a tennis game, this adaptive responsiveness creates a harmonious interaction where change begets change, and the participants create together a beautiful but shifting pattern that seems to reflect a more perfect and well-ordered reality. Similarly, a skillful conversation, even one that involves both important issues and considerable disagreement, can generate such a sense of harmonious interaction.

Perhaps even more revealing about this last characteristic of skill is the fact that the state just described can arise from doing some simple act, whether one is alone or with others. For example, when your tennis serve is truly skillful, a feeling can arise that your individual motions fit into the world's larger motions and your present world fits harmoniously into a more significant world. You think it perfectly right for you to be doing just what you are doing; you accept your place with total equanimity (136, 137, 141).

Skillful action is, then, a performance not a process, and one that manifests a distinctive kind of knowledge and sort of disposition. More specifically, it also contains those characteristics we just discussed: adaptive responses to external changes; gains in power and efficacy without additional effort; unification of the mental and the physical; generation and manifestation of tranquility; and the sense of participation in a larger, more harmonious whole.
All these features of skillful activity point toward the spiritual state that Zhuangzi commends. I need, however, to stress again that the ultimate state transcends skillfulness. It involves, to use our earlier terminology, replacing both one’s dispositional and reflective drives with transcendent drives, it involves being moved by forces and a wisdom that surpass the simply human. Moreover, crucial features of it can be understood only by examining, as we did earlier, those evocative but elusive figurative depictions Zhuangzi presents. Let us end by bringing together these various treatments in order to render, however inadequately, the ultimate spiritual state.

The Spiritual State Pointed to by Zhuangzi’s Portraits of Skills and His Figurative Depictions

Understanding the state of ultimate spiritual perfection is made especially difficult by the fact that Zhuangzi never gives a clear account of the higher realm whose actions define that state. He is, in general, committed to overturning, or at least questioning, dichotomies such as that between “higher and lower realms,” or the normal self and its lord, or even “Heaven and human beings” (51, 84–85). Indeed, when describing the archer Yi’s skill, he will even go so far as to declare: “The perfect man hates Heaven, hates what is from Heaven in man, and above all the question ‘Is it in me from Heaven or from man?'” (106, cf. 111). Moreover, he employs—seemingly quite self-consciously—a wide variety of often mysterious formulations to point to the “higher.” He speaks, for example, of returning to the root, trunk, seed, magic storehouse, ancestor from whom one is descended, or gate from which we emerge (51, 68, 84 ff., 109).

Given this, we can never hope to gain an adequate understanding of the full character of transcendent desires and the realm they manifest. Nevertheless, we can at least proceed with what I earlier called a raid on the inexpressible because Zhuangzi does leave certain markers that point out a trail.

We have already examined many of those markers in analyzing both those figurative images that Zhuangzi uses to depict the ultimate spiritual state and those characteristics of skill that reflect and point to it. That account can be filled out by examining several other especially noteworthy passages and by returning again to some passages we have already examined.

Zhuangzi claims that the fully spiritual person lacks the normal person’s “judging that’s it, that’s not,” and therefore likes and dislikes; instead he or she “constantly goes by the spontaneous” (82). Nonetheless, only certain kinds of spontaneity manifest transcendent drives. The spontaneity shown
in dispositional drives, for example, involves a surrender either to instinctive or socially conditioned desires. It disturbs or blurs a person's awareness of the changing features of the external world and impedes transcendent drives. A lucid, detached, impersonal calm must, then, underlie true spontaneity. That is, only a tenuousness born of the fasting of the mind and reflected in the possession of a mirrorlike mind provides a home for transcendent drives.

Attaining the perfected state involves a specific regimen of training, but the exact details of that regimen are unclear. We have seen at least hints of it, for example, in the process prescribed for Yan Hui and described by the Engraver Qing (68–69, 135). The regimen does seem clearly to involve discarding a person's normal reliance on language's dichotomies, on self-interested plans of action (a "too easy path," Zhuangzi thinks), and on an inner allegiance to regnant manners and moral codes (68, 70, 79). Moreover, the cultivation of qi through breath control is surely one part of it. But other far more mysterious transformation disciplines seem also to be involved and of them we know virtually nothing.20

The result of this training is not simply to contact a nature that a person possesses from birth. Rather it is to allow transcendent drives to possess one. A sure sign of such possession is the development of a power, de "virtue," that is manifested, in part, by one's indifference to irreparable disasters and in one's detachment from normal concerns (see, for example, 76–83).

Perhaps most important, however, is another feature. The presence of transcendent drives is manifested in one's possession by the shen "daemonic" or, more accurately, in one's attainment of the state of "being daemonic." The daemonic is a force and "intelligence" that is higher than and alien to normal human thought, feeling, and effort. It fits, then, only uneasily into any of our normal categories of understanding. Indeed, it can be easily trivialized into the eerie or uncanny; falsely spiritualized into a moral sacred; inappropriately conjoined with our own contemporary overtones of restless anguish; and simply confused with the malignity of the demonic.

All such attempts to place the daemonic within accessible categories of understanding miss the reality to which Zhuangzi thinks he refers. For him, it represents that possession by a higher kind of ability that we saw mirrored, if imperfectly, in skill activities. To be more precise, the daemonic ought not be hyphostatized, made into a substantial something; it is defined by its exercise, it does not just account for its exercise.21

Being possessed by the daemonic, becoming a daemonic person, is a distinctive characteristic of virtually all those who appear in Zhuangzi's skill stories, as well as of various other spiritual adepts he depicts. Daemonic aptitude and insight manifest, then, the realm of transcendent drives, the spontaneity of those vital processes that arise when we abandon normal
knowledge, cultivate qi, and simply perceive and respond (63–64, 69, 105, 110, 135–138).

Such daemonic activity is amoral—if normal moral standards are the measure.* It can, however, involve the acceptance, when necessary, of certain fated duties such as love of parents or service to lords (70, 62, 66–72). Moreover, it need not involve the rejection of customary practices or moral codes if they are accepted simply as matters of practical convenience. In fact, accepting certain conventions can help one avoid fruitless conflicts that wear out the daemonic (54, 72–74, 78–79). Furthermore, Zhuangzi even hints that such activity produces a new kind of morality, one whose benefits extend to everyone, perhaps because such activity can heal others in mysterious ways, or, if followed by all, will allow people to interact as harmoniously as do those darting fish who never collide with each other. Nevertheless, the moral quality of this perfected state is usually of little interest to Zhuangzi, especially if morality is defined in a narrow or conventional way.21

Most important to us, however, is Zhuangzi’s idea that people possessed by the daemonic cease to be normal agents, that is agents who manifest either dispositional or reflective drives. Instead, such people are empowered by higher forces, transformed by transcendent drives. People’s normal deliberating selves, perceiving senses, and habitual or instinctual drives are replaced by an alien power and intelligence that creates a spontaneous and saving attunement to the changing facets of the world. This possession manifests all those characteristics we discussed in describing skillful activities, but their presence is intensified. Moreover, these characteristics now inform all of a person’s actions. The person does more than just skillfully build bell stands, or cut meat, or give political advice; whatever skill a particular situation demands is instantly activated.

Possession by the daemonic allows one, then, to negotiate a way through the world in a fashion that resembles the easy movements of the swimmer who thrives in the turbulent foam below a waterfall. Moreover, all of one’s actions manifest the characteristics that one sees only at times and imperfectly in even the most exemplary skill activities: tranquility, easy movement; power without effort; attentive adaptation to changing externals; unification of the mental and physical; pleasurable fulfillment that is present at any moment; and harmonious joyful accommodation to the rhythms of a larger whole. This, then, is for Zhuangzi the ultimate spiritual state that at least some humans can achieve.

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*On the question of the amorality of Zhuangzi’s dao, see editors’ note on page 142.
—Eds.
Notes

1. A situation that might well have pleased Zhuangzi informs the history of this piece. I initially wrote it almost fifteen years ago for a volume on Daoism, aimed at a general audience, that is yet to appear. The editors of this volume expressed interest in the piece, and with the approval of the other volume’s editor, I accepted their offer. Much has, of course, happened both to me and to scholarship about Zhuangzi in the intervening time. Nevertheless, on rereading it I found that almost all of the piece still represents either my own view or a defensible position. (The distinction is one Zhuangzi might, I think, have relished.) I did find places in the text where infelicitous prose, evident lacunae or even errors, and problematic interpretations appeared and I have changed them. I have also added much material in the footnotes. Despite all these changes, the piece remains much as I originally wrote it, and the text itself surely remains aimed toward a general audience. This means the changes in me then and me now, and in the understandings of Zhuangzi then and now are, at times, only imperfectly reflected. Such a situation seems more fitting with this subject than with virtually any other I can imagine.

2. Good discussions about problems in both the text and the translation of the Zhuangzi occur in Graham 1979; Graham 1981, 27–33; Graham 1982; Roth 1991; and Mair 1994. Also note the general discussion of texts from this period found in E. Bruce Brooks, “Review Article: The Present State and Future Prospects of Pre-Han Text Studies,” Sino-Platonic Papers 46 (July, 1994), 1–74.


it are analyzed in them. See, especially, the analysis of "empowerment" in Yearley 1990, particularly when the subject is the perfection of courage (pp.141–143 and 150–159); the general treatment of comparative issues when the self is the subject in Yearley 1991 and Yearley 1995; and the examination of the relationship between claims about human action and claims about ontology in Yearley 1994.

5. Graham's views on the problems in applying any Western ideas about the self to Zhuangzi surely have influenced my own views; see, for example, his "Reflections and Replies" in Rosemont 1991, 283–286. Nevertheless, the differences between us are often striking and I do think a more "rational" ordering of materials about the self is possible than he does. My acceptance of the general direction, if not always the details, of Taylor's analysis underlies many of these differences; see, especially, Charles Taylor, Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 15–44. I do, however, think it important to take seriously the approach to Daoist ideas of the self found in Norman J. Girardot, Myth and Meaning in Early Taoism (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); see, for example, 258ff. I find Wu's account less compelling, see Wu 1982, for example, 91–106. A last note: I use "drives" rather than "desires," despite the word's biological overtones and the awkwardness the term sometimes introduces, because it carries few connotations of consciousness and is not restricted to the human realm.

6. The Graham 1981 translation will be cited in the text by page numbers alone, as in the references that precede this footnote. That translation also contains an often plausible, if also usually controversial, reconstruction of the distinct parts of the text as well as an important commentary. Among the other translations, Watson 1968 and Mair 1994 are particularly noteworthy but also note Legge 1891 and Pung Yu-lan's translation of the first seven chapters, 1964.

7. The earliest Chinese version of the story appears in the Huainanzi (chapter 18), a collection of various essays organized around D\aoist themes that was presented to Emperor Wu in 139 B.C.E. For an early and not altogether reliable partial translation of the text, see Evan Morgan, trans., Tao the Great Luminant (London: Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1935); for a scholarly study of the history of the text, see Harold Roth, The Textual History of the Huai-nan Tzu (Ann Arbor: AAS Monograph Series, 1992).

8. For important treatments of these issues from different perspectives [apart from some excellent treatments in this volume], see Chad Hansen, Language and Logic in Ancient China (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press Hansen, 1983), 55–65, 88–97; Graham 1969–70, 138–143; Graham, 1981, 9–14, 25–26; Graham 1989, 176–186, 199–202; Ivanhoe 1993; and
Kjellberg 1993. I focus here just on ethical language, conceived broadly as what involves judgments about the good, the bad, and the indifferent when the subject is human flourishing. It remains true, however, that Zhuangzi at times seems to refer to all language. Moreover, even when ethics is the focus the text contains a few passages at variance with my general portrait; see, for example, Graham 1981, 70.

Much of Zhuangzi’s critique can be recast in terms of what today is called “behavioral nominalism” although he surely maintains a sturdy, even naive, realism about many things. This kind of critique is often powerful but, to my mind, many of its more dramatic results arise from adopting an observational rather than a deliberative posture toward ethical judgments. I share Hampshire’s doubts about the adequacy of that posture; see Stuart Hampshire, *Innocence and Experience* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 23–32, 38–41, 79–105, 109–110. Moreover, I now think identifying those weaknesses has significant implications for our understanding of thinkers like Zhuangzi, implications that I missed in some of my earlier work. For my revised view see Yearley 1994 and 1995.

9. Zhuangzi’s ignorance also rests on his understanding of what has been called the problem of the criterion: Any criterion that establishes the truth of something will need still another criterion to establish the initial criterion’s truthfulness, and that process results in an infinite regress (see Graham 1981, 58–59). Incidentally, throughout this discussion, I use “knowledge” rather than “belief” or “justified belief” for the sake of simplicity.


12. Compare Graham 1981, 259. Yearley in Mair 1983 contains an interpretation of Zhuangzi that relies in large part on developing ideas about detachment that arise from the notion of a mirrorlike mind. That interpretation is “experimental” and differs considerably from the one given here.

13. The concept of *qi* is both important and vexing; for a discussion of it

14. Two important if general questions about this distinction need to be noted. First, does the distinction express the only available options? Second, even presuming the distinction is true, are the modes of action presented so dissimilar that a person could not move between them, using each at different times for different purposes? Put in another vocabulary, the issue concerns the place of rules or even injunctions in a framework that relies basically on the adaptiveness found in virtues; see my treatment of this subject in Yearley 1990, 44–51 and 98–100. My own view is that both modes need to be used; that Zhuangzi can, at times, be read as validating that view; and that many pictures of the self that draw on Zhuangzi, including Graham’s, fail to consider fully that option. See note four for the background for my judgment.


16. On the analysis of skillfulness in Zhuangzi see Graham 1989, 186–194 and Ivanhoe 1993. Eno’s piece in this volume also covers this subject and is, I believe, very helpful to read in conjunction with mine.

17. A variety of technical questions exist about the relationship between the ideas contained in the first seven books and those stories about skill that appear elsewhere in the book and reappear in other Daoist works, such as the Liezi. (Graham 1981, 135–142, brings together the stories in the Zhuangzi in a section entitled “The Advantages of Spontaneity” and also notes where they appear in standard editions.) Certain notions or emphases
in these stories clearly represent different perspectives and others, at best, represent "developments" of Zhuangzi's ideas; see, for example, my later treatment of the skillful swimmer. I will not attempt here to defend my selections and interpretations, but I think a defense can be given.


19. On the idea of processes and performances in Aristotle, see J. O. Urmson, "Aristotle on Pleasure," in J. M. E. Moravcsik, ed., *Aristotle: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1967), 323–33; he calls "performances" activities; also note the references to Aquinas and other people listed in Yearley 1990, 226, footnote five. We have, unfortunately, no technical terms in English that capture this distinction and therefore I must use these two often ambiguous terms. More important, the distinction involves some complicated questions—for example, the role of anticipation in listening to music—that we cannot examine here.


21. On the idea of the daimonic see Graham 1981, 18–19 and 35. Also note Waley 1935, 26–29. Roth has done meticulous historical work on the role and development of the idea of shen, translated by him as numen, in early Daoist thought; see Harold Roth, “The Early Taoist Concept of Shen: A Ghost in the Machine?” in Kidder Smith, Jr., ed., Sagehood and Systematizing Thought in Warring States and Han China (Brunswick, Maine: Asian Studies Program, Bowdoin College, 1990), 11–32, and Roth 1991b. Roth’s work raises what is, to my mind, an important issue. Unlike later thinkers, Zhuangzi does not provide anything resembling a full account of what shen is and how it operates. This can be seen as a failure: that is, later thinkers developed the kind of theoretical account he should have had. To my mind, however, it is less a failure of Zhuangzi than a refusal, and a refusal based on solid philosophical ground. Zhuangzi can be said to refuse to become involved in the, for him, specious analyses that attempt to define shen as an entity and then relate it to other entities. He, therefore, never produces what Roth notes as a possible “ghost in the machine,” and he has solid (and I think commendable reasons) for not doing so. For an analysis of some of the delicate philosophical issues that surround the analysis of something like shen see my treatment of the conception of dispositions in Yearley 1990, 106–108 and the interchange between myself and Martha Nussbaum on this point; see Martha Nussbaum, “Comparing Virtues,” The Journal of Religious Ethics 21.2 (1993), 345–367 and my response, “The Author Replies;’ Book Discussion on Mencius and Aquinas by Lee H. Yearley,” The Journal of Religious Ethics 21.2 (1993), 385–395.

22. On the possible new kind of morality, see Graham 1981, 77–79 and 90–91, cf. 140; also see Graham 1982, 26. The issue of Zhuangzi’s relationship to normal ideas of ethics is far too complicated to discuss here. See, however, the treatment in Yearley 1995 and also note Crandell in Maier 1993, 101–124. My treatment of Mengzi’s ideas of semblances of virtue and the village honest person (xiangyuan) in Yearley 1990, 67–72 is also relevant; on this subject at least Mengzi and Zhuangzi show some noteworthy similarities.