The Accidental Daoist

Augmenting Zhuangzi's Knack Experience

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Abstract
This paper examines the relation between the knack experience as described in the classic Daoist text, the *Zhuangzi,* and the Alexander Technique as originally developed by F. M. Alexander. A closely read comparative study, it identifies an access to the knack experience in the Alexander Technique that overcomes the charge of specialization leveled by some Daoist scholars, while remaining congruent with the wider Zhuangzian project. The terminologies of the two traditions are progressively interwoven over the course of the paper, leading to a core knowledge at their intersection, and leaving the door open to a larger set of commonalities as yet unidentified.

For all its variety of literary forms and rhetorical strategies, the *Zhuangzi* offers two distinct bodies of inquiry. One of them raises far-reaching philosophical questions, the other contemplates access to the Dao. One asks whether the genesis of anything can be known, the other celebrates an effortless execution of skill that has come to be known as the knack experience. In this competition, or possibly co-existence, between a thinker's *Zhuangzi* and a doer's *Zhuangzi*, recent Anglophone scholars have tended to favor the former. Chad Hansen, among the pre-eminent sinologists of our time, summarizes the knack experience well:

> The performances look and feel effortless. The spontaneity of the flow along a natural path gives performers the sense that their behavior is "world-guided" rather than internally controlled. These behaviors become second-nature as we realize how we are entangled with the objects—knee, knife, and knot. We move beyond anything like sub-vocalizing instructions, deliberating, or reflecting—and yet we are concentrating intently on our performance. The range of his examples reminds us that such satisfying states of performance can be experienced in even the lowest caste and mundane of activities, including butchering and criminal skills, not merely in fine arts and philosophy (2025).

So far, so good. However, Hansen now closes in on "the different understandings that accompany stages of learning as one approaches this effortless flow." He writes:

> Finally, this non-ironic praise of sublime achievement in know-how is the observation that such expertise in performance always comes with some kind of limitation—not least that each example is a different person with a different knack. There is no shortcut Dao that gives you a knack at every activity…. The valorization of *this kind of specialization* in an art pulls in the opposite direction of Zhuangzi's encouragement to broaden and enlarge our perspectives and scope of appreciation. (2025; emphasis added)

People are right not to want to be pulled in different directions, and many scholars, understandably wary of somatic feats of skill, have chosen to concentrate on Zhuangzi as a philosopher in the more conventional sense. Yet given the many ambiguities in his work (including how much of it is his), one might wonder if the friction is inevitable. Compare, for example, Hansen's description of the Zhuangzian knack with this passage from a different source, of a pianist at a keyboard:

> [In] this new way of doing things, action is no longer executed through a controlling mind that oversees the physical execution of the act and is therefore seen as separate from the body. When the pianist performs the act of playing with a perfectly coordinated mechanism, action feels strange and disembodied, as if he has lost

> direct control over the hand and it moves of its own accord…Before, he was trying to control actions that were meant to hit – but might miss – the target. Now the idea of what he wants is incorporated into the coordination of the entire act… This experience of control in process resembles the infantile experience: movement occurs by itself, and the resulting experience happens *to* the child as a kind of transformational sensory experience." (Dimon 2003, 186)

This quote is from Theodore Dimon, co-founder of the American Society for the Alexander Technique, director of the Dimon Institute in New York City, and, as a matter of full disclosure, my teacher in the 1980s. A brief survey of his writings will not give the impression of a mystic. His recent book *The Anatomy in Action* is taken up almost entirely with an explication of the muscular system. You would have to look long and hard for so much as a metaphor in it. Yet the passage is remarkably reminiscent of knack experience as related in the *Zhuangzi*.

It is common, of course, to see equivalences made between Daoism and contemporary practices or techniques, but given the striking resemblance noted above, I thought it might be useful to revisit the foundations of the Alexander Technique with a more attentive eye, not only to compare and contrast these parallel descriptions of the knack experience, but also to see if the Alexander Technique engages, or even resolves, some of Zhuangzi's broader philosophical concerns.

The Alexander Technique has been adapted in various ways since its introduction, just as the *Zhuangzi* has. In this paper, I draw mainly from Alexander's book *The Use of the Self*, with special attention to the chapter "The Evolution of a Technique," which describes the genesis of his discovery. As for Zhuangzi, my sharpest attention will be on his idea-heavy Inner Chapters, as translated by Brook Ziporyn (2009) and Angus C. Graham (1981). These choices leave out large swathes of both traditions. Alexander did not teach his technique in the same way that he learned it, and there is much in the *Zhuangzi* of interest beyond the Inner Chapters. My idea is to focus narrowly on the innovators, such that the comparison might be expanded upon later if need be.

Even within these limitations, an approach such as this poses challenges. While Alexander tells his story in a more or less chronological sequence (and often, admittedly, in plodding detail), Zhuangzi makes daring leaps, with frequent shifts in point of view and tone, opting sometimes for storytelling, others for argument. For the sake of clarity, I've preserved Alexander's order of exposition, interspersing passages from the *Zhuangzi* where they resonate. Because some readers may require an introduction to the Alexander Technique, I've set out its development at some length.

Formulating the Problem

F. M. Alexander is often thought of today as the originator of a method for reducing stress due to poor posture. I believe this characterization is misguided. In my view, what sets the Alexander Technique apart from other approaches that fall under the headings of mindfulness or body awareness is a) its attention to first-person, first-order interactions between mind and body in the midst of activity and b) its unflinching refusal to draw inferences about those interactions. Unlike many other disciplines, the Alexander Technique is resolutely empirical.

Alexander began with a problem. As a stage performer (technically, an elocutionist) in late 19th century Australia, he started to have trouble with his throat and vocal cords."[N]ot long after," he writes, "I was told by my friends that when I was reciting my breathing was audible, and that they could hear me (as they put it) 'gasping' and 'sucking in air' through my mouth" (Alexander 1955, 3).

Zhuangzi also mentions different kinds of breathing, including gasping. "The mass of men," he writes in chapter 6, "breathe from their throats. Submissive and defeated, they gulp down their words and just as soon vomit them back up. Their preferences and desires run deep, but the Heavenly [natural] Impulse is shallow in them" (Ziporyn 2009, 40). In the same passage, he contrasts gasping or gulping with "breathing from the heels." I don't find a good explanation of what breathing from the heels might mean, either in the *Zhuangzi* or in the *Yinshu* (Pulling Book), a medical treatise written several centuries later (Lo 2014). Still, the mention of gasping by both writers marks an auspicious start.

In hopes of eliminating the problem with his voice, Alexander turned to the medical community. He was given various remedies, some of which helped… until he returned to the stage, when his gasping returned. "Is it not fair, then," he asked his latest in a series of doctors, "to conclude that it was something I was doing that evening [the night of a recital] in using my voice that was the cause of the trouble?" (Alexander 1955, 5). The doctor had no answer, so Alexander embarked on a sustained exploration, using mirrors to study his movements, into what he was actually doing.

When presented with a question to which he had no answer, Alexander secluded himself. While one might suppose that seclusion was a common practice in the *Zhuangzi*, I find only two examples in the Inner Chapters where this is chosen specifically as a means of discovery, notably when Yan Hui reports his findings to Confucius. In chapter 4, one line in particular stands out. Yan Hui says, "Before I find what moves me into activity, it is myself that is full and real. But as soon as I find what moves me, it turns out that 'myself' has never begun to exist" (Ziporyn 2009, 27). In this respect, Yan Hui and Alexander are both asking, in their different ways: "What moves me into activity?" Interestingly, Yan Hui, though nominally under the tutelage of Confucius, appears to be undertaking his investigation on his own initiative, much as Alexander was. In this respect, Alexander may be thought of as a modern-day stand-in for Yan Hui.

The problem, Alexander observed, was not only that he gasped. He also pulled his head back and depressed his larynx whenever he attempted to speak at recital volume, and to a lesser extent when he spoke in a normal speaking voice. At first, he was unable to determine which of these caused the others.

Zhuangzi asks the same question about the body in chapter 2, albeit without relating it to an ailment. "It seems that there is something genuinely in command, and that the only trouble is we cannot find sign of it. That as a 'Way' it can be walked is true enough, but we do not see its shape; it has identity but no shape. Of the hundred joints, nine openings, six viscera, all present and complete, which should I recognize as more kin to me than another?" (Graham 1981, 51). He is unable to resolve the question, except to say "if there is a genuine ruler among them, then whether we could find out facts about him or not would neither add nor subtract from his genuineness" (Ziporyn 2009, 10-11). This is in the context of the force that moves all things—Heaven, which in context means "nature."

So far, both Zhuangzi and Alexander approach the question of causation in the body using ordinary everyday reasoning. In the *Zhuangzi*, this would mean using one's *zhi* 知, or "understanding consciousness," which carries the connotations of discernment, cleverness and skill in judgment. In using one's *zhi*, one employed *shifei*—where *shi* 是 means "(That) is it" or "right" and *fei* 非 means "(That) is not" or "wrong." In the Warring Sates period during which Zhuangzi wrote, the combination *shifei* came to indicate a form of debate with an opponent. Here, as with Alexander throughout, Zhuangzi is conducting an internal inquiry rather than a public dispute, but the principle of *shifei*—that's it, that's not it—remains implied.

After some months of his own internal inquiry, Alexander found that the variable over which he had control was the pulling back of his head. If he was able to prevent this, the gasping and depression of his larynx did not occur. In this, he seems to have been fairly lucky, because in the ensuing years he found the head-neck relation to be the governing factor over muscular activity throughout the body, in both himself and others. He eventually gave this head-neck relation the term the Primary Control.

There are vague hints of a parallel to the Primary Control in the *Zhuangzi*. Just before relating the knack story of Cook Ding in chapter 3, Zhuangzi notes that life "tends toward the current of the central meridian as its normal course. And this is what enables us to maintain our bodies." In a related footnote, Ziporyn points out that the Chinese word for the core yang meridian—*du* 督—literally means "controller" or "governor" and that, in the context of traditional Chinese medicine, refers to "a current of energy that runs vertically through the center of the human back" (Ziporyn 2009, 22; see also Marshall 2020, 464).

The concepts of controller and genuine ruler are obviously similar. Yet Zhuangzi never equates the two, and the relation between head position and gasping, as far as I can tell, is never mentioned at

all. The *du* is introduced as affirming, much like the lilies of the field in the New Testament. Nor, for his part, did Alexander ever investigate the principles of traditional Chinese medicine. On the contrary, he continued to confine himself entirely to evidence gained from his seclusion.

A case in point was his next step.

Having secured a first beachhead by identifying the importance of his head-neck relation, Alexander was now beset with new problems. Whenever he moved his head forward (in relation to his neck), he tended to lift his chest and narrow his back, which in turn depressed his larynx and brought back his hoarseness. Searching for a position of his head that didn't strain his voice, he discovered that it should go straight up while tilting forward (not forward in space, but freely tilting forward from the top of the spine), which resulted in his stature lengthening. Even then, however, when reciting, he eventually returned to lifting his chest and narrowing his back. "This made me suspicious," he writes, "that I was not doing what I thought I was doing" (1955, 10).

Zhuangzi arrives at a similar formulation from an entirely different angle. In chapter 2, in a debate over the limits of knowledge, Wang Ni asks Nie Que, "How do I know that what I call knowing is not ignorance?" While this sentence appears to be much like Alexander's, Zhuangzi is actually concerned with something else. Wang Ni continues, "People eat the flesh of their livestock, the deer eat grass, the snakes eat centipedes, hawks and eagles eat mice. Of these four, which 'knows' the right thing to eat?" (Graham 1981, 58).

By Zhuangzi's lights, each being knows what's right for them, and what's right for each being varies. Thus, one cannot know a single thing that's right for everyone. On this point, Alexander and Zhuangzi are not at all in accord, for the mere fact that Alexander's naïve attempt to do what he thought was right for him was also causing him to gasp. Radical acceptance was accordingly not to be his way. On the contrary, he set up in two additional mirrors and confirmed for himself that he was unable to maintain his head position or to continue widening his back whenever he attempted to speak. "When I realized this," he writes, "I was much disturbed, and I saw that the whole situation would have to be reconsidered" (1955, 10).

It only got worse. The next thing he noticed was that he was also curling his toes down in such a way as to interfere with his balance. He recalled the advice of an acting coach, who had advised him to "take hold of the floor with his feet" and realized that he had followed this advice without actually knowing what it meant. Not only was he doing things he didn't mean to do, but he had "cultivated" habits that actually furthered his misuse (1955, 12).[1]

Two points followed from this line of thought. First, there was a mismatch between a linguistic description—"take hold of the floor with your feet"—and how he actually carried it out. He had simply assumed, incorrectly, that he could carry out any advice given in language form in a way that felt right for him. Second, since he had always carried out actions in this way, his habits were more widespread and more deeply engrained than he had originally thought.

Zhuangzi tends to gloss over the subject of habit, as when he associates "gulping down words" with "preferences running deep"—a connection is made, but he explains it no further. Wang Fuzhi adds the qualifier of immediacy: The mass of men "come forth immediately in response to every stimulus" (Ziporyn 2009, 192). Guo Xiang, the first editor of the *Zhuangzi*, comes much closer to Alexander on this point with his concept of "traces," which accrue in a person as deliberate activity and interfere with the spontaneous self-so (Ziporyn 2009, 192; 1993, 511-39).

Having seen firsthand how strongly he held to his habits, Alexander still assumed that it would be enough to know this—and in fact, now that he did know it, that his conscious thoughts would be enough to correct them, however "right" they felt to him. But this only led to a new confusion. "In actual practice," he notes, "I found that there was no clear dividing line between my reasoned and my unreasoned direction of myself, and that I was quite unable to prevent the two from overlapping" (Alexander 1955, 17).

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[1] This is not an attempt to put Zhuangzian terminology into Alexander's mouth. He explicitly uses the word "cultivated."

In the opening of chapter 6, Zhuangzi also encounters two intermingled sources of activity:

> To understand what is done by the Human [as opposed to what is done by Heaven, or nature]: that would be to use what your understanding understands to nurture what your understanding does not understand…. However, there is a problem here. For our understanding can be in the right only by virtue of a dependence on something, and what it depends on is always peculiarly unfixed. So *how could I know whether what I call the Heavenly is not the Human? How could I know whether what I call the Human is not really the Heavenly*?" (Ziporyn 2009, 39-40; emphasis added).[2]

This is a problem of a different order from the relativity of each being able to choose what is right for them. Taking on the perspective of others may be difficult to admit for reasons of pride, but concerning one's own actions there is a confusion, because there is actually no other perspective to take but one's own.

"Let us say instead then," Zhuangzi continues, "that there can be 'Genuine Knowledge' only when there is such a thing as a 'Genuine Human Being'" (Ziporyn 2009, 39-40).

The Genuine Human Being, like the genuine ruler, does not settle easily anywhere in the *Zhuangzi*. In this case, Zhuangzi is arguably unable to take a skeptical stance any more than a perspectivist one, and so is rather formulating a hypothesis. The condition for Genuine Knowledge, he says, is that there must be a Genuine Human Being. This being asserted, he is required to give an account of the necessary attributes of such a being, which comes across as curious—precisely because he cannot take the perspective of this being as different from his own. In this reading, I follow Ziporyn, who describes the Genuine Human Being as "simply stipulated as the author imagines them, admittedly and unapologetically according to his own present perspective" (2020, 64).

The passage on the Genuine Human Being concludes with a kind of axiom that supposes a preferred state of balance: "In their one-ness, they were followers of the Heavenly. In their non-oneness, they were followers of the Human. This is what it is for neither the Heavenly nor the Human to win out over the other. And that is what I call being both Genuine and Human, a Genuine Human Being" (Ziporyn 2009, 39-40).

This axiom is no easier to puzzle out than the rest of the passage. The skeptic might suppose that "one-ness" means simply to dismiss the distinction between the Human and the Heavenly doer, but this indistinction is the very problem that Zhuangzi poses.

I would argue here that the Genuine Human Being is best understood not as a cultivated state of mind, but rather as an agency within the human being that persists from an earlier stage of evolution, when the nervous system was still more autonomic than central, and the ability to "say" was just beginning to appear.[3] This hypothesis is consistent with the following:

> a) The Genuine Human Being is sometimes referred to as "of old."
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> b) The *Zhuangzi* has an abiding interest in returning to a prior state, whether it be the Ancestor, or "not yet existing."[4]

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[2] Graham's translation explicitly refers to agency: "How could I know that the doer I call 'Heaven' is not the man? How could I know that the doer I call the 'man' is not Heaven?" (Graham, 1981, 84).

[3] Perhaps the closest among the commentators to sharing my view of the Genuine Human Being is Guo Xiang: "What knowing knows is little compared to what is really present in the body. What doing accomplishes is little compared to the abundance of operating principles" (Ziporyn 2009, 189).

[4] Zhuangzi offers a naïve theory of evolution in which different beings, including humans, are transformed into other beings. (Graham, 1981, 184) Alexander also has a naïve theory of evolution, in which civilized life has "debauched" the senses, obscuring the natural response of the organism. This theory is laid out in some detail in (Alexander 1996).

c) The Genuine Human Beings apparently lacks an understanding consciousness entirely. "Oblivious, they would forget what they were saying" and "Their understanding was a temporary expedient, arising only when the situation was unavoidable" (Ziporyn 2009, 42).

d) The Genuine Human Being is sometimes not referred to as "of old," which allows for the possibility that the Genuine Human Being is part of who we are, now obscured because, in Zhuangzi's memorable phrase, "saying is darkened by its foliage and flowers" (Graham 1981, 52).

If this interpretation holds, the question becomes: How can I know that the activity in my body originates from an uncultivated original agency as distinct from my understanding consciousness?

Solving the Problem—Or Not

In what was becoming an experiment of many months, Alexander's attempts to untangle the source of his actions were still leading to naught. Undaunted, his next approach was, when considering an action, to *inhibit* its execution, by which he meant "not carry it out." Verbatim: "[I]t would be necessary for me to make the experience of receiving the stimulus to speak and of refusing to do anything in response" (Alexander 1955, 18).

"Refusing to do anything in response" can be read without difficulty in the Zhuangzian sense of "not doing" (*wuwei* 無為). While not-doing clearly looms large as a subject in the history of Daoism, I find only two schematic references to it in the Inner Chapters in the narrow sense of suppressing specific actions.

In chapter 7, Hu-Tzu, relating his meeting with the shaman Lieh-tzu, says, "I should think he saw me as I am when I hold down the impulses of Power." And the following day: "the impulses were coming up from the heels. I should think he saw my impulses towards the good" (Graham 1981, 97). "Holding down" and "impulses coming up from the heels" also suggest something akin to Alexander's program of inhibition. In this same tale, Hu-Tzu mentions the existence of nine reservoirs, of which these are two. We will see Zhuangzi himself refer to a reservoir shortly as well (Ziporyn 2009, 53).

In chapter 3, Cook Ding describes how, prior to undertaking the complex action of carving up an ox, his "understanding consciousness, beholden to its specific purposes, comes to a halt and the promptings of his spirit taking over" (Ziporyn 2009, 22). This is quite close to Alexander's aspirations as stated thus far—and indeed his technique remained very much line with it as he came to develop it further.

For the time being, however, Alexander was not seeking the moment when his understanding consciousness came to a halt. He was seeking the moment when it began. Rather than simply telling himself to inhibit *x* (refuse to do *x*), then, he began to investigate *x* in parts and inhibit each subdivision in turn. At the same time, he would continue to think "let head go up and forward" and "let the back widen" without actively attempting to do either—a kind of projected thought he came to call *direction.* In effect, in closely observing the means to an end, he began to identify the chain of impulses leading to an action, in hopes of finding the moment where he began to pull back his head. He called this procedure the *means-whereby*, and the failure to attend to it *end-gaining*.

In chapter 2, Zhuangzi delivers an argument that, though more abstract, resembles Alexander's attempt to locate first appearances. Following an argument of regress, Zhuangzi finds that each step to establish a prior moment only serves to give the moment of "nothing" existence through the assertion itself. Ultimately, he leaves open the question whether one is able to distinguish "not yet existing" from merely saying these words (Ziporyn 2009, 15).

Zhuangzi is not always so non-committal about "not yet existing." Recall that Yan Hui, relating his progress to Confucius, reports that "as soon as I find what moves me, it turns out that 'myself' has never begun to exist." In other words, against an implied skeptical claim—that one cannot overcome "nothing" to arrive at actual nothing—Zhuangzi has one of his characters present an example to the

contrary: that one *can* not-yet-exist. This again suggests that his arguments sometimes might not culminate in skepticism or perspectivism so much as stop at hard questions.

To summarize then. By now, Alexander had a) tried to isolate the cause of his problem, b) tried to remedy this problem directly, c) realized that his idea of what he was doing was incorrect, d) noticed related problems and tried to solve them directly as well, and e) tried to solve these problems by not immediately carrying out his idea of an action. So, when he tried to solve these problems by including an investigation of the means for carrying out his action, was he successful?

No.

Alexander was faced with an indiscernible difference between "not yet pulling back his head," which was still integral to pulling back his head, and a not-yet-pulling-back-his head proper. When he thought he was not-doing, he was still doing—much as Zhuangzi at one point supposes will always be the case." Clearly, Alexander concluded, "to 'feel' or think that I had inhibited the old instinctive reaction was no proof that I had really done so, and I must find some way of 'knowing'…This meant that I must be prepared to carry on with any procedure I had reasoned out for my purpose, even though that procedure might *feel wrong*" (Alexander 1955, 21-22; emphasis in the original).

The shift was subtle but crucial. Previously, we saw that the reduction to a single perspective obscured the difference between two possible sources of activity in a person. Now, with Alexander expecting to feel "wrong," we're in a position to see how the reduction of perspectives actually limits any chance of distinguishing these two sources.

A section in chapter 2 finds Zhuangzi giving a more extended discussion of *shifei*. For every "this," he says, there is a "that," for every right, a wrong. But each wrong is right from the perspective of another. Therefore, he proposes that we let "both alternatives proceed," a move he also calls Illuminating the Obvious. If one does so, one can then situate oneself at the fulcrum between alternatives, and choose from among them according to the context of the moment—the term for doing so being *yinshi* 因是, or "right by circumstance" (Ziporyn 2020, 13-15).

During the course of this argument, Zhuangzi alludes to a familiar paradox of the time, promulgated by Gongsun Long, and recasts it as a "horse is not a horse." As Ziporyn interprets it in a footnote (2020, 25), the paradox arises from pointing: one can point to something, but one can never point to pointing. Indicating a horse, then, is caught up in pointing, and is therefore not the horse itself. Zhuangzi answers the paradox by saying: "[Y]ou can use the act of indication as an illustration of the unindicated that belongs to all indication, but that is no match for using the unindicated itself as an illustration of the unindicated that belongs to all indication" (2020,15). Many readings of this dense sentence are possible, but Alexander's inquiry diverges at the phrase "using the unindicated itself as an illustration" because he's concerned with something unindicated that cannot be illustrated.

Faced with any dispute, Zhuangzi says, one should admit "that" as well as "this," the wrong as well as the right. This is a fundamental idea for a perspectivist reading of the *Zhuangzi*. Yet this method will certainly fail in a case where one is looking for something that cannot be pointed to.

Alexander, for his part, begins by thinking he can point to the problem and then point to the solution, and then thinks he can point to an alternate solution, but he's brought to a halt when he comes to realize that he must do what feels wrong. Unlike different candidates for what is right, which can be replaced by other candidates for what's right, "what feels wrong" cannot be described by others or oneself, and therefore resists the *shifei* mode of inquiry entirely. We can formulate this problem as a paraphrase of the famous Daoist motto: the Primary Control that can be pointed to is not the Primary Control.

Zhuangzi's answer to that which is un-point-out-able is, in my view, another case where he is framing a hypothesis.

"When the understanding consciousness comes to rest in what it does not know," he writes, "it has reached its utmost. The demonstration that uses no words, the Course that is not a course—who 'understands' these things? *If there is something* able to 'understand' them, it can be called the Heavenly Reservoir—poured into without ever getting full, ladled out of without even running out, ever not-

knowing its own source. . . . This is called the Shadowy Splendor" (Ziporyn 2009, 17; emphasis added).[5] And there, for Zhuangzi, the matter seems to end.

Alexander had certainly come to rest in what he did not know. He did not know in advance what it would feel like to perform an action "wrongly," and he could not simply inhabit the perspective of his nervous or muscular system to find out. What he needed—so he reasoned—was some way to maintain "not-doing" past the moment where his habit refused to play along, some failsafe barrier in his mind to make sure he would carry out an action that simply felt wrong. In his words, he needed "concrete proof that my instinctive reaction to the stimulus to gain my end *remain inhibited*" (Alexander 1955, 22; emphasis original).

Alexander's idea for securing this concrete proof included an innovation that seems not to have emerged from his previous results so much as to have come out of nowhere. As before, he continued to project the thought of his head going up, resolving to not go through with his stated action (speaking), including all the intermediary steps, but now he would also consider whether to pursue some other end altogether, such as lifting his arm. With all this in place, he would then, at the last second, allow himself to pursue this additional end, continue with his original action or not respond to either.

This worked! Alexander was able to speak without pulling back his head, not just once or twice, but reliably thereafter.

This final procedure, which came to be called the "flanking maneuver," required thought on several levels at once. More importantly, it required a different kind of attention. In addition to directing his thoughts toward subdivisions of an action, the final, crucial step was to expand his view beyond that one action. In other words, he ensured he would do the "wrong thing" (where habit was deemed "right") by extending not-doing across a range that was larger than a single end.

> When not-doing exceeds a single end, the "wrong" is allowed to pass and become right by circumstance—without ever being pointed out.

There is a passage in chapter 6 in which, if Zhuangzi means to associate a constantly changing body specifically with physical movements, may be speaking to the same principle. "Now, the human form in its time undergoes ten thousand transformations, never stopping for an instant. . . People may model themselves on [the sage] but how much better off are those who bind themselves equally to each and all of the ten thousand things, *making themselves dependent only on each transformation*, on all transformation!" (Ziporyn 2009, 43; emphasis added).

In Alexandrian nomenclature, this relation to "each and all of the ten thousand things" would correspond to directing while inhibiting the *change between* ends, in addition to those ends.

Stepping Back

Notice that Alexander ascribes the outcome of his endeavors not to the defeat of reason, but to its success. Rationality is a constant theme in his writing. This is not our normal idea of rationality, however. He uses his understanding consciousness until it fails, and ends up with a form of thinking that's carefully arranged to stay out of the way.

Alexander's view of habit can be confusing in this regard as well. Throughout his campaign for the advance of reason, he describes habit as a reflex and so seemingly aligns it with nature, which reason must control. Yet he also identifies habit as the passive, unexamined result of reason's pursuit of its own ends. By the same token, his non-habitual responses of his body are not *constructed* from his conscious thoughts. He doesn't reason that lengthening the neck allows the back to widen (such that

[5] Ziporyn advances that the Heavenly Reservoir and the Genuine Human Being are one and the same, and gives them the shared status of a wild card, which allows Zhuangzi to switch perspectives according to circumstance. I can see how the Heavenly Reservoir and the Genuine Human Being might be the same entity, but not how they become a wild card if they represent the kind of "black box" of knowledge that's described in this passage.

the chest no longer puffs up). He observes it, and follows that observation to the next, even as his body's responses remain permanently foreign to his perspective.[6]

With this clarification, we might hazard a variation on Zhuangzi's axiom about the Genuine Human Being (which, as stated, is envisioned as residing within the human body). First, while maintaining the original structure of the statement:

> * When the Genuine Human Being is obscured by the understanding consciousness, the Genuine Human Being serves the understanding consciousness.
>
> * When the Genuine Human Being is not obscured by the understanding consciousness, the Genuine Human Being serves nature.

And then converted into the active voice:

> * When the understanding conscious obscures the Genuine Human Being, the Genuine Human Being serves the understanding consciousness.
>
> * When the understanding consciousness does not obscure the Genuine Human Being, the Genuine Human Being serves nature.

Where there is a split (meaning, the normal state of affairs), the Genuine Human Being has a master, whom it serves dutifully. It answers to the short-term demands of the "decider." If I decide to continue revising this paper in a knackless fashion, my body will continue to obey, no matter the repetitive stress injury that ensues. By contrast, where there is no split, there is neither master nor servant—the power relationship dissolves. In allowing for both of these conditions, ends are still pursued (even in the flanking maneuver, one must still formulate and choose ends after all), but no longer to the detriment of the genuine, and "neither Heaven nor the Human wins out over the other."

The situation is not symmetrical, however. If the Genuine Human Being follows the understanding consciousness for better or worse, as seems the case for both Zhuangzi and Alexander, the only way to arrive at a state of balance is for the master to change. Here both writers advocate a sustained process of *receiving information*.

In chapter 3 of the *Zhuangzi*, Cook Ding explains how he achieved his remarkable knack for butchery. For three years, he says, he saw only the ox. "But now. . . my understanding consciousness, beholden to its specific purposes, comes to a halt, and thus the promptings of the spirit begin to flow. I depend on Heaven's unwrought perforations and . . . I go by how they already are" (Ziporyn 2009, 22).

The Chinese for "Heaven's unwrought perforations" is *tianli* 天理, lit. "heavenly principle," a term of Zhuangzi's own devising. In the context of the "understanding consciousness, beholden to its specific purposes," coming to a halt, the concept of *tianli* fits quite neatly with Alexander's discovery over several years as to the actual location of his head and neck and all the attending muscles from there down. Indeed, as Alexander progressed beyond his original study before his mirrors, he came to see that his entire organism, when freed from habitual use, worked as a whole—just not in the way he imagined it.

The result was his own knack experience: one day, while sitting and directing his knees to move away from his hips, he stood up without knowing how it had happened. As he reported it to a student, "I kept it up, until one day I got up out of my chair without effort of any kind. I just shot right up" (Binkley, 1993, 104). One might say that Alexander located the *tianli* of the human body through a

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[6] Many teachers of the Alexander Technique would likely frame this conclusion differently, stressing the unity of mind and body. While it is not possible to argue the point in full here, I maintain that the body has an organizing principle that remains distinct from the perspective of the conscious mind, as evidenced in part by the ability to fall back into habit after having achieved a level of good use. While the technique itself remains the same either way, my interpretation favors a concordance with the Zhuangzian theme of "making things equal."

method of non-doing that allowed the hidden alternatives to pass, much as Cook Ding did with an ox's carcass. Or that, like Yan Hui, as soon as he found out what moved him, he ceased to exist.

Task Independence

The flanking maneuver leads, perhaps obviously, to not-doing over many ends, and to the extent that it's sustained, to not-doing over potentially *any* end, or task independence. Stated the other way around, task independence is simply the flanking maneuver expanded over a range of ends.

There is wide consensus in the Alexandrian community on the point of task independence, even several generations after his death. The technique is not a posture, but a way of thinking in activity. (Although, pushing task independence to its conclusion, one could always practice it *while* in certain postures, or as well, *whil*e getting short-term relief from physical problems.) In the *Zhuangzi*, too, we see that a knack is not associated with specific postures or ritual movements as the Confucians observed in their social customs, but with an individually learned activity—swimming, butchering, or, say, knocking the plaster off of someone's nose with the whirl of a hatchet—that answers only to the next discovered transformation. For Alexander, however, these feats are all the same. Moreover, the very universality of his technique has the potential to drain a good deal of the exoticism from Zhuangzi's tales. If students of the Alexander Technique can learn to play the piano as if the body were acting of its own accord, they can learn to a cross a room in better harmony with nature just as well.

Concluding Remarks

It would be rash of me to claim I've found anything like the original first-order Dao as it existed during the Warring States period. On the other hand, it would also be rash of me to say I'm describing something entirely different. I have interpreted the Genuine Human Being essentially as the autonomic nervous system, with some appeal to Guo Xiang at the expense of other commentators, and while my interpretation of the Alexander Technique never offers the kind of psychosomatic unity that some writers assert, it nevertheless jibes with the view, already prevalent in the second generation of Alexander teachers, that the technique effectively unveils the uncultivated "wisdom of the body" (Jones 1979, 14).

Then, too, gaps in the comparison remain, especially on Zhuangzi's side. The adepts in his stories may or may not have proceeded in a manner similar to Alexander, or they may have done so in some respects and not others. Individuals may have developed their own special methods, either heuristically or systematically. "Sitting and forgetting" may have signaled a host of connotations to Zhuangzi's contemporaries, or it may actually have meant just to sit there and forget. The wheelwright, for his part, flat out says that his knack cannot be learned, and Zhuangzi himself asserts that the Way, in the larger sense of all creation, cannot be transmitted. We also know that he disapproved of both the healing exercises associated with the house of Peng, and with whatever methods caused Yuzi of Shou-ling to return home from Handan unable to walk (Ziporyn 2009, 75).[7]

Yet it's also quite possible that Zhuangzi encountered some hard philosophical questions and, while recognizing their theoretical importance to the knack experience, remained unaware of the transit from theory to practice, prompting him to resort to something like honest reporting. The running substitutions of names for entity that is ill-defined at best—genuine ruler, Genuine Human Being, Heavenly Reservoir—suggest as much. In any case, we do not see him secluding himself to seek a first-order Dao or claiming to possess a knack of his own anywhere in the Inner Chapters.

All this being said, I believe the foregoing identifies a reliable path to the knack experience that, while developed quite apart from any ancient Chinese intelligence, nonetheless engages Zhuangzi the philosopher on his own terms – and perhaps improves on them. Because it can be learned by anyone to execute mundane tasks as well as extravagant ones, the Alexander Technique overcomes the

[7] Whatever the "Handan Walk" may have been, it's mentioned in the context of disparaging any efforts to understand the vastness of nature through disputation.

complaint of specialization. If anything, it can be deflating about collaboration with the Heavenly at close range. And unlike the wheelwright's lament, it can be taught.

Taken a step further, Alexander's Dao doesn't so much side with Zhuangzi against the Confucians (i.e., they relied on rote rituals and procedures) as much as enter the problem on a different level, because one can engage in it *while* adhering to ritual forms of conduct—or not. Like a modern-day Yan Hui, one can "play in the cage" of a prospective employer and still move into activity from a place of not-doing (Ziporyn 2009, 75). Cook Ding was, after all, performing for a high-ranking noble.

I've concentrated mainly on a single chapter in one of Alexander's books and the Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi*. It would be interesting to see how much further, if at all, the affinities go. Alexander provides a more definite Dao to follow; Zhuangzi covers a wider scope of concerns. Do the two traditions explicitly contradict each other on points not considered here? Conversely, is it possible to extend the concordances between them?

There may be assistance from other quarters. Among the philosophers, the most visible advocate of the Alexander Technique's merits has been John Dewey, who not only penned the introduction to *The Use of the Self*, but studied the technique himself. On the other side of the equation, the *Zhuangzi* entered European philosophy through Martin Heidegger by way of Martin Buber, which suggests a fairly wide-open field.

After a lag, the Alexander Technique is beginning to be investigated from a scientific perspective as well. A paper published in 2020 gives a good review of the progress in confirming his assertions (Cacciatore 2020, 199-213). One study I don't find mentioned in it is an experiment showing that vocalizations correlate to changes in the head and trunk orientation on the sagittal plane, with the changes being proportional to vocal volume—exactly as Alexander observed in his original inquiry (Lagier 2010, 195-202).

Straddling science and philosophy: In the mid-20th century, when logical positivism was in the ascendant, there was passing interest in the Alexander Technique as a case of operational verificationism (Mungo 1946, 325-27). This line of inquiry resonates especially well with Zhuangzi's perspectivism, in that it holds out the possibility of verification through a subjective operation which each individual performs on their own. In the final analysis, it also serves as a reminder that research can be conducted apart from written evidence. If Zhuangzi's claims are still relevant today, it should not matter if someone discovered a Dao for the knack experience in the 20th century, or in any century. And it especially should not matter to thinker-doers, who, regardless of their walk of life, are free to investigate it for themselves.

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