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ZHUANGZI AND THE OBSESSION WITH BEING RIGHT

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1. The Interpretive Problem

Since Zhuangzi laments the human obsession with being right, he would be highly amused at the scholarly obsession with being right on the meaning of his text, especially on the matter of whether he ultimately believes in a right versus a wrong. The fact is that he invites our obsession by raising the question and then refusing to answer it.[1] In chapter two, we are invited to take a stance above the debating Confucians and Mohists. What one *shi*s 是 the other *fei*s 非 (what is 'right' for one is 'not right' for the other); what one *fei*s the other *shi*s. Argument is powerless to declare a victor. Zhuangzi asks, "Are there really *shi* and *fei*, or really no *shi* and *fei*?

The rest of the text poses exquisite dilemmas for those who desire to answer. Parts of it articulate a profound skepticism about our power to know. Other parts seem to point us toward a way of life that is held superior to the Confucian and Mohist ways of life. Does the proposed engagement with a way of life imply the claim that it is a better way? If so, how do we reconcile this knowledge with the skeptical theme?

The opening chapter contains themes expressing both skepticism and engagement. On the one hand, the perceptions of all creatures are shaped and limited by their size and location in relation to what they perceive in their environments. Peng flies so high above the ground that when it looks down, all it sees is blue, just as we do when we look up at the sky. The cicada and dove cannot comprehend the scale of the huge bird's flight because their idea of the upper limit of flight extends only to a tree branch. Yet something beyond the relativity of perception is suggested by Zhuangzi's poking fun at Huizi for being unable to think of a use for some huge gourds he had grown. Huizi was preoccupied with finding conventional uses for the shells, as water dippers for instance,

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and did not see, suggests Zhuangzi, that they could be lashed together to make a perfect raft with which to go floating down the river. This story suggests the possibility of changing perspectives, even broadening one's original perspectives, to take in more of what the world has to offer.

The second chapter articulates skepticism most clearly and most vigorously without any apparent limitation in scope. The third, fourth and fifth chapters, the "skill chapters," give us characters displaying marvelous attunement with the material or the situation or the people with which they are working, such as Cook Ding's effortless, dance-like carving of the ox, or Confucius's advice to Yanhui to handle a ferocious ruler as a trainer handles a tiger, or the Daoist masters who get goodness from their students by acting as a still-water mirror to them.

Binding together such a diverse array of themes in one coherent interpretation is the challenge. It is no wonder that interpretations of the text tend to favor either skepticism or engagement.

2. An Interpretation that Makes Skepticism the Overarching Theme

Chad Hansen gives pride of place to the skeptical theme. For him, Zhuangzi claims no authoritative insight into the way things are, but rather appreciation for the many perspectives on the world one could have, the many ways of dividing the world up by sets of distinctions, none of which can be shown in a non-question-begging manner to be superior to the others. *Ming* or illumination is light shed on the limits of knowledge. Such skepticism does give rise to advice: we should be "flexible, tolerant, aware of the infinite range of possible ways to respond to life" because "getting locked into one makes us unable to see the benefits (and defects) of others."[2] The artificiality of convention provides no reason to live without it. We must adopt some *dao*, some path, and with a nod to the skill chapters, Hansen suggests that Zhuangzi celebrates spontaneous skill mastery within the *dao* he adopts, mastery beyond words and expressed by total absorption in the matter at hand. He cannot recommend such a *dao*, however, from any meta-perspective that shows it to be any more natural or appropriate than others.

Hansen's comment about needing to see the benefits and defects of other perspectives reveals the difficulty in giving priority to the skeptical themes. The "flexible and tolerant" perspective from which we see the benefits and defects of infinite ways to respond to life seems a meta-perspective that *is* superior to the ones from which we see the benefits and defects of only one or a few ways.

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Huizi really is missing something when he neglects the possibility of using the gourds for a raft, blinded, as we are, by calcified ideas of what is useful and what is not. His preoccupation with using the gourds as water containers or dippers prevents him from seeing their capacities to float upon water. Or consider Confucius's advice in chapter four to Yanhui to "fast his mind" in order to rid himself of preconceptions about how to advise a bloodthirsty ruler. These preconceptions will interfere with Yanhui's ability to see the ruler as the particular ruler he is, at the time Yanhui sees him, and therefore they will interfere with Yanhui's ability to *deal with him* as the particular ruler he is at that time.

Hansen has explicitly addressed the problem of reconciling skepticism with engagement by qualifying the kind of skepticism he attributes to the *Zhuangzi*:

> While not implying that we abandon or stop advocating our own conception of the good, it acknowledges that we have little confidence that we can rationally convince those with different comprehensive views starting *from their norms*. We cannot marshal arguments that should convince all others. At the same time, their arguments will not convince us. The skepticism does not rest on discovering anything *wrong* about our way of life.[3]

Hansen here draws from passages in which the *Zhuangzi* characterizes opposing viewpoints as resting on a coherent set of justifications and norms for gaining knowledge. Attempts to resolve the disagreement merely end in an infinite regress of justification on each side with no convergence in shared norms that is sufficient to produce resolution (as in the dispute between the Confucians and the Mohists). However, lacking proof demonstrable to others gives us no reason to abandon our own commitments, and this is how Hansen proposes to defuse the apparent conflict between skepticism and engagement.

Notice, however, that such a strategy of scaling back Zhuangist skepticism still does not explain how we could find other perspectives genuinely revelatory. To grant that we could not prove our own perspectives against others, and by implication show the superiority of our own perspectives to theirs, is on Hansen's account merely to realize that there is *nothing wrong* with our own.

Hansen's account gains plausibility from the way he focuses Zhuangist skepticism on the conflict between ways of life. Because many of us are pluralists in denying that there is a single correct way to live, it seems plausible that our inability to prove the superiority of our own way of life to all others should not undermine our confidence that our way is genuinely good and worth living.[4] On the other hand, Hansen notes that, in general, Zhuangzi is not a pluralist or a relativist about the

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natural world. He seems to believe there is a single world, about which there can be different and conflicting perspectives. Hansen grants that the scope of Zhuangist skepticism extends to our inability to justify our particular perspective on the natural world as superior to others. But it is here that our inability to justify our own perspective over that of others becomes more disturbing and threatening to retaining confidence in that perspective. We presume that at most one perspective can be right about how things are, and yet we are unable to show not just to others but also *to ourselves* why we are more justified in holding our perspective. This problem, and the need to account for the way that the *Zhuangzi* presents the exploration of other perspectives as genuinely revealing of things our own perspectives conceal, leads me to conclude that we must seek a more general solution to reconciling skepticism and engagement in the *Zhuangzi.*

3. Skepticism Bounded by Engagement

Others have moved in the direction of according more authority to the way of life apparently recommended in the text. This would seem to require limitation in the scope of skepticism. Skepticism ends where the authority of the Zhuangist *dao* begins. A variety of interesting interpretations in this vein draw the line in different places.

Robert Eno exempts a kind of knowing—practical knowing as opposed to theoretical knowing—from skeptical questioning. *Ming* is achieved in ordinary practice, where the most skilled such as Cook Ding have learned to deal with the world not as containing a stable ontology of individuated things but as a protean world of flux that frustrates the human habit of assigning appropriate functions to persistent entities.[5]

Zhuangzi's skepticism is not so neatly bounded. Consider the questions posed in chapter two:

> 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?
>
> While we dream we do not know that we are dreaming, and in the middle of a dream interpret a dream within it; not until we wake do we know that we were dreaming" (translation by Graham, pp. 59–60).

The skepticism of such passages does not appear to be aimed at the theoretical but at the practical in the most profound sense. They ask whether we should have any confidence in the assumptions underlying our fundamental aims in life.

P. J. Ivanhoe has presented some forceful criticisms of some of my earlier interpretations of Zhuangzi. His own positive view is that

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Zhuangzi's skepticism is limited to a linguistic or conceptual skepticism that does not preclude other ways of knowing. He also suggests that the most skeptical-sounding passages articulate a "god's-eye" point of view in which "any claim of meaning recedes into insignificance" and which serves to remind us that we are but a small part of things.[6] On Ivanhoe's interpretation, however, Zhuangzi's primary point of view is not the god's-eye view but the human point of view from which certain ways of being are contrary to our nature and to the nature of the world. The skill chapters portray ways of being that are in attunement with our nature and the nature of the world.

This seems to me to suggest two different ways of reconciling skepticism and engagement in Zhuangzi, each of which has certain attractions and problems as an interpretation. One way is to say that skepticism arises from taking the god's-eye perspective and that meaning-generating engagement reappears in taking the human perspective. There certainly is something like a god's-eye perspective suggested in the text, but to say that human life is insignificant from the perspective of the universe is not necessarily to support skepticism. Indeed, taking that perspective might involve the most objective point of view, from which human life takes on the significance it deserves.

Another way is to limit skepticism to language and concepts. Certainly, this interpretation fits with the passages that express distrust with language, as when Zhuangzi notes the shifting meanings of words. However, some of the skeptical points seem to concern a relativity of perception that is not particularly linguistic or even conceptual in nature. It is remarked that when we look up at the sky, all we see is blue, and we are asked whether that is its real color or an effect of looking into the infinite. After all, Peng flies up so high that when it looks down at the earth everything below looks the same as above. In chapter two, Changwuzi's skepticism cuts deeply against the assurance that we have nonlinguistic veridical access to reality. Such moments of access might be mere moments of dreaming. Or our waking discursive lives might be dreams containing within them the dream of non-discursive access to reality.

Yet Zhuangzi at a number of points shows no difficulty in articulating what look to be prescriptions, thus undercutting the contrast between a wordless way of knowing that can be trusted and articulated beliefs that cannot be trusted. Those who desperately strive for political office or fame, who try to live forever because they think that death is the ultimate evil, are living contrary to the grain of things. Now Ivanhoe grants that words and concepts are not useless for Zhuangzi, even for the purpose of describing the way things are. The problem is that they

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provide us with a "limited and often incorrect grasp of the world."[7] When qualified in this way, Ivanhoe's interpretation of Zhuangzi as a skeptic makes him out to be entirely too mild-mannered.

Eric Schwitzgebel dilutes the corrosive power of skepticism by arguing that Zhuangzi did not intend to defend radical skepticism but only an "everyday" skepticism that advises us to be more open to the possibility that we are wrong and that our words cannot capture all that is important about life or the world, such as the skill of Cook Ding.[8] The apparent arguments for radical skepticism are not meant sincerely but are therapeutic attempts to jolt us out of our complacency. The arguments, to take the jolting metaphor a bit further, are not meant to knock us out as knowledge seekers, but only to make us lighter on our feet. Supporting this interpretation are the many playful moments in the *Zhuangzi* that make us question which assertions, if any, to take seriously. The *Kun*/*Peng* story of chapter one is after all a "big fish that got away (more specifically, flew away)" story. Schwitzgebel's interpretation receives further support from claims in the text that look like they were meant to be taken to heart, claims, for instance, that urge us to accept the inevitable and to be content with it. Chapter four expresses as inevitable the love of one's parents and duties to rulers.

Despite these points in favor of Schwitzgebel's interpretation, one cannot help but find it disappointingly deflationary. Could this dazzling display have been deployed simply to establish a cautious and sensible fallibilism?

In chapter 2, wisdom is ostensibly dispensed that sounds Zhuangist: "The sage does not work for any goal, does not lean towards benefit or shun harm, does not delight in seeking, does not fix a route by a Way, in saying nothing says something and in saying something says nothing, and roams beyond the dust and grime" (Graham, p. 59). Yet Changwuzi condemns this saying as something that would have puzzled the Yellow Emperor. "How do I know that taking 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?"

It is difficult to believe that such questions serve merely to remind us that we *might* be wrong about the goodness of life and the evil of death, but that we probably aren't. Rather, they remind us that we are creatures whose questions far outrun our ability to answer them. And what about the self-deconstructing criticism of Zhuangist wisdom? Granted, there is a great deal of playful humor that is undoubtedly meant to warn against taking ourselves too seriously, but the ever-present sharp edge of that humor relies on a sense of our inadequacy in the light of our ambition. We are the quail and the dove, with the important exception

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that we have an inkling of what lies beyond our understanding. As Lee Yearley remarks, Zhuangzi has "trained himself, and hopes to train us, to possess an incapacity to understand much of what is obvious to virtually everyone else," including that which "seems so evidently true . . . about how to live."[9]

What is, after all, the distinction between radical and "everyday" skepticism? One possible way of making the distinction is through scope. Radical skepticism subverts the body of what we claim to know in sweeping ways that leave little of importance untouched. It unseats confidence in the major ways of knowing about an independent reality, such as perception, even under the most favorable conditions. Everyday skepticism subverts our confidence here and there, mostly at the periphery. It questions what we perceive, but only sometimes, and seeks to explain error through unfavorable conditions for perception or correctible error in reasoning or judgment. If Zhuangzi is out simply to impress upon us an everyday skepticism of limited scope, it would appear that he has deployed a canon to shoot a pheasant. Moreover, he might seem to have missed his target in the sense that the most powerful skeptical passages are quite *misleading* if what he wants to impress upon his audience is skepticism of limited scope.[10]

Schwitzgebel's rebuttal is that Zhuangzi is pressing a radical form of skepticism to compensate for our tendency to be dogmatic and narrow in our perspectives.[11] Given our tendency towards dogmatism, moderate arguments will not get us to the moderate skepticism Zhuangzi really holds. This is a nice reply. Yet it requires us to interpret Zhuangzi as not meaning what he says in the service of a modest fallibilism—a possibility, but one to be avoided other things being equal. Furthermore, the strategy of taking Zhuangzi's arguments as deliberate rhetorical overstatement must reckon with the necessity of engaging with the content of these arguments. These radical arguments are either persuasive in undermining our epistemic confidence or they are not. To the extent that they are, it is inappropriate to settle on a moderate skepticism. To the extent that they are not persuasive, it is unclear why moderate skepticism, as opposed to persisting with our usual confidence, is the appropriate response.

4. Skepticism and Engagement in Dialectical Relation

These reflections on the limitations of all these worthy attempts to get Zhuangzi right suggest we strike out in another direction. Rather than thinking of skepticism and engagement as two adjoining, potentially hostile countries, between which a boundary must be drawn to keep the peace, or alternatively between which a final victor must be declared,

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perhaps we should pay more attention to the way in which skepticism and engagement mutually support one another. First of all, much skeptical argument in this text is directed toward undermining our initial perspectives in the interests of *broadening* them or becoming more flexible in adopting new perspectives. The skeptical thrust is directed at current perspectives conceived as obscuring what else is there for us to experience (the "underbrush" in our heads), but there is a non-skeptical thrust in that the new perspectives we are invited to adopt really do seem to reveal something genuine we have not experienced before.[12] Zhuangzi points out uses for the huge gourd shells to which Huizi had been blinded by his narrow preconceptions. Our experience of the world always overflows our perspectives on them precisely because the function of these perspectives is to make experience manageable by deeming most of it irrelevant for our purposes. But this means that on the most basic level experience is an inexhaustible resource for new perspectives if only we let go of the obsession with being right once and for all.

Consider Fred Dretske's distinction between extensional and intensional ways of describing our perceptions.[13] We can describe our perceptional experience of seeing a duck as seeing an object that turns out to be a duck (extensional) or seeing that the object is a duck (intensional). Seeing an object in the intensional sense is to have a set of experiences, and on Dretske's theory we store this rich matrix in "analog" form in preparation for its selective utilization or "digitalization" by the cognitive centers that form belief. Perception in the intensional sense always overflows conceptual categories. To have a cognitive, as opposed to sensory, representation of what we perceive is to strip away components of information that make the perception of that thing to be the phenomenally rich experience we know it to be. To believe of something that it is an apple, or to see it *as* an apple is to strip away information about its color, size and orientation in space. Upon seeing an apple, we might form only a belief that it is an apple, but if queried, we show the ability to tap back into the sensory representation and form beliefs about its color, size, and spatial orientation. This process of abstraction is essential to the project of holding beliefs, at least where human beings are concerned. Beliefs store and encapsulate sensory information relevant to our current purposes and allow us to ignore the rest, which we must in order to function.

The set of purposes that are salient to us at a given moment therefore narrow the range of possible beliefs we have about things in the world, such as Dretske's apple or Huizi's gourds. To loosen the grip of those purposes on us is to open up the possibilities for tapping back into sensory representation and having other beliefs, such as the belief that the gourds have excellent buoyancy. Moreover, the new beliefs that are

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warranted by tapping back into the store of sensory information are not always going to be consistent with the old beliefs. The new beliefs, for example, may entail that the old ones were part of a dream.[14]

It is important to the argument of the Zhuangzi that each new perspective be conceived as potentially compelling a portrait of the world as the one we have now, even the ones inconsistent with the one we have now. While in the grip of each such perspective we believe that it does reveal something new about the world to us. Skeptical questioning of our current perspectives leads to more openness to new ones, but as the new ones loosen the grip of the old perspectives on us, we are aware that *their* grip on us is subject to loosening by still further new perspectives. Zhuangzi's skepticism is not a skepticism bounded by a privileged kind of knowing, nor is it mere therapeutic device to induce a sensible fallibilism. It is a continuous willingness to be surprised, an openness to being jolted, even an enjoyment in being jolted, that is the thread underlying this process. It is no accident that the *Zhuangzi* is one of the most humorous and playful works to be found in all of philosophy. Humor rises out of a reversal of expectations, or at least much humor does, and certainly Zhuangzi's humor does.

The interplay between skepticism and engagement is a dialectical process with no end in sight. Skeptical questioning of our current perspectives opens us to new perspectives, and in adopting these new perspectives we can make genuine discoveries. But it is precisely because these discoveries can undermine our assumptions of what we thought we knew that we keep on asking skeptical questions that lead to further new discoveries, at least some of which will again undermine our current assumptions. Of course, we might ask why, if we experience no end to this process, we do not reach the ultimate skeptical conclusion that all past, present and future perspectives are unreliable and delusory.

5. Interrogative Skepticism

To understand how Zhuangzi can be deeply skeptical yet not arrive at the ultimate skeptical conclusion, consider Paul K. Moser's distinction between interrogative skepticism and declarative skepticism.[15] A declarative skeptic asserts and sometimes argues for skeptical theses, such as the thesis that we do not know anything, except perhaps for this thesis—a kind of radical declarative skepticism—or the thesis that we probably do have knowledge about important aspects of the world but we might be wrong about some things—a kind of "everyday" declarative skepticism. An interrogative skeptic, on the other hand, is not defined by the assertion of any skeptical *thesis*—radical or skeptical—at all, but rather by engagement in troublesome questions about claims to know

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how things are independently of what anyone takes them to be. Such a skeptic may ask how it is that we can validate our claims to know about an independent reality without begging the question, since we support our claims to knowledge by reference to other claims that either must be accepted on faith or belong to a network of mutually supporting claims. Our inability to settle disagreements between fundamentally different perspectives, such as those held by Confucians and Mohists, is a prime example of this skeptical interrogation.

> If you and I are unable to know where we stand, others will surely be in the dark because of us. Whom shall I call in to decide it? If I get someone of your party to decide it, being already of your party how can he decide it? If I get someone of my party to decide it, being already of my party how can he decide it?

Not only do the two sides beg the question against each other, but advocates of third and fourth perspectives also beg the question:

> If I get someone of a party different from either of us to decide, being already of a party different from either us how can he decide it? If I get someone of the same party as both of us to decide it, being already of the same party as both of us how can he decide it?[16]

It is the mark of an interrogative skeptic to pepper those who claim to know with questions exactly like Zhuangzi's. This is not to deny that Zhuangzi sometimes offers skeptical theses, but these seem more like provisional moves in a game where the primary thrust is interrogative. The most probing passages end with questions, not answers, not even skeptical answers. It is because the primary thrust is interrogative that the *Zhuangzi* can also contain claims about what does at present seem right. Absent is any sweeping declarative that we can know nothing. To make such conclusive skeptical claims is again to outrun our ability to know that all knowledge is relative or that we cannot know anything important. To reject all claims to knowledge definitively is perhaps incoherent but in any case it is dogmatic and contrary to the sprit of joyful and restless inquiry displayed by Zhuangzi.

Even though Zhuangzi's skepticism is not a radical declarative skepticism, it is a radical skepticism because it questions the veridicality of our most basic modes of access to the world. Two crucial moments in the second chapter encourage us to accept the epistemological insecurity of our condition and to embrace the continual wonder and the feeling of free fall it produces.

Consider the moment after Ziqi has meditated on the mystery of the Great Clod of dirt blowing out its breath through the ten thousand hollows. Just as the tremendous variety of sounds seems to have but one

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source, so things would seem to have one lord whose identity eludes us. Ziqi sinks into depression as he reflects on the way that humans and other things go on stroking and jostling one another, racing around at a gallop, laboring all our lives in ignorance of where we shall end.

> Is man's life really as stupid as this? Or is it that I am the only stupid one, and there are others not so stupid? But if you go by the completed heart and take it as your authority, who is without such an authority? Why should it be only the man who knows how things alternate and whose heart approves its own judgements who has such authority? The fool has one just as he has.[17]

One continues to make judgments, but one subjects them to continuous questioning and challenge from new perspectives one keeps embracing. In its embrace of this life, the heart affirms its authority without having to approve its own judgments and without having to know how things alternate.

> Where neither It nor Other finds its opposite is called the axis of the Way. When 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.[18]

The axis of the Way is that state of mind in which we embrace the continuing process of discovery and the questioning of each point of view, without asserting our possession of final and ultimate truth, with no final declaration of what we can know to be It or what is not.

The second moment was mentioned earlier: the skeptical questioning turned upon Zhuangist-sounding wisdom, concluding with the question, "How do I know that taking 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?" Our moments of seeming veridical access to the world might be our dreaming. Or our waking discursive lives might be dreams containing within them the dream of such access. Any claim to knowledge of something important is subject to interrogative skepticism, even Daoist pronouncements when converted into claims.

Zhuangzi's restless spirit of inquiry, his resolution always to pay attention to the richness of our present experience (Dretske's "analog" form of experience, before it is reduced and "digitalized" into beliefs) *feeds* his interrogative skepticism because they jolt his previous framework of belief about the world. Indeed, at the heart of Zhuangzi's skepticism lies things we *learn* about the world that weaken our confidence in the reliability of our modes of access to the world.

Sometimes discovering something about a person, for example, that he is capable of misdeed one never thought he was capable of, has the

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effect of unseating a previously settled sense of who that person is. And instead of constructing a new portrait of that person, one can instead wonder about one's ability to know others. The opening story of chapter five of the *Zhuangzi* questions our pretensions to know people and what they have to offer us. Our image of a teacher is someone like Confucius, but then a teacher comes along not at all like Confucius, but people "go to him empty and come back full."

Consider the perspective of ourselves as very limited creatures, small parts of the natural world, who are just smart enough to figure out what a very narrow range of sensory stimuli is available to creatures of our scale and equipment. Even though our sensory information about things is phenomenally rich and cannot be encapsulated by any set of beliefs we might have, it is meager compared to what we want to know and what we usually claim to know. This view of ourselves is a genuine discovery and an advance over a naive realism that we more or less perceive how things are. But it is also a humbling one that upsets much of what human beings have thought they knew.

This is very much the perspective we are invited to take in the opening chapter of the *Zhuangzi*. We get the range of sensory information appropriate to creatures midway in scale between Peng on the one hand and the quail and little dove on the other hand, and that range of sensory information renders our usual claims of knowledge as ridiculous as the small creatures' scorn of tales of Peng's flight. Strikingly, this Zhuangist perspective is echoed by the observation W. V. O. Quine makes about the self image we get from science and how that image undermines the traditional philosophical project of putting our knowledge on firm foundations. Science tells us that the only information that teaches us through the senses is provided by irritations at our sensory surfaces, but all the claims we make about the world "are less than determined by our sensory irritations."[19] The hypothesis that there are ordinary physical objects is drastically and permanently underdetermined by the data. Our most impressive body of knowledge claims, our science, undermines our claims to know.

The form of interrogative skepticism attributed here to Zhuangzi is consistent with there being a determinate way for how things are. It is a questioning of our ability to find that way given the evidence we have and given our cognitive equipment. The fundamental mistake that is made in reading the *Zhuangzi* is to read it as embodying a set of *theses*. Interrogative skepticism, as opposed to declarative skepticism, is a questioning and embodies a stance, not a set of claims. It does not embody any such thesis as the "perspectivism" that is often attributed to Nietzsche. It is not the claim that there are many perspectives on

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the world that are as true as any other.[20] To make this claim would be to invite questions as to how one knows that.

Rather, Zhuangzi's interrogative skepticism is the process of questioning how one knows some favored perspective to be true. The skeptical stance is a virtue of the Zhuangist *dao*, not a set of conclusions or beliefs. The text therefore is not a defense of skeptical conclusions but *an enactment* of the skeptical virtue, an enactment of the very dialectical process of skepticism producing enlargement of one's perspective, but also further skepticism made possible by one's new-found knowledge.[21] Previous readings of the *Zhuangzi* fundamentally misread the text as containing some final doctrine that is either predominantly skeptical or predominantly engaged in prescribing a way of life. Rather, the *Zhuangzi* enacts a *search* that has no end but leaves it up to the audience to see what might come of it.

6. Skeptical Questioning in Support of Acceptance

There are various ways in which the kind of engagement that produces continuous discoveries about the world can stand in a relation of mutual support with interrogative skepticism. There are other relations of support. If we manage to develop a deep sense of uncertainty about the most basic matters—not knowing whether to love life or hate death, for instance—we might with Zhuangzi embrace it all, life and death included. Interrogative skepticism about judgments that move us to accept some things that happen to us and reject other things can support an inclusive acceptance of whatever life throws at us. There is no logical entailment here between interrogative skepticism and this all-inclusive acceptance. Uncertainty might just as well move us to reject it all, so far as mere rationality requires. But if we are disposed to marvel at the sheer richness and diversity of the world, if we are disposed to wonder, as Zhuangzi is, we shall embrace this attitude:

> Death and life, survival and ruin, success and failure, poverty and riches, competence and incompetence, slander and praise, hunger and thirst, these are the mutations of affairs, the course of destiny. They alternate before us day and night, and knowledge cannot measure back to where they began. Consequently there is no point in letting them disturb one's peace, they are not to be admitted into the Magic Storehouse. To maintain our store in peace and joy, and let none of it be lost through the senses though the channels to them are cleared, to ensure that day and night there are no fissures and it makes a springtime it shares with everything, this is to be a man who at every encounter generates the season in his own heart. This is what I mean by his stuff being whole.[22]

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Springtime connotes the spirit of expansiveness and opening up after a winter of contraction and closing in. By embracing all of it we can make springtime at any time: welcoming, expanding, opening up to things, even in times that most others would call winter.

Furthermore, we can get shaken in our confidence that we know people, that we know who are the worthy and who are the unworthy, that we know what to expect from them, we may be prepared to learn from those who are broadly scorned and despised, such as the Masters with criminal histories and amputated feet in chapter five. The passage about making it springtime with everything is presented by Confucius in explaining why people are drawn to the excruciatingly Uglyface To, who never says anything new and merely chimes in with the others. Questioning whether we really know what we think we know about people moves us to look for what we might have missed in those of whom we previously taken the measure.

7. The Need to Pay Attention

Finally, the fact that Zhuangist skepticism is primarily interrogative in its thrust makes it possible for him to recommend to us forms of activity he has found to be supremely satisfying. For Cook Ding, it is the activity of wielding his knife so that it flows through the spaces within the ox. For the adviser to dangerous rulers, it is abandoning all preconceptions of how to change them but instead responding to them as the particular people they are so that he might lead them to change. One thread that underlies both the skeptical, interrogative stance on the one hand and the appreciation of flow activities on the other hand is the need to pay attention to one's present experience. Paying attention yields new discoveries that undermine one's current beliefs, but also supremely satisfying experiences of activity in response to the matter at hand.

It is tempting to give the passages about flow activities another interpretation. The efficacy and effortlessness of such activities might appear to suggest privileged veridical access to the situation and material at hand. Cook Ding has gotten past the stage where he sees with his eyes while cutting the ox; instead, his *qi* 氣, his vital energies or his "spirit," moves freely to where it must go. Certainly, we have experienced the kind of phenomenology to which Zhuangzi refers. There is no self-conscious guiding of one's actions but rather a complete absorption with the matter of hand. One is tempted to say that such an experience provides the kind of special access that in the Cook's case allows him to move the knife's blade cleanly through the spaces within the ox.

Consider Dretske's account of perception again, according to which we form beliefs by drawing from phenomenally rich sensory experience in

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analog form. The rich analog form provides no usable information about the world in his account. However, those who hold in a nonlinguistic and nonconceptual access to the world may see just such experience as a primary mode of access that gives us the most complete and direct experience of the world, and they may suggest that flow activities in the *Zhuangzi* are about acting on this experience.

Yet there is no compelling evidence for attributing such a naive realism to Zhuangzi. In fact, one point in the Cook Ding story seems to weigh against it. This is where the Cook encounters a difficult place the ox, and as he describes his method, he carefully prepares himself, slows down, and moves the knife until the ox falls apart. Again, this description resonates with familiar moments in flow activity. Not everything will be effortless; at times one encounters difficulties for which one must gather oneself up to make a special effort. There will often be at least a temporary break in the flow of experience for the sake of self-conscious direction. It is more plausible not that concepts are making a sudden re-entry by interrupting a pure, direct experiencing, but that concepts are merely back moving towards the center of awareness from a place on the periphery. We do, after all, apply concepts without awareness of doing so. The accomplished musician totally absorbed in the performance can be said to be applying concepts of her instrument and the score, but she will not be aware of applying them. Furthermore, she is deploying those concepts in service of a goal: making music, just as the cook was cutting up the ox in order to cook it.[23] In flow activities, getting to the point of placing self-conscious application of concepts in the background of mental focus is getting to the point of being able to focus more fully on the object of experience to which one is applying the concepts and in particular on the salient feature of the object in such a way that one can more immediately respond to it as the activity requires (consider the cicada catcher in the "Mastering Life" outer chapter who excludes all from his focus but cicada wings!).

There is, then, much to learn about paying attention to one's present experience and what such attention makes possible, without having to interpret the passages about flow activities as suggesting some direct line to the *dao* unmediated by words or concepts. If someone were to present such experiences as embodying some privileged access to the world, Zhuangzi would skeptically interrogate that claim, but that would not prevent him from recommending such experiences to us as supremely satisfying. And if a declarative skeptic were to confidently *deny* that such activities provided privileged access to the world, wouldn't Zhuangzi also interrogate that? Here again we must resist the temptation to extract a *thesis* about what we know from Zhuangzi.

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The temptation again appears with the question of how we might interpret Zhuangzi's stance on the values that shine forth from the engaged perspective: valuing skill, creativity, overcoming our rejection of death and our infatuation with material success and social approval. Are these merely temporary values or do they constitute a more enduring base?[24] To declare them merely temporary or enduring, of course, is to put forward a final thesis and yet again to fall into the trap of reading Zhuangzi through our preconceptions of what he is about.

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NOTES

I received many helpful comments on earlier versions of this essay from participants in the conference *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Moral Psychology in Early Chinese Philosophy*, in May of 2003, Jiyuan Yu, Eric Schwitzgebel, and the editor of this journal, David Glidden. The failure to make better use of these comments than I have is entirely my own.

1. I am here assuming the widespread though not universally accepted view that the first seven chapters, the so-called "inner" chapters, more or less accurately reflect the views of the historical Zhuangzi.

2. Chad Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 284.

3. Chad Hansen, "Guru or Skeptic? Relativistic Skepticism in the *Zhuangzi*," in *Hiding the World in the World: Uneven Discourses on the Zhuangzi*, ed. Scott Cook (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), p. 153.

4. I have in fact argued this in "Dwelling in Humanity or Free and Easy Wandering?" in *Technology and Cultural Values: On the Edge of the Third Millenium*, ed. Peter D. Hershock, Marietta Stepaniants, and Roger T. Ames (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003), pp. 400–415. Hansen cites an earlier, unpublished, version of this paper under the title, "Zhuangzi on the Dilemma of Value Pluralism."

5. Robert Eno, "Cook Ding's Dao and the Limits of Philosophy," in *Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics in the Zhuangzi*, ed. Paul Kjellberg and P. J. Ivanhoe (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), pp. 138–139.

6. P. J. Ivanhoe, "Was Zhuangzi a Relativist?" in *Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics*, ed. Kjellberg and Ivanhoe, p. 202.

7. Ibid., p. 199.

8. Eric Schwitzgebel, "Zhuangzi's Attitude Toward Language and His Skepticism," in *Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics*, ed. Kjellberg and Ivanhoe, pp. 68–96.

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9. Lee Yearley, "Zhuangzi's Understanding of Skillfulness and the Ultimate Spiritual State," in *Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics*, ed. Kjellberg and Ivanhoe, p. 157.

10. Comments from John Berthrong, Wiebke Denecke, and Carine DeFoort helped me to say more about the contrast between everyday and radical skepticism and why I think Zhuangzi cannot be striving for everyday skepticism.

11. Schwitzgebel has conveyed this clarification in correspondence with me.

12. John Berthrong suggested that there might be some parallel between the dialectic between skepticism and engagement I have attributed to Zhuangzi and the Jesuit dialectic between reason and faith. I think there is something to this parallel. The Jesuit dialectic, as I understand it, denies that reason and faith are hostile to each other but in faith mutually supportive—that reason involves faith in the fundamental presuppositions it must make and that faith involves reason.

13. Fred Dretske, *Seeing and Knowing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969).

14. Dretske's distinction does not imply by itself the sort of skeptical turn here attributed to Zhuangzi. Rather, that skeptical turn depends additionally on taking seriously the perspective on human beings as natural creatures with significant limitations in our modes of access to the world. This perspective receives articulation in section 5.

15. Paul K. Moser, "Realism, Objectivity, and Skepticism," in *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), p. 88.

16. Here I use A. C. Graham's translation from *Chuang-Tzu: The Inner Chapters* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1989), p. 60.

17. Translation from Graham, p. 50.

18. Translation from Graham, p. 53.

19. W. V. O. Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, Mass.: Technology Press of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1960), p. 22.

20. Thanks to Nicholas Bunnin for posing a question that prompted this contrast with perspectivism.

21. This interpretation of Zhuangzi affirms Yang Xiao's argument that in reading Chinese philosophy, we must consider what thinkers say as speech acts, and that the speech acts they perform might be of a significantly different nature than the ones we are led to expect from reading much Western philosophy. See his "Practicing Moral Psychology: Philosophy as A Way of Life in the *Analects*," read at the Fairbank Center conference.

22. Translation from Graham, p. 80.

23. At the same time, one must be prepared to question that goal precisely in the way that Zhuangzi was trying to get Huizi to question his goals in the story of the gourds.

24. Thanks to Eric Schwitzgebel for raising this question.

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