

Introduction

The *Zhuangzi* is a delightful book to read,¹ containing a dizzying array of dialogues, fables, and allegories, all written in a lively and engaging style. But it is also a profoundly serious book, some of its most memorable characters being people who have suffered mutilating punishments, crippling diseases, or horrible deformities. It is a treatise on how to survive, both physically and spiritually, in a dangerous and confusing world; yet it also emphasizes reconciliation with the inevitable fact of death, both our own and those of the people we love. Part of the book's allure lies in its ability to raise such dreadful and disturbing issues without being weighed down by them. Zhuangzi confronts his readers with some of life's most painful and difficult problems, problems which for the most part they would rather avoid thinking about; but he does so with a confidence and good humor that holds the promise of some solution.

Just as philosophers often miss the literary aspects of the texts they study and how these contribute to the thought of a given author, the style and unparalleled beauty of the *Zhuangzi* can easily lead one to overlook its philosophical profundity. Indeed, one of the greatest challenges facing any interpreter of the *Zhuangzi* is that its protean nature and literary subtlety are inseparable from its philosophical message: one cannot understand its content without careful attention to its multifarious and moving form. The very difficulty of the text is one of the ways the *Zhuangzi* uses literary style to make its philosophical point. On the level of individual characters, technical terms like 明 *ming* "clarity" and 道 *dao* "way" are obviously of central importance though they are never precisely defined. On the level of whole stories, even when the sequence of events is more or less straightforward, the overarching moral often remains unclear. Is the hermit Xu You, for instance, a hero or a fool? Are we supposed to reject the cicada or reconcile ourselves to being one? The *Zhuangzi* presents us with interpretive challenges at every turn. It does not seem possible to read the text without relying on a host of assumptions; and yet there is no way to verify those assumptions except on the basis of some reading, all of which leaves readers wondering whether or not they know what the text is really about. But these are exactly the issues that Zhuangzi is trying to raise: the impact that interpretive assumptions make on our everyday experience and the consequent difficulty of figuring out

what human life is “really about.” Thus the text presents us stylistically with an example of the problem it examines philosophically.

In spite of this close interconnection between theory and style in the *Zhuangzi*, a given study can focus more on the work’s philosophical content than on its literary form. Such is the case with the present volume. In particular, the following essays are concerned with reconciling Zhuangzi’s skepticism with his normative vision. Zhuangzi mounts powerful arguments questioning our ability to know that we have interpreted the world correctly, especially regarding our evaluative judgments of good and bad, right and wrong, etc. But the simple fact he wrote a book indicates that he has *some* ideas on how people ought to live. One place we see this positive vision given form is in a series of vignettes known collectively as the “skill stories.” These stories, which depict people involved in activities the principles of which remain inexpressible and inexplicable even to themselves, represent the convergence of Zhuangzi’s skepticism concerning knowledge and language and his confidence that there is a better way for people to live. It is no accident that almost every contributor to this volume makes reference to the most famous of these stories, that of the Cook in the third chapter, *Yang Sheng Zhu*. The task of reconciling the skeptical and the visionary strands in the *Zhuangzi* is of course an interpretive problem for the reader; but it is also Zhuangzi’s way of raising the practical problem of figuring out how to act amid the inevitable uncertainties of ordinary life.

The first two essays focus attention on Zhuangzi’s skepticism by juxtaposing it to forms of classical Greek skepticism. In the lead essay, “Sextus Empiricus, Zhuangzi, and Xunzi on ‘Why be skeptical?’,” Paul Kjellberg compares Zhuangzi to Sextus in order to establish the nature and limits of skeptical arguments. None of the arguments that Sextus or Zhuangzi deploys proves that knowledge is impossible, nor, Kjellberg argues, does either philosopher intend for them to. The purpose of the skeptical arguments is not to disprove knowledge but to draw it into question, and to produce a state of uncertainty—referred to by Sextus as *epochē* “suspension of judgment”—which is quite a different thing from the conviction that nothing can be known. In spite of this similarity, however, the two philosophers value uncertainty for notably different reasons, prompting Kjellberg to distinguish skeptical arguments, which question knowledge, from justifications for skepticism, which explain why the process of questioning is worthwhile. Sextus is quite explicit in identifying the goal of his skepticism as *ataraxia* “peace of mind,” or relief from the anxiety caused by the commitment to unverifiable assumptions. Zhuangzi is less obvious. And while all the essays in this volume generally concur on his skepticism, each of them offers a somewhat different version of the motivation lying behind it. Kjellberg argues that Zhuangzi prescribes skepticism as a means of living in accord with nature and uses a consideration of Xunzi’s objection to clarify precisely what this natural life

entails, with the disturbing conclusion that Zhuangzi's arguments presuppose the value of such a life without providing any ultimate justification for it.

In "Skeptical Strategies in the *Zhuangzi* and *Theaetetus*," Lisa Raphals uses a similar comparison between the arguments in Zhuangzi's *Qi Wu Lun* and Plato's *Theaetetus* to distinguish three versions of skepticism. By "skepticism" one can mean, first, a thesis or doctrine denying the possibility of true knowledge. Such a thesis, if it entails a categorical denial of all knowledge, is generally acknowledged as self-refuting since, if knowledge is impossible, we cannot know even that we know nothing. Second, skepticism can be a recommendation to live with a certain attitude of doubt, as Sextus Empiricus recommended suspension of judgment so as to arrive at peace of mind. Finally, skepticism can be a method of questioning and inquiry that leads the practitioner to doubt. Raphals argues that Zhuangzi and Plato alike employ skeptical methods and implicitly recommend skeptical attitudes but that they carefully refrain from committing themselves to skeptical theses and thus avoid self-refutation. With her fine-grained analysis Raphals is able to define more clearly what we see in the *Zhuangzi* while simultaneously dispelling the common myth that casts Greek and Chinese thought as polar opposites with nothing in common.

The next three essays all focus on language and its relationship to truth as the particular object of Zhuangzi's skeptical attack. David Loy's contribution, "Zhuangzi and Nāgārjuna on the Truth of No Truth," presents an analysis of both these thinkers as anti-rationalists² who use rational arguments to demonstrate the untenability of reason, particularly the rationalist attempt to analyze the world into discrete self-existing entities and binary oppositions. We try to distinguish between things like dreaming and waking, self and other, life and death, pursuing one and avoiding the other; but in practice we cannot tell which is which and so are in constant anxiety. Loy argues that both authors borrow or temporarily "lodge" in ordinary, dualistic language in order to turn it back onto itself in a negative or self-deconstructing dialectic. In the process of undermining our confidence in language and logic, these authors dismantle our everyday conceptions both of the self and of things, thus releasing us from oppositional notions such as truth versus nontruth and revealing "nonduality [as] the great dream which we awaken not from but to."

In "Zhuangzi's Attitude Toward Language and His Skepticism," Eric Schwitzgebel offers a different reading of the text based on a careful study of Zhuangzi's view of language and the particular form of skepticism that results from it. A central concern of Schwitzgebel's essay is reconciling the apparent tension between those passages in the text that seem to argue either for a skeptical denial that we could ever know the truth or for a relativistic denial that there is any truth to know, on the one side, and those that clearly advocate some positive position, on the other. Schwitzgebel focuses on the

question of skepticism, though he suggests that much the same argument can be made for Zhuangzi's relativism as well, and offers a simple solution: "Although Zhuangzi argues for radical skepticism, he does not sincerely subscribe to it." In other words, Schwitzgebel contends that Zhuangzi does not always mean what he says and that his statements of more radical forms of skepticism are designed as a kind of therapy, the aim of which is to bring us to what Schwitzgebel calls "everyday skepticism . . . a willingness to concede that we probably do put more stock in our beliefs than they truly deserve," which Schwitzgebel describes as "both an epistemic and a moral boon." For Schwitzgebel, then, what concerns Zhuangzi is not the inability of analytic reason to comprehend a unified reality, as it was for Loy, but rather the tendency of entrenched views to insulate themselves from justified criticism. Zhuangzi's motivation for doubting, on this reading, is not to release people from the torments of a dualistic metaphysics but simply to render them more willing to admit their mistakes and to learn from experience.

In "Language: The Guest of Reality," Mark Berkson reviews some of Ferdinand de Saussure's and Jacques Derrida's central views on the nature and function of language and its relationship to truth. Berkson is careful to point out, as many are not, some of the important differences between Saussure and Derrida and then goes on to show that there are genuine and significant similarities between certain of their views and those of Zhuangzi. In opposition to certain recent studies, however, Berkson argues that reading Zhuangzi as a postmodern thinker ignores essential elements in his thought and distorts his overall philosophy. In particular, while Zhuangzi shares with Saussure and Derrida a deep appreciation of the role language plays in shaping experience, he does not go so far as they do in denying that there is any reality outside of language, which then allows him to go beyond them in supplementing the negative, deconstructive project with a positive, constructive one. Zhuangzi believes that there is a way that the world is, a *dao*, that imposes limitations on language's proper use. By breaking people of their dependence on language, then, his skepticism returns them to a set of prelinguistic intuitions that offer an alternative source of knowledge to those skillful enough to tap into them.

The next three essays all focus attention on the consequences of Zhuangzi's philosophical position, offering three distinct interpretations of the form of life that Zhuangzi's skepticism is meant to produce. Robert Eno, in his "Cook Ding's *Dao* and the Limits of Philosophy," argues that Zhuangzi identifies two kinds of "knowing," skill knowing and fact knowing, which are reminiscent of if not identical to Gilbert Ryle's notions of "knowing how" and "knowing that".³ Fact knowing is essentially linguistic and lies in the ability to name and describe things correctly according to some rule. Skill knowing, by contrast, is practical and is manifested in the ability to perform

an activity successfully rather than simply to describe it correctly. Real knowing is skill knowing, according to Eno, but this was being increasingly overshadowed in Zhuangzi's time by the sophistries of the later Confucians and the Mohists who, in effect, put more emphasis on talking about how to live than in actually living. By invalidating fact knowing, Zhuangzi's skepticism functioned to restore skill knowing to its rightful place. Eno characterizes skill learning as "dao-learning" and says that it "provides a conduit away from the human perspective and into a holistic engagement with nature." Beyond its being nonlinguistic, however, Eno sees no limitations to what may constitute dao-learning. In particular, he contends that there are no ethical requirements governing it and concludes that Zhuangzi's dao is wholly amoral; "the dao of butchering people might provide much the same spiritual spontaneity as the dao of butchering oxen—as many a samurai might testify." The goal is simply a direct interaction with nature unmediated by concepts, in whatever form that interaction might take.

In "Zhuangzi's Understanding of Skillfulness and the Ultimate Spiritual State," Lee H. Yearley begins with an analysis of Zhuangzi's notion of the self into three kinds of "drives": dispositional drives, involving either instinctive or habitual responses to circumstances; reflective drives, consisting of intentional preferences that may or may not conflict with dispositions; and finally transcendent drives, which combine the spontaneity of dispositions with the intelligence of reflection. Arguing that Zhuangzi has a complex and subtle picture of the self and its potential deformations, Yearley sees him as outlining a course of spiritual training designed to bring people to the point where they are "animated by transcendent drives." Skillfulness points to this highest state, he argues, but only points to it. People who come to be moved by transcendent drives attain a state Yearley describes as "intra-worldly mysticism." Having been mediated by reflection, these transcendent drives manifest none of the stupidity of unreflected dispositions. But having become, as it were, second nature, they entail none of the internal conflict of reflective drives. The result is a state of tranquility, ease, power, and attentiveness in which individuals feel a joyful connection to transcendent spiritual patterns and processes. In this regard, Yearley's claims seem similar to Eno's regarding dao-learning. While it is not clear whether he would agree with Eno that *any* skillful activity can lead one to this desired state, Yearley does concur that Zhuangzi's dao is amoral, at least when judged by the normal standards of morality.

In his essay "Spontaneity and Education of the Emotions in the *Zhuangzi*," Joel Kupperman describes an ideal of "educated emotions" that is similar in many respects to Yearley's notion of "transcendent drives." Kupperman understands Zhuangzi's underlying project as "self-transformation" and argues that, far from being relativistic, the text clearly implies, "that one would be better

off if one approximated the free and spontaneous life that is presented as a possibility." At the same time, Zhuangzi does not believe in or advocate any single type of life and Kupperman suggests that the fluid and humorous nature of the text itself reflects this broad and flexible ideal. For this and other reasons, Kupperman thinks it is wrong to see the self-transformation described by Zhuangzi in the overly narrow terms of moral improvement, by which he seems to mean the conscious adherence to and cultivation of a particular set of principles. Instead, he describes the goal as a renegotiation of the relation between people's feelings and their actions. Kupperman speaks in terms of a continuum between spontaneous urges and desires at one extreme, and self-conscious preferences at the other. The point of Zhuangzi's project is not to give the desires free rein, nor is it to eliminate them in favor of some externally imposed set of norms: "the Daoist sage is not someone who always acts on impulse . . . [but] will be someone whose preferences will not be at war with basic wishes or urges." The purpose of Zhuangzi's skepticism, on this account, is to bring people's spontaneous desires into harmony with the exigencies of the real world around us.

In the final essay, "Was Zhuangzi a Relativist?" Philip J. Ivanhoe takes up directly the question of the amorality or relativism of Zhuangzi's ultimate ideal. He reviews and criticizes two important interpretations of Zhuangzi as a relativist, those of Chad Hansen and David Wong, and argues first, that these authors have quite different notions of what relativism entails, and second, that neither seems appropriate as a description of Zhuangzi. Ivanhoe argues against any form of relativism as a viable reading of the text since Zhuangzi quite clearly advocates some ways of living and rejects others. He further suggests that neither of these interpretations is complete as a philosophical position in its own right since both rely on important yet suppressed premises. On Hansen's view, "no account of the world is any more accurate or valuable than any other." And yet if this were true, there would be no grounds for recommending any one form of life over another, and consequently no grounds even for arguing in favor of relativism. Since Hansen does argue in favor of relativism, however, he must be doing so for some reason, though he leaves it to his readers to speculate on what that reason is. Wong argues for relativism because he believes it can help us to realize the implications of the equal worth of individuals. Ivanhoe explores the ways in which this claim and other aspects of Wong's approach are similar to what we see in the *Zhuangzi*, and he points out that both Zhuangzi's and Wong's views rely upon implicit beliefs regarding the character of human nature. Ivanhoe goes on to argue that other parts of Wong's analysis find no clear parallels in the text and concludes his essay by examining some of the significant contributions Wong's interpretation of Zhuangzi's thought can make to contemporary ethics. Along the way, he outlines his own view of Zhuangzi's

philosophical project according to which human nature is benign and “our suffering comes from our tendency to subvert our inherent nature by over-intellectualizing our lives.” He regards Zhuangzi’s skepticism as “a form of therapy, designed to curb our terrible tendency toward self-aggrandizement” so as to “enable us to accord with the nature of both ourselves as creatures—things among things in Nature’s vast panorama—and Heaven’s patterns and processes.”

The volume concludes with a comprehensive and up to date bibliography of works on Zhuangzi in Western languages compiled by Ted Slingerland. Slingerland’s bibliography lists every significant study of the *Zhuangzi* done over the last fifty years and provides a useful compendium of the wide variety of research on this most interesting text. As we have learned to expect with the *Zhuangzi*, no two readers see the text in quite the same way. There are, however, a few things that all the contributors to this volume agree on. All of them reject the interpretation of Zhuangzi as a relativist⁴ and consequently they agree on the need for an account of his positive ethical project. They also agree in regarding Zhuangzi’s project as therapeutic so that an understanding of the text involves not only an account of Zhuangzi’s theories but also an analysis of the effect that the presentation of those theories is intended to have on the reader.⁵ There are other issues, however, over which they part ways. They differ, for instance, in whether they see as the goal of Zhuangzi’s philosophizing as spiritual fulfillment or practical success. Admittedly this may only be a difference in emphasis, but it manifests itself interestingly in their varying accounts of skillful behavior and in the aspects of skill that they point to as being particularly salient. Yearley and Kupperman focus primarily on the psychological aspects of skill—the spontaneous ease, confidence, and fulfillment of a skillful performance—while others put more weight on the practical effectiveness of skillful action. Similarly, though all of our authors agree that Zhuangzi is skeptical of the ability of knowledge and language to capture the way the world really is, they have different notions of precisely what it is about the world that so systematically resists our attempts to know it. Loy argues, for instance, that since language functions by distinguishing between things it is incapable of grasping a reality that is fundamentally unified and undifferentiated. According to Kjellberg, however, the problem with language lies not in distinguishing between things that are the same but in assimilating things that are different and thus losing sight of the subtle idiosyncrasies that need to be taken into account in order to live well. If there is one thing that the study of Zhuangzi teaches us, however, it is that no one has the last word. And if the essays in this volume have not provided definitive answers, we hope that they have at least raised provocative questions.

Notes

1. Here and throughout the introduction, when we refer to the *Zhuangzi* we mean primarily those sections, the seven Inner Chapters serving as their core, that are generally thought to be the work of a single author named Zhuangzi. However, we recognize that certain other parts of the text may represent genuine writings or at least writings that are consistent with or inspired by Zhuangzi. Scholars have long suspected that parts of the text were not genuine, and a considerable amount of work has been done on dating the text's different strata. The two most significant studies in English are Graham 1979 and Roth in Rosemont 1991.

2. Loy adopts the term "anti-rationalism" from Angus Graham, who used it throughout many of his works. Graham's most complete statements of this notion can be found in his *Reason and Spontaneity* (London: Curzon Press, 1985) and *Unreason Within Reason: Essays on the Outskirts of Rationality* (La Salle: Open Court, 1992).

3. See Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1949), 25–61. Ryle distinguishes between knowledge *how* to do things and knowledge *that* certain state of affairs obtain. The traditional presupposition had been that all knowledge *how* could be reduced to knowledge *that*, that is knowledge that a certain set of rules needed to be followed in order to perform the task successfully. Ryle uses a *reductio ad absurdum* to overturn this assumption, arguing that even if one knows *that* a certain rule holds true, one still needs to know *how* to apply it. Thus, he concludes, knowledge *that* is really a species of knowledge *how*, rather than vice versa. Zhuangzi can be seen as making a similar point, not as rejecting articulable, linguistic knowledge, but as arguing that such knowledge relies on non-linguistic and inarticulable skills in order to be effectively employed.

4. This view has been argued for most influentially by Chad Hansen, concisely and compellingly in his "A Tao of Taos in Chuang Tzu" in Victor Mair 1983 and then in greater detail in his *Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

5. Wu Kwang-ming has made this point eloquently, arguing that the point of the *Zhuangzi* lies not in what the book says but in what it does. See Wu 1982, xiii and Wu 1990, 367. Robert Allinson argues at length for a similar reading in Allinson 1989.