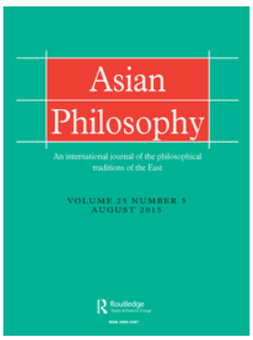

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Of Fish, Butterflies and Birds: Relativism and Nonrelative Valuation in the *Zhuangzi*

Robert Elliott Allinson

I argue that the main theme of the Zhuangzi *is that of spiritual transformation. If there is no such theme in the* Zhuangzi*, it becomes an obscure text with relativistic viewpoints contradicting statements and stories designed to lead the reader to a state of spiritual transformation. I propose to reveal the coherence of the deep structure of the text by clearly dividing relativistic statements designed to break down fixed viewpoints from statements, anecdotes, paradoxes and metaphors designed to lead the reader to a state of spiritual transformation. Without such an analysis, its profound stories such as the butterfly dream and the Great Sage dream will blatantly contradict each other and leave us bereft of the wisdom they presage. Unlike the great works of poetic and philosophic wisdom such as the* Dao de Jing *and the* Symposium*, the* Zhuangzi *will be reduced to a virtually unintelligible, lengthy, disjointed literary ditty, a potpourri of paradoxical puzzles, puns and parables, obscure philosophical conundrums, monstrous interlocutors and historical personages used as mouthpieces authoritatively arguing on behalf of viewpoints humorously opposite to what they historically held.*

Whenever there is a discussion of Zhuangzi, from academic articles to comic books, the thoughts of Zhuangzi are inevitably linked to relativism. While there are many statements in the *Zhuangzi* that appear to endorse a simple relativism in epistemology and in values, it is important to consider both the context and the purpose of these statements and not simply identify them as evidence that Zhuangzi is an unqualified relativist. In addition, one should consider the statements in the *Zhuangzi* that are not relativistic in nature and point to definitive, nonrelative, value judgments. Since statements of both kinds abound in the *Zhuangzi*, it makes sense to arrive at an interpretation of the *Zhuangzi* that takes *both* types of statements into account.[1] If one considers that there are both relativistic and nonrelativistic statements in the *Zhuangzi* (in addition, as I argue, to an overall nonrelative intention), then it becomes possible to arrive at a coherent meaning for the text of the *Zhuangzi* through

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distinguishing between the two types of statements in the Zhuangzi when interpolating the text.[2] This does not mean that an interpretation of the *Zhuangzi* will or should remove all of its frequently tantalizingly paradoxical message. Some of the paradoxes must be retained in order to provide its full meaning. It is, after all, a metaphorical philosophy, not a literal, discursive or didactic advocacy.

Why do I consider that the central theme of the *Zhuangzi* is spiritual transformation? This particular interpretation arises from a comprehensive analysis of many passages found in the inner chapters, the systematic order of the literary structure, the dialectical progression of the gallery of characters, particularly the monstrous characters that feature in the text, and from the fact that key passages, such as the fish-bird narrative and the Great Sage dream only make sense when they are understood as metaphors for spiritual transformation. The dialectical and systematic progression of the gallery of monsters is an excellent illustration of both the method and the fruit of the end-goal of spiritual transformation.[3] In short, the extremely complex, recondite and subtle literary structure and philosophical poetry of the *Zhuangzi* can best—I am inclined to say, only—be deeply appreciated if it is understood as embodying the theme of spiritual transformation. [4] While it can well be argued that this theme is fraught with paradoxes, this is no argument that it is therefore not a theme. A theme, however seemingly paradoxical it may be regarded, so long as it is coherent, is nevertheless a theme.

To properly analyze the *Zhuangzi*, we must make sure to keep to the inner chapters and add examples from the mixed and the outer chapters only if they further illuminate and do not contradict the essential theme of the inner chapters. If a chapter shows itself to be particularly incoherent with the inner chapters, we must take special care not to take its message into account as it will contradict the message of the inner chapters and leave us with a *Zhuangzi* that is offering us a host of mixed and contradictory messages. The problem with mixed and contradictory messages is that the road to spiritual transformation may be blocked.

The perspective of this present position is that even if the *Zhuangzi* is a composition by many hands that the first seven chapters are either written by a single hand or at least are taken by tradition to be the work of one Chuang Chou. Outer or mixed chapters that are acknowledged not to be by the same author who penned the first seven chapters should not be considered to contain the message of the *Zhuangzi* when their messages may conspicuously contradict the message of the inner chapters.

The authorship, however, is not the crucial issue. Here, the issue is the complex integrity and subtle meaning of the text as a coherent philosophical work. If in the end, we discover, as many have well argued, including Mark Twain and Sigmund Freud, that William Shakespeare was not the author of the plays of Shakespeare, but rather they were penned by Robert de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford, this discovery would not detract from the sublime greatness of the works. What we would find worrying, indeed disconcerting, is crediting passages as genuine that imply that Hamlet is a decisive actor, Macbeth, the Thane of Cawdor, a good man and Lear a beloved and happy father. How contradictory such passages would be to the meaning of the texts!

The point in analyzing the *Zhuangzi* is to ensure that its key theme of self-transformation is not undermined. If there is no such theme in the *Zhuangzi*, it becomes then a mere minor text of limited philosophical interest. It also becomes so self-contradictory that little sense can be made of it. Left unexplored and unexamined, the messages of its profound anecdotes such as the butterfly dream and the Great Sage dream will contradict each other and the meaning behind the messages will become incoherent, robbing us of the gift of wisdom they would otherwise portend (Allinson 1989).

The *Zhuangzi* comments upon value judgments and the problem of attachment to fixed points of view. The problems of fixed standpoints appear in the context of attempting to show that one should never attach oneself to a rigid, fixed standpoint or else one will not possess the openness of mind to be capable of rising to a higher standpoint. This 'or else' is a part of the message. One can leave the text as hinting at the fallacy of holding onto any one standpoint as its only message. However, this approach is sustainable only at the price of not paying attention to statements that clearly point to a higher standpoint to be obtained that is explicitly stated as obtainable.

The higher standpoint is indicated at the very beginning of the text with the story of the fish-bird transformation. We must keep in mind that the *Zhuangzi* is not a literary fable or a children's fantasy, bedtime story. The fish-bird story is not meant to lull children into sleep. The *Zhuangzi* possesses metaphorical signification. The *Zhuangzi* is a spiritual and philosophical story for adults. The fish-bird metaphor surely stands for the message to the adult reader that a higher standpoint can be achieved. A fish can be transformed into a bird. This serves well as a metaphor for the main theme of the *Zhuangzi*. Why else would such a remarkable narrative mark the commencement of this work? One can be transformed from a lower state of limitation and ignorance to a higher state of freedom and knowledge. Such would be the point of a creature that transformed itself from a bound habitat that permitted only limited vision to a creature who could soar through the air with great freedom and capable of vision of great scope.

The cicada and the dove mock this possibility and stand for narrow-minded and dogmatic skeptics who doubt the possibility of the validity of a higher standpoint. It is clear that Zhuangzi favors the higher standpoint over that of the petty-minded skeptics. Zhuangzi's reaction to the cicada and the dove's skepticism of the ability of the Big Bird to complete its great journey is: 'What do these two creatures understand? Little understanding cannot come up to great understanding …' (Watson, 1964, Chapter 1). Little understanding is not placed on the same plane as great understanding. It is evident from the text that a value preference is indicated. The petty-minded birds, standing for what we might call 'the little picture people', do not possess sufficient understanding to realize that a great physical journey, a metaphor standing for a great mental transformation, is truly possible.

If Zhuangzi aligned with the cicada and the dove, then he would identify with the idea that any pretensions to transcendence are doomed to fail. He would be a profound pessimist and fatalist in addition to being a skeptic. The cicada and the

dove doubt that the journey of the Big Bird is possible. Why would Zhuangzi begin his philosophical poetry with a story that was doomed to failure and end his first chapter with a story of a healing salve that was successful in saving a kingdom if he were a profound skeptic and pessimist?

If Zhuangzi were a relativist—the common interpretation—he would not extol ancient wisdom. What would be the purpose in his extolling ancient wisdom? A skeptic or relativist clearly would not choose to praise the spiritual integrity of ancient wisdom. A skeptic or relativist cannot laud those who are considered wise as having achieved something greater than inane folly. However, one only has to turn to Chapter Six of the *Zhuangzi* to find Zhuangzi making frequent references to the true men of ancient times. He never praises the 'Narrow-minded skeptics of old'. Truth is an honorific adjective here. It is not a pejorative adjective. The ancients possessed truth; they were not relativists.

There is a difference between right or correct understanding and understanding that misses the fundamental mark. However, to make such a distinction between levels of understanding, one cannot be a relativist. Consider the language in which Zhuangzi compares levels of understanding. In my former colleague, Burton Watson's inspired and poetic translation: 'Great understanding is broad and unhurried; little understanding is cramped and busy. Great words are clear and limpid; little words are shrill and quarrelsome' (Watson, 1964, Chapter 2).

It is evident that great understanding is being described in favorable ways and that little understanding, what we might liken to the 'red pencil' mentality, is described in pejorative terms. It is conclusive that a value hierarchy lies here. Great understanding, broad mindedness, open mindedness is not considered to be on the identical axiological plane as narrow-minded thinking. A narrow-minded thinker cannot think in the same terms as a visionary. A 'little picture' person meeting a Gandhi might focus on the fact that he did not cut his nails properly. Consider the traditional saying, 'When a pickpocket meets a Sage, all he sees are his pockets.'

As we have argued, the outlook that reflects profound understanding is clearly valued above the outlook that reflects a narrow-minded perspective. Since the comparison between great understanding and little understanding appears in Chapter Two, it would seem that the chapter as a whole cannot be interpreted as standing for the reduction of all views to a monolithic value sameness. To put Chapters One and Two together, there is no doubt here that great understanding is to be valued above narrow mindedness. There is no equivalence between the outlooks of the Big Bird and the cicada and the dove, and it is evident that Zhuangzi favors the outlook of the Big Bird.

Let us look at another passage that reflects that Zhuangzi did not consider all views to be relative to each other: 'We can't expect a blind man to appreciate beautiful patterns or a deaf man to listen to bells and drums. And blindness and deafness are not confined to the body alone—the understanding has them too' (Watson, 1964, Chapter 1; Burton Watson translation). There are beautiful patterns. This already implies that some patterns must be more beautiful than others. Beautiful patterns do exist. Ontologically, the world is not composed of equivalent aesthetics. The problem is the lack of understanding that fails to see what is

beautiful. Blindness is not considered to be on the same axiological plane as sightedness. While the example is of physical blindness and physical deafness, the *Zhuangzi* is not a medical treatise; it is a philosophical work. Physical blindness and physical deafness are examples utilized to signify mental blindness and mental deafness. Mental blindness may be likened to what psychologically we call tunnel vision. In tunnel vision we only see what is directly, straight ahead. One thinks of the Chinese story of the frog in the well whose vision was so narrow that all it could see was a tiny strip of the sky. Mental deafness might be likened to pig headedness: someone who cannot hear the message because his mind is blocked by fixed ideas.

Consider the much-cited case of the anecdote concerning the Mohists and the Confucians. These philosophical positions reflect fixed standpoints. From each of the standpoints, the other is mistaken. To expand upon the text of the *Zhuangzi*, from a Confucian standpoint, familial love is preferential to universal love and vice versa[5] From a higher standpoint, one need not choose sides with either approach.

Let us spend some time to explore the case of the narrative of the healing ointment, which comes towards the end of the first chapter. We must remember that the *Zhuangzi* is not a children's story, a how-to of silk bleaching, a book of Chinese medicine, a manual for getting rich, book of military strategy or how to be political. Hence, this story of a medical ointment that is told, that involves silk bleaching, buying and selling, naval battles and interactions with kings is not literally about any of these contents. Plainly, this is a story that stands for a higher, implicit message. This story leads upwards and is, as a story, a metaphor for gaining higher understanding. A family has in its possession a recipe for making an ointment that allows them to bleach silk without causing chapped hands. A traveler appears, offers to buy the recipe for gold and they sell the recipe to the traveler for immediate gain. The first use, the incorrect use, is to sell the recipe—let us call it the prescription—for immediate gain. The next use is a higher use. The stranger offers it to King Wu. There is a definite hierarchy of usage here. The King uses it in turn for his navy which defeats the King of Yueh. He thus ensures the safety of his own kingdom. His usage, the preservation of his people, is a higher usage than the initial sale of the prescription for a monetary gain for an individual family. The reward offered by the King in turn is a permanent gift of land to the traveler. The permanent gift of land represents a permanent state of spiritual understanding. The metaphor is that the proper use of healing ointment (a philosophical prescription) if used for the highest purpose (transcendence)—the king of the land stands for the highest earthly purpose, which in turn stands for the highest spiritual purpose—carries with it enormous, permanent value. The relative value, the obtaining of gold, is clearly not as highly valued as the higher value of the permanent gift of land. To adhere with the meaning of the extended metaphor, the permanent gift of land is a metaphor for a permanent spiritual state. Whether or not one agrees with the present author's interpolations of the extended metaphor, the point remains that there is no way a restricted, relativistic interpretation can make sense of the message of the story of the salve. The present author's interpretation of the end of the chapter coheres well with its

beginning. It both begins and ends with a message of transformation and transcendence.[6]

If Chapter Two follows upon Chapter One, and so on, one expects and is given a development of the theme of spiritual transformation. In Chapter Two, we are given the great gift of the Great Sage dream, which, as I have argued elsewhere, should properly speaking, end the chapter (Allinson 1989, pp. 96–110).

Consider this significant line from the Great Sage dream anecdote: 'And Someday there will be a great awakening when we know that this is all a great dream' (Watson, 1964, Chapter 2; Watson translation).

What is important is that this statement can in no way be construed as skepticism or relativism. This is explicitly a claim to knowledge and a knowledge that is a nonrelative knowledge, signified by the adjective 'great' placed before the gerund, awakening.

The Great Sage story presents compelling evidence that a higher viewpoint not only is to be obtained, but that it will be obtained! The evidence is literally in the text and is not derived from an interpolation from the text. This is evidence both that there is a hierarchy of values in the *Zhuangzi* (this textual evidence is clearly not compatible with relativism) and that a higher standpoint is achievable (again this is not compatible with the view that we should rest content with a relative scale of values).

Now, even relativism, apart from the wonderful Great Sage anecdote, cannot sustain itself as a viewpoint to be recommended since to recommend is already to adopt a favored standpoint (in favor of relativism), which contradicts the message of relativism. This is why the great Spinoza once sagely said, 'the skeptic must be dumb'. Zhuangzi was anything but silent. Indeed, in a trenchant story from a later chapter which coheres well with the message of the inner chapters, a farmer kills a silent goose and allows a cackling goose to survive. The metaphor, as I have written earlier, is that silence (in contrast with the sometimes message of Ch' an Buddhism or Zen Buddhism) is not to be preferred. Above all else, Zhuangzi is a talking goose. One might say that he is speaking nonsense, but like Plato, it is not any ordinary nonsense; it is profound, transcendental nonsense as in the nonsense of deep ecology.

The difference between ordinary and transcendental nonsense is that ordinary nonsense is meaningless nonsense. Transcendental nonsense has a purpose; its intent is to lead us into another level of understanding, a level that is neither understood nor explicable via the road of discursive reasoning. In the Great Sage anecdote, we are also told that one day a Great Sage may appear who will explain all of this to us. The message of Zhuangzi, as this metaphor foretells, is that he is not speaking ordinary nonsense. It takes a truly gifted goose to provide us with an explication. The message may be paradoxical, but it is far from unintelligible.

As acute a mind as Zhuangzi possessed, it would be surprising that he would not be easily aware of the fatal flaw of relativism, that one could not be its own advocate. Some commentators have attempted to avoid this problem by arguing that Zhuangzi simply advocates a form of spontaneous action. A. C. Graham's depiction is 'Respond with Awareness' (Graham 1983, p. 12). It is a bit odd that such commentators state that Zhuangzi advocates or stands for spontaneity or awareness since a relativist, strictly speaking, cannot value spontaneity over calculated action. What is important

is that what Zhuangzi recommends is not spontaneity or awareness, but action that shows an understanding of a higher viewpoint. One could be physically aware, but not possessed, of the right understanding. Even Cook Ting of Chapter Three, who knew how to cut up an ox, did not simply do this out of spontaneity. It took him years of practice to gain the right understanding before he could exercise 'spontaneity' correctly. Cook Ding had the ability to cut through the ox without hitting bone. He learned this art. It was a matter of his understanding how to do it before he could spontaneously perform it.

We recall Huizi from Chapter One of the *Zhuangzi* who could not make use of large gourds. Huizi did not possess the insight as to what to do with large gourds. It is not indicated by the metaphor that he lacked spontaneity. What he lacked was a creative vision of larger accomplishments (one could use these gourds to make a boat, a large vessel that could transport persons). Once again, this metaphor is not about shipbuilding, anymore, than the metaphor of shipbuilding in Aristotle was about shipbuilding. The metaphor stands for the ability of the mind to grasp larger ideas that have to do with mental transport. Once again, the story precedes the story of the medical ointment, the prescription for which is eventually given to the King. A larger use of the ointment is the answer that ends the chapter. The ointment is not sold for gold; it is given to the King for his higher purposes. There is no indicator here of the valuing of spontaneity.

An unknowing cook could spontaneously wield a knife. She or he would not necessarily be able to cut through the ox without hitting the bone. The farmer could have spontaneously killed the cackling goose. But, this spontaneous act would have been wrong. Spontaneity by itself is value neutral. A spontaneous decision as to which goose to kill could have resulted in killing the cackling goose. Spontaneity had virtually nothing to do with making the right decision. Right understanding was necessary in order to know which goose to kill.

Why then are numerous commentators misled into thinking that Zhuangzi is a relativist, a Chinese Richard Rorty? There are many reasons for this and I have argued at length elsewhere how and why the relativistic interpretation has flourished for so many years (Allinson, 1989, pp. 127–142). In this compass, I shall mention three possible influences.

One influence for the prevalence of the relativistic interpretation of Zhuangzi may be that there has been far too much reliance upon Chapter Two with a particular emphasis on its "conclusion", the butterfly dream, which initiates most discussions of the *Zhuangzi* without taking into consideration its predecessor, Chapter One. This is similar to taking an argument out of context. In Chapter One, the theme of self-transformation is well indicated from the start with the commencement of the fable of the fish, which transforms itself into the Big Bird, a transformation that transforms a limited creature with limited vision into a creature capable of great freedom and a panoramic perspective. If we ignore Chapter One and instead commence our line of interpretation with Chapter Two, and focus on the butterfly dream, which I have argued at length elsewhere is a rudimentary and an unsophisticated version of the Great Sage dream (and in its present form and order of fragments leading to a

conclusion of ignorance contradicts the Great Sage dream!), we will arrive at a relativistic viewpoint (Allinson, 1989, pp. 78–110).

Consider the present form of the butterfly dream. It begins with [an awake] Chuang Chou beginning to dream and ends with his not knowing if he were dreaming or not. It is a regression. If he ends by 'waking' to realize that he does not know if he is dreaming or not, he ends in a state of unknowing, of ignorance. Unlike the fish-bird narrative and the Great Sage dream narrative, there is no movement from ignorance to knowledge. Indeed, there is a reversal from knowledge to ignorance. How unlikely it is that this reflects the original order of the lines of the butterfly dream. If so, it contradicts both the fish-bird and the Great Sage dream stories.

It is only after and within Chuang Chou's dream content proper (he is a butterfly fluttering freely) that he "awakes" (a questionable awakening since it possibly takes place inside the dream) to know he is Chuang Chou. Then (still inside the dream since the "awakening" is retrospectively canceled as its presumed result—*knowing* with certainty he is Chuang Chou—is then questioned), in this questionable awakening he is no longer sure if he is Chuang Chou dreaming or a butterfly dreaming. He has regressed from his starting point (explicitly commencing with a lucid and awake Chuang Chou who has a dream) to a Chuang Chou who does not know whether he is dreaming or not. Unlike the fish-bird fable and the Great Sage dream story, the butterfly dream moves from lucidity and knowledge to ignorance and confusion.

We can endeavor to solve this problem by either altering the placement of one fragment (so that Chuang Chou awakes after he does not know if he is Chuang Chou dreaming he is a butterfly or vice versa) or moving the butterfly to an earlier place in Chapter Two so that it does not possess the seeming authoritative status it does as the alleged conclusion to Chapter Two. The problem with its closing the chapter is that it is logically rather odd since it has a less-sophisticated story follow a more-sophisticated one (the Great Sage dream). In addition, it lends support to the impression that the *Zhuangzi* is a relativistic tract. My recommendation is, at the very least, move it to an earlier location in Chapter Two so that the Great Sage dream, currently 'hiding its light', can be given the prominence that it deserves. This move will provide more coherence to the text, enabling Chapter Two to be better perceived as a development of Chapter One rather than its contradiction.[7] What follows is the received order of lines:

> Last night dreamed he was a butterfly, spirits soaring he was a butterfly (is it that in showing what he was he suited his own fancy?,) and did not know about Chou. When all of a sudden he awoke, he was Chou with all of his wits about him. He does not know if he is Chou dreaming he was a butterfly or a butterfly who dreams he is Chou. Between Chou and the butterfly there was necessarily a dividing, just this is what is meant by the transformation of things. (Allinson, 1989, p. 88; Graham translation)

If we relocate the butterfly dream to an earlier placement in the chapter, it is more suitable to its status as a cruder version of the message of the Great Sage dream. It makes sense that the Great Sage dream should end Chapter Two on the grounds that

it explains both itself and the butterfly dream and includes elements of self-reflexivity not found in its more famous cousin. Most importantly, ending with the Great Sage dream enables Chapter Two to end with the nonrelative knowledge obtained by the Great Sage, which makes Chapter Two more congruent with Chapter One, which begins with the promise of the transformation from ignorance into knowledge signified by the Great Fish trapped underneath the waters being transformed into the Great Bird free to undertake its great journey.

We can alter the order of one of its lines so that Chuang Chou awakens to know that he is Chuang Chou after (not before) he cannot discern if he is Chuang Chou dreaming he is a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming that it is Chuang Chou. This reordering would make the butterfly dream more coherent with the fish-bird transformation, a transformation from ignorance to knowledge.

In Kuo Hsiang's order of the butterfly dream fragments, Chuang Chou awakes from his butterfly dream not knowing if he is Chuang Chou or a butterfly. After not knowing, there follows the fragment: 'Between Chou and the butterfly there was necessarily a dividing' (Allinson, 1989, p. 88; Graham translation). Why would there be a necessary division if one could not tell one identity from another?

In the present author's reordering of the fragments, the logic becomes evident:

> Once upon a time, Chuang Chou dreamed he was a butterfly; flitting and fluttering he darted wherever he wanted; he did not know he was Chuang Chou. In fact, he didn't know if there were Chuang Chou dreaming he was a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming he was Chuang Chou. Suddenly he awakens. He sees that he is Chuang Chou. So, there must be a distinction between Chuang Chou and a butterfly …'[8] In this version, it is clear why there must be a distinction between Chuang Chou and the butterfly because he has awakened to see that he is, in fact, Chuang Chou.

As this alteration is too shocking for most readers, for sentimental reasons, the order of its lines can be kept intact—it should however precede the Great Sage dream in the text. These alterations are recommended, not to rewrite the *Zhuangzi*—for such would be an act of incredible *hubris*—but to order the text in a manner that most likely resembles the original order that was the design of Chuang Chou or its original authors. What we do have now is simply the order of the text which Kuo Hsiang edited some 600 years later than Chuang Chou in an order, in the present author's view, which probably best suited his own predilection to interpret the text as a work of relativism, as evidenced by passages from his commentary (Allinson, 1989, p. 181).

Thomas Ming thinks that my suggestions for altering the order of the lines in the butterfly dream and moving the Great Sage dream to the end of the chapter are attempts to rewrite the *Zhuangzi* and rectify its alleged 'mistake': 'Allinson, is, however, unsympathetic to this reading [the order of the lines in the butterfly dream as set by Kuo Hsiang] and prefers to rewrite the butterfly dream to rectify the "mistakes" of the author. [Zhuangzi]' (*cf*., Ming 2012, p. 502). Later, he writes that the textual revisions I have recommended are designed to make the author's sequence of arguments smoother, thus possibly attempting to improve upon them. Ming asserts, '… I find it quixotic to rewrite someone else's work not because of historical evidence but for smoother reading' (Ming 2012, p. 502).

My reordering has much more to do with making the received text not smoother, but more coherent with its intended meaning so that the end purpose of the text, that of the path of spiritual transformation of the reader, is not lost or rendered absurd. This would truly be an entrance to the theatre of the absurd.

There is no rewriting of the text. The textual emendations recommended by the present author elsewhere are not recommended to make the text squeeze into the prism of my philosophical interpretation; they are recommended to give more coherence to the text that is already betokened by its numerous, explicit contents (Allinson, 1989, pp. 78–110).

Ending Chapter Two with the butterfly dream in its current ordering of lines possesses the consequence of creating the impression that we end in ignorance, not in knowledge. Such an ending would fit the fish-bird story if the bird transformed itself back again into the fish: Knowledge transforming itself into Ignorance. However, the fish-bird transformation is only one way; it does not signify a reverse journey back to ignorance.

If we ignore the insights offered by the Great Sage dream and assume that Kuo Hsiang's ordering of the butterfly dream is correct, a conclusion can be drawn that Zhuangzi thinks that our knowledge is uncertain, ambiguous and insecure and hence we should become skeptics. Another difficulty with this analysis is that there is no rationale why one would need awakening from a dream to become a skeptic. We do not need to wake up from a dream to realize that our everyday knowledge is uncertain. Skeptics from Sextus Empiricus to David Hume make no use of a dream argument to establish the standpoint of skepticism. They knew that a dream argument would be otiose. Thus, if the point is to wake up to a Socratic ignorance, from thinking we know to knowing we do not actually know, we must also then realize that the incomparable Plato offered no such dream argument for this purpose either.[9] There is no need to wake up from false knowledge to reach Socratic ignorance.

A second influence for the relativistic interpretation of Zhuangzi arises from the titling of Chapter Two. If one renders the title of Chapter Two as 'The Equality of all Things' or Graham's 'Evening Things Out', such an understanding contributes to the interpretation that Chapter Two is concerned with the equivalence of all views (Allinson, 1989, pp. 127–142). A more neutral understanding of the title, such as 'Discourse on Equality', would not predispose the reader to consider that Zhuangzi is about to adopt and argue for a relativistic viewpoint. The Chinese language is compatible with either of these understandings. It requires the correct philosophical understanding to know how to interpret this 'languaging'. The correct philosophical understanding would come from a correct understanding of the chapter after which the title would be tacked on to it. Since the titles of the chapters of the *Zhuangzi* were later additions, the problem of the titles, including the title of Chapter One, is one which has arisen from an incorrect understanding of the chapters and which since then has had an influence all of its own (Allinson, 1989, pp. 174–175, 185–186).[10] While it may be argued that the original version did not contain titles, titles have been added to the chapters for two millennia (*cf*., Graham 1981, p. 29).

A significant influence that has been instrumental in leading to the relativistic interpretation of the *Zhuangzi* may be the taking of Chapter Seventeen as an

important source for interpreting the message of Zhuangzi. There are a minimum of five reasons that we can cite why Chapter Seventeen is inauthentic.[11] First, it clearly advocates relativism. This clear advocacy is not present in the inner chapters and contradicts their core message of transformation. Second, there is no dream anecdote. This makes the chapter epistemologically inferior. No waking up is needed to achieve the standpoint of Jo of the North Sea. If this is the case, the message of Chapter Two is counter-indicated. Third, the story of the fish, however much discussed, is contradictory to the message of the inner chapters. We shall engage in an extended analysis of the story of the fish below.

Fourth, we may, on no less of an authority than my late, distinguished colleague of many years, Professor D.C. Lau, also discount Chapter Seventeen on stylistic grounds. Professor Lau, a frequent guest speaker in my classes on Chinese philosophy at The Chinese University of Hong Kong for many years, related to me that the style of writing of Chapter Seventeen was so different from the inner chapters that he could not countenance its being considered authentic.

Fifth, Chapter Seventeen is internally self-contradictory. Chapter Seventeen presents the viewpoint of simple realism coupled with skepticism. This message is self-contradictory. Simple realism represented by the fish on the Hao river story does not cohere with Jo's viewpoint that all standpoints are equally valid. If all standpoints are equally valid, then Zhuangzi's argument does not overturn Huizi's argument. The chapter is internally incoherent. While Zhuangzi's writing is very paradoxical in a number of passages, it cannot be said to be incoherent. *Explicable paradoxicality and incoherence are not mutual equivalents*. If a chapter's message is incoherent, it cannot be relied upon to be evidence to stand for any particular point of view, least of all one to be attributed to Zhuangzi. Of course, one may walk the road that Zhuangzi is always spouting ordinary—as opposed to transcendental—nonsense. However, this conceptual path, like that of consistent relativism, is self-refuting.

We have briefly explored the reasons why relativism has become synonymous with the viewpoint or an attitude that best characterizes Zhuangzi. This characterization of Zhuangzi is plainly at odds with many statements to be found in the text of the inner chapters. It makes choices random or arbitrary. There is no reason for Zhuangzi to favor the 'True Man of Old' or the cackling goose or crying and then singing and pounding on a tub after his wife dies. It renders the *Zhuangzi* unhelpful as a life guide. It makes the text illogical and incoherent. It makes us ignore passages in which he talks of those who can see and those who cannot. Under the hypothesis of relativism, we are all blind. But, this is not what Zhuangzi says!

There is another possibility, which is not to take Zhuangzi as a relativist, but to argue that the transformation of which he speaks is an endless transformation of all things. This interpretation gains support from Chapter Seventeen. However, we have seen that to seek support from Chapter Seventeen requires us to ignore key passages from the inner chapters that attest to the possibility of knowledge.

We can also examine the notion of an endless transformation on its own terms. Endless transformation collapses into confusion. If one never reaches an

understanding, but every understanding is surpassed by its opposite, one is in a state of perpetual confusion. If every understanding is to be surpassed, one can never arrive at an ultimate understanding. This may or may not be a good philosophy, but it is not Zhuangzi. It is more Hegelian than it is Taoist. But, let us simply pay heightened attention to the text. In the fish-bird transformation that marks the beginning of the narrative, the bird does not change back into the fish. It is one-way and not a round trip. If understanding were also to be revised, we should, by rights, be treated to a two-way transformation. The bird should transform itself back into the fish and then to a bird again and so on. *That kind of metaphor* would be a metaphor for endless transformation. However, this is not what is found in the authentic, textual *Zhuangzi*. Once the Great Fish, K'un, transforms itself into the Big Bird, Peng, there is no going back. Transformation is to a higher state; it is not cyclical.

It should also be noted that one does not need a dream argument—and Zhuangzi introduces a number of dream arguments—to promote the thesis of endless transformation. It is possible that dream arguments are introduced to implicitly reveal their opposite: which is waking up. The dream argument conceals and implicitly reveals its significance, which is to point to the difference between illusion and knowledge. If everything were on the same level as is argued by Jo of the North Sea, we would not need a dream argument (indeed there is none in Chapter Seventeen). If everything were to be valued as equal to everything else, we should not value the True Sage of Old or the Holy Person. If everything were on the identical level, Zhuangzi should value the unholy person equally to the Holy Person. However, he does not! Forcing a relativistic interpretation on the text does violence to the text. It does not do violence to Chapter Seventeen, but this only illustrates how Chapter Seventeen is not consistent with the early chapters.

It is sometimes argued that Zhuangzi is not advocating anything since he does not explicitly endorse anything. Such an argument does injustice to Zhuangzi's use of metaphor and his elaborate dialectical progression of metaphors (*cf*., Allinson 2015). Zhuangzi is definitely communicating something transformative to us, even if it cannot be shown to be part of an explicit advocacy. He does not need to verbalize advocacy to be an advocate. It is clear, from the examples the present author has cited, that he is an advocate for Truth, Understanding and Wisdom. He does so metaphorically, not didactically.

To finish, let us return to the much retold story of the fish above the river Hao. This story implies that knowledge comprises perceptual realism. It is taken from the spurious Chapter Seventeen so this should not surprise us. However, let us set this fact aside and examine the anecdote on its own merits.[12]

We remember the story ends with Zhuangzi allegedly saying that he could know what the fish felt (that the fish was a happy fish) by simply looking at the fish in the river. This answer is one of simple realism. All that is required is looking. One is reminded of G. E. Moore's argument for realism, which consisted of holding up one hand and then holding up the other before his eyes. G. E. Moore, the noted empirical realist and one of the founders of analytic philosophy, considered simple observation to be sufficient to upset the Cartesian argument that he (G. E. Moore)

could be dreaming and might awaken to discover that he did not have two hands (for example, in real life, one hand might have been amputated). The story of Zhuangzi and the fish has a similar point to it. The only difference is that in the earlier, authentic, inner chapters, it is Zhuangzi who takes the position on a number of occasions that at any one moment, he could be dreaming. In Chapter Seventeen, this Cartesian reservation is absent. Unlike G. E. Moore, who is a consistent empirical realist in his writings, in this fish story, Zhuangzi refutes himself. Unlike Descartes, the dream argument introduced time and time again in the inner chapters is not introduced simply to question realist epistemology; it is introduced to suggest that our entire way of thinking may be illusory, especially the way of thinking that attributes reality to the empirical ego. Unlike Descartes, the purpose of the earlier dream arguments is not simply to question the veridicality of empirical observation. Zhuangzi introduces the dream argument as a metaphor to suggest that just as we can physically awaken from a dream to realize that what we dreamed was not reality, we can awaken from our physically awake state to a higher awakening to realize that our ordinary valuation can be superseded by a higher order of valuation. If this entire line of argument is to be contradicted, then a vital argument of Zhuangzi is called into question. If the dream argument is discredited, an important prop is pulled out that supports the transcendental message that we should and can obtain a transcendental freedom and the way to do it, to awaken to a higher level of understanding, is then abandoned.

Zhuangzi would never say he could tell that the fish was happy by looking at the fish (literally, by standing by the river Hao). This degree of confidence in uncritical realism exceeds even the naïve realism of G. E. Moore. Zhuangzi could infer from the movement of the fish that it was happy. However, this is already an inference and exceeds what he could determine by simply looking. Such weakness of thinking is surely not the thinking of the sophisticated writer or writers of the inner chapters. More importantly, if one does not take into account the omnipossibility that we may be dreaming, the omnipossibility that our life view may be based on an unwarranted premise has lost an important support. For if the message of the *Zhuangzi* is one of spiritual transformation, then we must always be on the lookout to question our ordinary ways of thinking and consider that a higher wisdom is available and that we have the possibility of reaching that higher wisdom. It is possible for us to transform ourselves from the Great Fish to the Big Bird. Great Ignorance can be replaced by Great Knowledge. The possibility lies before us to undertake this great journey. Or, we can wait on the sidelines with the cicada and the dove.

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Notes

[1] For elaborations on the two types of statements (relative and nonrelative) and their diverse functions, *cf*., Allinson (2003 pp. 489–500, 2009, in press, 2012, pp. 513–520). With regard to how nonrelative positions can be evaluated, and the distinction between evaluation and trans-valuation, *cf*., Allinson (1986, pp. 429–443, 1994, pp. 127–136) (reprinted as Allinson 1996, pp. 156–168).

[2] This is a more compact description of the task involved in interpreting the *Zhuangzi* than is found in Allinson (1989), Robert Neville, Dean, School of Theology, Boston University, Series Editor, Series in Philosophy, State University of New York Press, [cloth-bound and paper issued simultaneously], (1989), Sixth Impression, 1996, pp. 203. Published in CD-ROM, Boulder, 2000. Published in a Chinese language version by Liu Dong, Beijing University, Editor of China Studies Overseas, Jiangsu People's Press Overseas, Nanjing, China, 2004, fourth impression, 2013; published in a Korean language translation by Greenbee Publishing Co., Korea, 2004, pp. 366. For the more complete version of the task, please take note of the explanations provided in this commentary. The more extensive treatment in the commentary explains the function of the fables, parables, paradoxes and riddles in terms of stilling the analytic mind in order to enable pre-conceptual cognition. In order to understand how to draw the distinction between and understand the differing function of the two levels of statements (relative and nonrelative), the reader is referred to my commentary. In this present compass, I confine my analysis to the much-neglected task of highlighting the preferential status Zhuangzi accords to the nonrelative statements.

[3] For an explanation of the dialectical and systematic development of the metaphorical gallery of monsters, *cf*., Allinson (2015).

[4] That spiritual transformation is the main theme of the *Zhuangzi* is argued at length in Allinson (1989).

[5] We need not consider at this juncture whether or not this is an accurate depiction of the quarrel between Confucians and Mohists and whether or not it could be resolved in a manner harmonious with both traditions.

[6] There is no definitive or authoritative rationale for the current customary order of the textual fragments. The salve story, in my view, should come at the very end of the chapter whereas it is placed not quite at the very end. *Cf*., Allinson (1989, pp. 185–189).

[7] Allinson (1989, pp. 78–130) for the full argument demonstrating the superiority of the Great Sage dream to the butterfly dream and the incongruity of its placement before the butterfly dream.

[8] Allinson (1989, p. 82) (Watson translation but not order; Watson, 1964).

[9] While Plato does say at one point that we cannot know if our life is a dream or if it is real, he does not make use of this observation to reach the standpoint of Socratic ignorance. There is a difference, of course, between the early Socratic dialogues and the middle and later Platonic ones.

[10] For a discussion of the philosophical significance of different understandings of the title of Chapter One, kindly refer to the Introduction to this work.

[11] A.C. Graham also concludes that Chapter Seventeen is inauthentic. *Cf*.,Graham (1981, p. 28).

[12] This story is examined in detail in Allinson (1989).

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