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# Introduction

The *Zhuangzi*, a fourth-century bce Chinese text, makes light of the charged debates of its day.1 It playfully casts doubt on entrenched practices and beliefs, raising open-ended questions that engage readers, in the form of ‘Is it like this? Or is it not like this?’ It uses stories about ordinary life, and fantasy dialogues between animals, to unsettle the familiar. Many of the extant texts from this time—the Warring States period in China (475–221 bce)—reflect the views of those in official life. The *Zhuangzi* challenged proposals for settling the unrest of this time. Zhuangzi did not contest doctrine with doctrine but caricatured other traditions, particularly the Confucian2 and the Mohist,3 mischievously calling their representatives ‘cramped scholars’ and comparing them to a summer insect with which one cannot discuss ice.4 The *Zhuangzi*’s doubt is compelling because it expresses disagreement with not only the content of the proposals, but also the attitudes that accompanied their promulgation. Apart from its lighthearted repartee, does the *Zhuangzi* itself offer more weighty considerations? I propose that its models of mastery prompt a serious re-examination of the institutional and personal resources required for a good life, an insight that is still relevant today. This account of the *Zhuangzi*’s views begins, in section 2, with a discussion of its skeptical questions and their implications. Section 3 explores responsiveness in the *Zhuangzi*, an indispensable element of a person’s engagement with the world. The final section examines some examples of mastery and considers how these ancient models of craftsmanship are relevant in the contemporary world.

1. ***Zhuangzi’s* Skeptical Questions**

From the perspective of the *Zhuangzi*, the other thinkers sought to prove others wrong in order to establish the strength of their own proposals. They seemed dazed, bound by a covenant, ‘like an arrow or a crossbow pellet, certain that they are the arbiters of right and wrong. They cling to their position as though they had sworn before the gods, sure that they are holding on to victory’ (3/2/11–12).5 In response, Zhuangzi emphasizes the limits of understanding. This is articulated in a number of ways in the text. We examine two specific concerns expressed through its stories. The first, a conversation between ‘Toothless’ and Wang Ni, wonders about the use of language to express the vast plurality of views in the world. A second issue relates to the limitations of individual perspectives, reflected in a conversation between two little creatures whose grasp of the world is constrained by their physiological makeup. These two issues draw attention to the misguided nature of the political discourse of the time. The thinkers believed, first, that their assertions about right and wrong were properly grounded in knowledge and, second, that what they individually held to be correct was applicable for everyone else. We examine these issues now.

In a conversation with Toothless (Nie Que) about knowledge, Wang Ni responds to each question with a rhetorical question, until he gets to a point where he turns the tables by posing questions about some assumptions that underlie knowledge-claims:

[Nie Que] asked Wang Ni, ‘Do you know what all things agree in calling right?’

‘How would I know that?’ said Wang Ni. ‘Do you know that you don’t know it?’

‘How would I know that?’ ‘Then do all beings know nothing?’

‘How would I know that? However, I will try to say something about this. How can we know that when I say I know something, it is not actually not-knowing? How can we know that when I say I don’t know something, it is not actually knowing?’

*(6/2/64–6; adapted from the translation by Watson [1968: 45])*

The conversation continues, with Wang Ni using examples of different choices by different species, of habitats, foods, mating partners, and appreciation of aesthetic and moral standards, to demonstrate variance in the preferences and habits of these creatures:

Now let me ask *you* some questions . . . Monkeys pair with monkeys, deer go out with deer, and fish play around with fish. Men claim that [Mao Qiang] and Lady Li were beautiful, but if fish saw them they would dive to the bottom of the stream, if birds saw them they would fly away, and if deer saw them they would break into a run. Of these four, which knows how to fix the standard of beauty for the world? The way I see it, the rules of benevolence and righteousness and the paths of right and wrong are all hopelessly snarled and jumbled. How could I know anything about such discriminations?

*(6/2/66–70; trans. Watson [1968: 45–6])*6

At first glance, Wang Ni’s remarks may seem to suggest relativism. However, I propose that the text is more sophisticated. It does not propose multiple truths or values, all of which are acceptable or correct. The problem here is an epistemological one: Wang Ni asks how he, or anyone else, could justify the distinction between right and wrong in epistemological terms. In other words, the issue here is not one of *choice* (between different views) but of *justification* (of one’s own position). In the previous passage, Wang Ni specifies that the problem relates to assertions (*yan* 言, saying), or claims to knowledge. Why are assertions a particular problem? In the *Zhuangzi*’s view, some of the debaters attempted to determine the winner of their debates (*bian* 辯, disputation) by arguing about right and wrong (*shi* 是, *fei* 非). By *proclaiming* their doctrines, each with a specific ‘bundle’ of values (of right and wrong), they believed that they were expressing what *was* the case. The Confucians *claimed* they were right, as did the Mohists; so, they resorted to disputation to resolve their disagreement. Wang Ni’s concern is this: how do we know that what a person says is the case is in fact the case? His question is not merely rhetorical, nor is he saying that knowledge-claims are always indefensible. In the preceding passage, his first question, about claims to knowledge, is followed immediately by its converse, about claims that one *does not know*. Wang Ni’s agnostic questions suggest that he is grappling with the lack of a reliable method to determine the claims about knowledge. They highlight the problematic connection—or lack of it—between assertions of knowledge, and (the possession of) knowledge, a connection that the other thinkers took for granted in their attempts to prove that they were correct. Elsewhere in the same chapter, the *Zhuangzi* wonders about the use of debate to settle disputes: should an arbiter be appointed? But if the point of the debate is to establish a perspective-free stance to determine who is correct, how do we ensure that the arbiter holds such a view, or whether it is even possible for anyone to have such a stance (7/2/84–90)?7

The second issue concerns the limitations of individual perspectives. This complicates the questions we have just considered. According to the *Zhuangzi*, one reason for being less certain about what we know is that our understanding is constrained by a range of factors. It presents a story about two little creatures, a cicada and a dove, which fail to fathom how a giant bird, Peng, could sweep across the sky when all that they can see is the forest surrounds they are familiar with. In the *Zhuangzi*’s characteristically playful style, giant Peng, who has transformed from a tiny fish called Kun (meaning ‘spawn’), has a back like Mount Tai and wings that spread like clouds (1/1/1–2). The cicada and dove dwell on Peng’s situation:

The cicada and the little dove laugh at this, saying, ‘When we make an effort and fly up, we can get as far as the elm or the sapanwood tree, but sometimes we don’t make it and just fall down on the ground. Now how is anyone going to go ninety thousand *li*8 to the south!’ *(1/1/8–9; trans. Watson [1968: 30])*

The little creatures are aware that their own capacities are limited in comparison to those of Peng. They know that they can only fly as far as a tall tree, sometimes even not succeeding in doing so. But the rhetorical question at the end of their conversation is revealing: it demonstrates how their personal embodied experience is not only limited, but *limiting*. They cannot imagine a scenario different from theirs, and this makes them incredulous that a being like Peng is even possible. The text has other images that evoke the same idea, amongst them the frog who lived in the dilapidated well, enjoyed the comforts provided by his environment, and who enthusiastically invited the giant sea turtle of the Eastern Sea to come into the well to see all of this for himself. But, of course, the turtle’s right knee was stuck fast at the mouth of the well (45/17/69–74). The wellfrog’s perspective is irreducibly lodged, as he believes that his habitat is the right one for him, and for everyone else.

Earlier, we saw how the *Zhuangzi* characterizes the misguided ambitions of the thinkers, believing that they were party to a covenant to determine right and wrong. In this imagery, the thinkers were taking their task far too seriously, believing that it was their responsibility to *pronounce* right and wrong. Language was an important component of their promulgation of norms. The *Zhuangzi* takes their earnestness to task, using features of language ironically to describe the insularity of their points of view. It uses indexical referents, ‘this’ and ‘that’, to highlight the inability of these thinkers to imagine anything beyond their immediate experience:

There is nothing that is not ‘that’ and there is nothing that is not ‘this.’ Things do not know that they are the ‘that’ of other things; they only know what they themselves know. *(4/2/27; adapted from the translation by Chan [1963: 182])*

The *Zhuangzi* uses the indexical term ‘that’ (*bi*) to denote distance from the self. Correspondingly, the perspective of ‘I’ or ‘this’ is also indexical. An unreflective individual does not know there are ‘those’ perspectives, nor is he aware of what things might look like from *there*, rather than *here*. Tragically, because we do not understand the indexicality of our own point of view, ‘our rights and wrongs end up charioteering us around . . . [w]e try to control others, using ourselves as the regulating standard’ (64/23/64; trans. Ziporyn [2009: 101]). Two aspects of this epistemological oversight bother Zhuangzi. The first is the belief of the debating thinkers that their views are fixed and once-and-for-all solutions to social disorder. The second is that their individual perspectives are universalizable.

What do the *Zhuangzi*’s skeptical questions amount to? As noted previously, the *Zhuangzi* seems to advocate relativism when it relates the different preferences and interest of the animals. Chad Hansen proposes that the *Zhuangzi*’s view be characterized as ‘perspectival relativism’ (1983b: 44–6). On this view, each assertion, including one’s own, is made from a particular perspective. The point in the *Zhuangzi* is neither to shed one’s perspective (for these are irreducible) nor is it to hold a view that is the simple sum of all perspectives. For Hansen, the text avoids the self-defeating characteristic of relativism because the vision that the *Zhuangzi* proposes does not claim to be more ‘natural’ than any other perspective. However, it is a ‘metaperspective . . . a perspective on the plurality of perspectives’, which has both epistemological and ethical aspects (Hansen 1992: 284). A person who holds this meta-perspectival view has a more flexible approach, understanding that others might have important insights from where they sit. Such a person would also have a more tolerant attitude (Hansen 2003: 153).

There are a number of problems with the relativist thesis. First, it requires that the *Zhuangzi* itself holds commitments to each of the views expressed in Wang Ni’s account—that they are true or real—as well as elsewhere in the text. There is, however, no such explicit or firm statement of its commitments, especially in light of the way in which the text poses scenarios to rouse doubt rather than certainty. Second, the relativist thesis cannot accommodate the suggestion that the *Zhuangzi* has normative commitments. The text advocates models of mastery, intended as a challenge to the then-dominant picture of official life. The skill masters, such as the wheelwright Bian, the expert swimmer, the bellstand carver, and the cicada catcher (some of them are discussed in section 4) embody the text’s positive visions of the Way (*dao*), as proposed by Philip Ivanhoe (1993, 1996).9 Lee Yearley incorporates religious elements—which he terms ‘intraworldly mysticism’—in his reading of the text, whereby the daemonic person transcends many aspects of this-worldly life but nevertheless maintains engagement with it (1982, 1983, 1996).10 Harold Roth similarly promotes a normative mystical vision in the *Zhuangzi*, although—being more focused on Daoist religious practices—he emphasizes the quality of the experience in terms of psychological tranquility, attained through meditative contemplation (1991, 1999).

One element of Hansen’s analysis is insightful: it brings out the way in which the *Zhuangzi* is a unique text. He suggests that the *Zhuangzi* holds a ‘metaperspective’. While disagreeing with Hansen that the meta-perspective is bound up with commitments to each perspective, the view here highlights the nature of the *Zhuangzi*’s engagement with the doctrinal disputes. Zhuangzi’s meta-perspective sets it apart from existing discourse, whose argumentative method was to debunk doctrine with doctrine. This method relied on the clarification of objective terms of reference in language, and according to which a winner is decided upon (7/2/84–92; see Lai 2006). The *Zhuangzi* demonstrates its refusal to engage in these debates, simply by pointing out the insularity of the other thinkers’ perspectives, and their unfounded assumption that these were universally held. It is at this level that it uses doubt to unsettle the thinkers’ commitment to their doctrines, instead of offering yet another doctrine. Lisa Raphals (1996) suggests that chapter 2 of the text (the chapter in which epistemological issues feature most prominently)11 uses doubt to question prevailing assumptions about knowledge. This account proposes that the *Zhuangzi* was not denying the possibility of knowledge but was, more importantly, highlighting the place of doubt. At this point, we need to return to the then urgent debates to consider the viability of the *Zhuangzi*’s position in light of the unrest during the Warring States. If we accept that individual perspectives are insular, what *can* be done to address the unrest?

# Thinking From Lodging-Places, and Responsiveness

In the way that the *Zhuangzi* portrays the animals in the passages cited earlier, we are made aware of the ‘lodged’ nature of each of their perspectives. What is only an indexical resting point is assumed to be permanent, and not *simply* a resting point. Stories like these speak to readers by asking them *temporarily* to lodge within these views in order to experience and understand the nature of the limitations. One way to understand the place of the different perspectives is to take Zhuangzi not as a theoretician (e.g. viewing the perspectives along relativist vs. monist lines) but rather as someone whose ideas are shaped by observations of the world and who in that sense thinks more like an empiricist.12 This is a novel interpretation of the *Zhuangzi*; to date, discussions on this topic—we have seen some—tend to focus on the issue of the *Zhuangzi*’s commitment to relativism or to perspectivism (e.g., Ivanhoe 1993; Connolly 2011).

If we proceed with the argument that the *Zhuangzi*’s view is based on an empirical approach, then we could say that each of these lodged perspectives is irreducible and non-universalizable. An empirically focused thinker would embrace plurality quite differently from how a relativist would. A relativist would accept that each view is true for the person whose ‘truth’ it is. By contrast, as a thinker who attends to empirical observations, Zhuangzi’s concern would not so much be whether each view is *true*, but ~~instead~~ whether it is *legitimate*: the well-frog’s view that his well is Paradise-like is legitimate, as is a fish’s, which prefers a habitat in water to one up in the trees. (Indeed, both the fish and the frog have no choice, so it seems.) However, as readers of the text, we have an opportunity that is not available to them: we have the ability to lodge temporarily in the scenarios presented in the text. When we do so, we provisionally consider different perspectives by imagining how comfortable the frog and the fish are, respectively, in their given environments. In doing so, we come to *agree* with the text that the human, the monkey, the fish, and the deer have different preferences and thrive in different conditions.13 Yet these animals, like the summer insect used to represent the cramped scholars, simply cannot see beyond their own preferences. The point that Wang Ni makes about our (lack of) understanding of knowledge-claims derives its significance in part from readers’ agreement with the legitimacy of each of the different preferences. From an empirical perspective, these examples are real: they are real in the sense that a monkey’s experience is *just like that*, and a human’s experience is *just like this*. We may never see the fish’s preferences like ‘this’, but we can attempt to imagine it by lodging, temporarily, *there*. To be able to lodge temporarily in others’ perspectives is to be sage-like:

The sage recognises a ‘this’, but a ‘this’ which is also ‘that’, a ‘that’ which is also ‘this’. . . . A state in which ‘this’ and ‘that’ no longer find their opposites is called the pivot of *dao*. When the pivot is fitted into the centre of the ring, it can respond endlessly. Its ‘yea’ is limitless and its ‘nay’ too is limitless. So I say, the best thing to use is illumination.

*(4/2/29–31; adapted from the translation by Watson [1968: 40])*

Here, again, the language of indexicals is used to highlight different perspectives. However, unlike the previously cited passage, this offers a solution to indexicality. In this passage, the *Zhuangzi* seems implicitly to accept indexicality as a given. Then, rather than dwell on it as a problematic issue, the text proposes how indexicality can be dealt with: the sage recognizes that what one individual takes as ‘this’, another takes as ‘that’. The sage takes his position at the center of the swiveling pivot, responding to the different perspectives *and* not being bound by any one of them. He engages—limitlessly—with different perspectives because he is not permanently lodged in any one of them. The metaphor of illumination (*ming* 明) suggests that the *Zhuangzi* does not promote a Way that stands among the other doctrines, at the level of first-order doctrines.14 To illuminate is to cast light on, and not to add to, the plethora of existing doctrines. From the vantage point of the pivot, the sage understands that each doctrine is proposed from some individual’s lived reality and therefore he does not uncritically accept them as true.15 Yet he sees them as equal, since they all have the feature of indexicality (which helps to explain the title of chapter 2, ‘Discussion on Making Things Equal’). According to this interpretation, the point of the *Zhuangzi*’s engagement with the other thinkers is not to voice another opinion by deciding on who is right and who is wrong, but rather, in a more sophisticated way, to point out the shortcomings of all of them.16

In the pivot metaphor, the text suggests a different approach from the ones that were available then. Imagination plays a central role, where readers are encouraged to consider alternative ways of viewing things. Yet the *Zhuangzi* is not simply committed to plurality for its own sake. Distinctively, it offers a way for human communication and interactions to proceed in spite of the limits of knowledge and what may be shared through language. The idea of responsiveness (*ying* 應 ) is fundamental in illumination: the sage’s responsiveness on the pivot is qualitatively different from the responses given by the ‘cramped scholars’. First, it recognizes the constraints of others’ as well as its own positions, as each is a lodged position. Second, building on this recognition, the sage lodges temporarily in another’s position, seeing from that position—in the way we lodge in the fish’s, the monkey’s, or the little bird’s perspective. In this way, the text prompts readers to lodge, just like the sage does, in the different perspectives. The text is not simply *telling* readers that there are varied perspectives, or what these perspectives *are like*; rather, it is getting them to imagine and *to see for themselves* what it might be like to have a lodged view. The sage’s responsiveness is marked by the efficacy in the way he moves and lodges in different perspectives. In doing so, his engagements are limitless, as, indeed, are the perspectives held by different individuals. His responses are limitless because he is not stuck within a single perspective. In contrast, although the other thinkers are saying something—they are making assertions, just like chirping fledglings do (4/2/24)17—are they fully responsive to the situation at hand? Their responses reflect their ingrained ways of thinking, not unlike the standard responses of those who subscribe to the same doctrine. A response of this kind is task- or context-insensitive and is better described as a conditioned reflex.

These considerations support the chapter’s interpretation of Zhuangzi’s approach as an empirically grounded one, an approach with important implications for how the text is interpreted. The particularities matter and, because they do, a standardized reflex will not suffice. Here, ~~again,~~ we need to ask the question of what this means in practice: how should an official respond to the existing unrest?

In a passage where Confucius is presented as a spokesperson for the *Zhuangzi*’s thinking, he speaks with his favored disciple, Yan Hui, who had decided that he was going to take up office with the Prince of Wei. The prince had a notorious reputation for treating his people appallingly (8/4/1–9/4/24). The details of the conversation are interesting, as there is remarkable acuity in the way the Confucian project and the Confucian master and disciple are portrayed here. Yan Hui seeks the permission of his master, Confucius, to undertake this mission; and Yan Hui’s decision to take up office in Wei was a principled response to the Confucian master’s teaching, that one should serve where help is most needed. An important element of the Confucian solution to the unrest lay in the hands of capable officials to positively influence their superiors (e.g., *Analects* 4.26, 19.10).18 In this conversation, instead of encouraging this noble pursuit, ~~however,~~ Confucius dissuades Yan Hui, saying ‘you will probably go and get yourself executed, that’s all’ (trans. Watson [1968: 54]). In the course of the conversation, Yan Hui demonstrates that he has already devised a multi-pronged strategy, to be ‘inwardly direct, outwardly compliant, and [to do his] work through the examples of antiquity’ (ibid.: 56). To be inwardly direct is to follow Heaven; to be outwardly compliant is to fulfill the ways of humanity (Yan Hui talks about fulfilling the ritual proprieties expected of a minister) and to draw on the normative authority of tradition in criticizing wrongdoing. Confucius disparages Yan Hui’s plans (ibid.: 57):

Goodness, how could *that* do? You have too many policies and plans and you haven’t seen what is needed. You will probably get off without incurring any blame, yes. But that will be as far as it goes. How do you think you can actually convert him? You are still making the mind[-heart] your teacher!

In Confucian terms, Yan Hui has prepared himself well for the task. His mindheart19 is attuned to Confucian commitments and he demonstrates due thoughtfulness about them in his plans. However, the Zhuangzian Confucius accuses Yan Hui of having too many plans and policies, especially as he has not encountered the situation as yet. Yan Hui’s conditioned and context-insensitive plans will obscure what he might actually encounter in his service of the Prince of Wei. To fail to see beyond one’s lodged perspective is the fundamental malaise gripping the debating thinkers. Sharp lines are drawn between what is right and wrong, missing out on the many possibilities, of what is perhaps ‘partly right’ or ‘partly wrong’, as well as others in-between.20 For each cramped scholar, every other perspective is ‘that’ or, more simply, just ‘not this’. The problem, as the *Zhuangzi* sees it, is as follows:

It is by establishing definitions of what is ‘this’, what is ‘right’, that boundaries are made. Let me explain what I mean by boundaries. There are right and left, then there are classes of things and ideas of the proper responses to them, then there are roles and disputes, then there are competitions and struggles . . . Wherever debate shows one of two alternatives to be right, something remains undistinguished and unshown.

*(5/2/55–8; trans. Ziporyn [2009: 16])*

The text highlights the complacency of those who believe that they hold and articulate what is correct. Bolstered by misplaced confidence in the correctness of their views, they fail to see what is remaindered in their pre-determined distinctions. Instead of attending to the situation, they make their decisions on the basis of what they already know to be correct. The conviction that they are correct, and the determination with which they promote their views, beget blindness to what falls beyond the sights of their doctrines. In response to such unfounded confidence, the *Zhuangzi* advocates doubt, perhaps better described as a lack of certainty. In the final section, we consider what it means to be attentive to situations and how such responsiveness may be cultivated.

# Doubt, A-certainty, and Mastery.

# The *Zhuangzi*’s questions sow seeds of doubt on quarrels about values, and on assertions about their correctness (‘Of these three creatures, then, which one knows the proper place to live?’ (6/2/67; trans. Watson [1968: 66]). In the literature, its hesitations have sometimes been described in terms of ‘skepticism’ and it is therefore important to understand how the text comes across in this way. How do elements in the *Zhuangzi* compare, for example, with the doubt of the ancient Skeptics? It may be, as Steve Coutinho has pointed out, that the aim of Zhuangzi’s doubt is to increase awareness of fallibilism, quite unlike the epistemic attitudes (e.g., of ataraxy) in ancient Skepticism (2004: 66). Coutinho’s point—about not drawing similarities across the two traditions on slender threads21—prompts us to consider more carefully the finer details of the comparisons. Perhaps, as suggested by Paul Kjellberg, the text does not deny the possibility of knowledge but simply questions it. On this basis, the *Zhuangzi* advocates skepticism not of a ‘dogmatic’ nature, but instead an ‘aporectic’ one (1996: 20). For Kjellberg, the text is focused on practice—philosophical practice— using ‘therapeutic’ arguments to generate uncertainty. Another account, proposed by Eric Schwitzgebel, distinguishes between a ‘philosophical skeptic’ and ‘skeptic in the everyday sense’. Schwitzgebel recommends that the *Zhuangzi*, belonging to the latter kind, promotes open-mindedness, ‘putting somewhat less faith than is standard in one’s own and others’ beliefs’ (1996: 91). This has important moral outcomes, Schwitzgebel suggests, engendering receptiveness to new evidence and tolerance of people with different beliefs.

These characterizations of the *Zhuangzi*’s skepticism highlight some of its different effects. Nevertheless, they converge on one point—that doubt in the *Zhuangzi* addresses attitudes such as open-mindedness, acceptance of fallibilism, and uncertainty. It is important to capture the attitudinal focus of Zhuangzi’s epistemology, but we should understand this in light of the text’s concerns about the nature of knowledge. I propose that *lack of certainty*, or *a-certainty*, best describes the text’s hesitations. The text is not simply advocating openmindedness as a measure to stimulate greater tolerance of difference, for it does not accept that any of the doctrines are ‘correct’, given their constraints. It is critically aware of fallibilism, but it says more: it is eye-opening first to lodge in the well-frog’s perspective, and then in the giant sea turtle’s perspective. It seems to uphold uncertainty, but its underlying concern is not that the sage should be *un*-certain. Clearly, the text does not seek to promote the nagging and perhaps debilitating doubt that can sometimes accompany uncertainty. The *Zhuangzi* speaks out against aspects of certainty, manifest in the thinkers’ views, in two different ways. The first relates to their views on the nature of knowledge (that it is indubitable), which leads to the aggravated debates in order to determine one correct doctrine. For the *Zhuangzi*, the search for knowledge *qua* certainty is misdirected.

The second problem is one of epistemological attitude. The thinkers’ false confidence—the certainty that they are correct—drives the desire to promulgate their entrenched standards. From this angle, every situation a cramped scholar encounters is assessed according to his fixed standard of right and wrong. It is this situation against which Confucius speaks when he accuses Yan Hui of having already devised plans and policies prior to taking up office. In Yan Hui’s approach, when a person encounters a new situation, it is simply another opportunity to rehearse the all-too-familiar. Closure on an issue has been attained prior to the encounter, guiding and constraining how a person responds in a particular situation. Such certainty leaves no room for a person to focus on, and respond to, the significant particularities of the matter at hand. By contrast, responsiveness requires openness to situations, not closure to them.

In the remainder of this discussion, I dwell on some models of mastery proposed in the *Zhuangzi*, where responsiveness is critical. Unlike the standard discourse of its time, the text upholds a contrarian model of excellence, using examples of the mastery of people skilled in ordinary activities including swimming, ferrying, cicada-catching, butchering, and wheelmaking. The skillfulness of these experts rests in their attentiveness to salient features of their respective activities: although cultivated, their actions are not habitual. Each particular instance of the same activity can throw up contingent, yet important, factors: steering a ferry successfully in choppy waters requires cognizance of the nature of the waves one encounters at that moment *and* the skills to handle the particular ferry, just as awareness of burls in a piece of wood, *and* the skills to work with them to make a wheel, are aspects of mastery in carpentry. Flexibility, rather than certainty about outcomes or products, is a mark of mastery. This is not to say that the *Zhuangzi*’s skill masters have no goals, or that there are no evaluative criteria for measuring success; it is to say that mastery is understood not simply in terms of outcomes. For Zhuangzi, mastery is multifaceted. It is manifest in performance,22 centering on how a person executes a task (adroitly, or excellently, or clumsily, or unsystematically, etc.), while also considering resources, circumstantial constraints, or enablers, as well as the outcomes or products of her action. How is this notion of performance expressed in the text? Consider the case of the bell stand carver, Qing, who makes magnificent bell stands at which people marvel. The Marquis of Lu, one of the onlookers, asks Qing about his skill. Qing’s mastery begins with the selection of the wood he works with. He says that he fasts so that his ‘skill is concentrated and the outside world slides away’ (50/19/57–8; trans. Ziporyn [2009: 82]). Qing continues,

Then I enter into the mountain forests, viewing the inborn [Heavenly] nature of the trees. My body arrives at a certain spot, and already I see the completed bell stand there; only then do I apply my hand to it. Otherwise I leave the tree alone.

*(50/19/58–9; brackets inserted by author; trans. Ziporyn [ibid.])*

Qing turns wonderful bell stands, not only because he handles the chisel and wood-carving tools well, but because he understands what he is working with, in making each bell stand. Quite a few of the *Zhuangzi*’s examples, like this one, highlight the responsiveness of the master to the situation that he encounters. Unlike the Confucian Yan Hui, who plans to turn the Prince of Wei toward his own ingrained Confucian ways, the skill master stories emphasize the depth of the master’s engagement with the task, approaching it without superimposing preconceived notions of what ought to be done. The *Zhuangzi* points out how the responsive actions of the skill masters are unique in each case as they are actions taken spontaneously, in response to each scenario: they leave no footprints or traces (*ji* 跡; 41/16/11–17, 52/20/29–35, 58/22/30–3). In contrast, the tendency of the other thinkers is to impose a primarily norm-guided life to quell the unrest. From the *Zhuangzi*’s point of view, it would be regrettable if its models of mastery were to be taken as authoritative and normative, for that would reduce responsiveness to certainty.

Therefore, Zhuangzi’s skill masters need to ‘forget’ a norm-driven approach in order to be responsive. The mastery stories state explicitly that the masters have forgotten many aspects of conventional life. For example, wood-carver Qing has had to fast to reach the state where he is able appropriately to select the wood that he can work with to craft into bell stands. In doing so, he has (progressively) forgotten: ‘praise or reward, rank or salary . . . honor or disgrace . . . skill and clumsiness’, and even that he has four limbs or a body, ‘as if the royal court has ceased to exist’ (50/19/56–57). Similar themes of absorbed attentiveness are also part of the butcher and cicada-catcher stories, as is the theme of forgetting, especially in a famous passage of ‘sitting and forgetting’ (17/6/89–93). The sage in the *Zhuangzi* ‘forgets’ a range of matters, including ‘worldly learning’ (Cook 2003: 76), ‘sense perception’ and ‘bodily awareness’ (Roth 2003: 18), ‘propositional knowledge’ (ibid.: 28–9), and even the self.23 For example, Butcher Ding is no longer led by sight, so that he is able to attend to each particular ox as each is different—and yet he carves each one masterfully, so that he has not sharpened his knife in 19 years (7/3/2–8/3/12). The masters lack certainty prior to the encounter—even though Qing has carved many bell stands, and Ding has dressed many head of oxen—for each encounter with *this* tree or *this* ox throws up new details and they do not assume that they already know what is at stake.

Why was this model of mastery so important to Zhuangzi? The *Zhuangzi* was dissatisfied with existing approaches to government and their underlying assumptions. In response, it did not offer another doctrine but instead looked to excellence in ordinary life, appealing to paradigms that were accessible to the greater majority. In doing so, it challenged elitist discourses and pictures of ideal life upheld by those in office. From Zhuangzi’s perspective, their doctrines reflected the lodged perspectives of their lives, failing to see a variety of views and the differences between them. Their rigidity, fueled by their certainty in the correctness of their doctrine, meant that they could not respond adequately to contingencies, manifold needs, and shifting contexts—features of life in the Warring States period, a time of great instability. Placed within its context, the *Zhuangzi* is significant because it challenged the status quo, using doubt to unsettle the *complacency* of those who believed they were irrefutably correct. But this is only one factor in its significance as a philosophical text. Importantly, in its use of accessible stories and imagery instead of proclamation, the *Zhuangzi* disputed both the other thinkers’ beliefs and their methods of justification. Zhuangzi effectively *entraps* the other thinkers, using them as figures, or using creatures to represent them, in its stories. In doing so, it draws them in to engage with the doubts it raises in its scenarios.

For us today, the *Zhuangzi*’s challenge to understand the insularity of perspectives remains. It invites readers to imagine what it feels like to *see* from a number of different perspectives. The text, realistically, does not ask us permanently to transcend our own perspectives or to uphold a view that inclusively takes in all perspectives (if indeed that is possible). In place of abstractly derived norms, it focuses on a person’s engagement with situations, promoting a more tentative approach to knowledge (one that is more conducive to mastery). This shifts the paradigm of knowledge and action to responsiveness. In its pictures of skill mastery, the *Zhuangzi* resists habitual, context-insensitive reflexes and makes the case for an empirically grounded philosophy whose central themes are those of spontaneous and efficacious action.24 Beyond the intellectual enjoyment of hopping into different perspectives, and the aesthetically charming pictures of mastery, the *Zhuangzi* offers an approach to life that is attuned to the practicalities of a rich and diverse world.

# Notes

1. The *Zhuangzi* and the *Laozi* have traditionally been grouped as belonging to one tradition, the Lao-Zhuang Daoist tradition. Wing-tsit Chan believes that the *Hou Hanshu* (*History of the Later Han Dynasty*) makes this association (1963: 178). Traditionally, it was also held that the *Laozi* was compiled earlier than the *Zhuangzi* and, as they stand in that relation, that the *Laozi* is less sophisticated and the *Zhuangzi* represents mature and developed Daoism. There are problems with the traditional views on the text. First, sections of the *Laozi* have a probable date of composition later than the *Zhuangzi*. Second, the extant *Zhuangzi* comprises 33 chapters, after a major revision of the 52-chapter text by Guo Xiang (d. 312 ce). Guo Xiang appears to have edited out 19 chapters of that text. The extent of Guo Xiang’s editing of the text is not insignificant, and it is not possible fully to determine its impact on the 52-chapter *Zhuangzi* (Knaul 1985). The discussion in this chapter uses the name of the text, *Zhuangzi*, and the name of its alleged author, Zhuangzi, interchangeably for stylistic reasons. Phrases such as ‘Zhuangzi believed that’ indicate that the source of the idea is to be found in the *Zhuangzi*. It is not the intention to suggest that Zhuangzi was the author of all of the ideas in the extant text.
2. The Confucian tradition is named after its alleged founder, Confucius (551–469 bce). The tradition is typically characterized by its utopic ideal of benevolent government, which would lead by exemplary conduct, instilling in the people a sense of propriety in their relational interactions (Lai 2017: ch. 2).
3. Mohism is named after Mozi (480?–390? bce), leader of a group that proposed an altruistic ethic (*jianai*: impartial concern) marked by equal concern of each person for everyone else. The Mohists conceived of morality in terms of a standard applicable to all, much like the standards with which some of them might have been familiar in craftsmanship (e.g., use of the plumb line). Mohist doctrine competed with Confucian ideals: its view of *jianai* may be construed as an attempt to anchor moral values independently of the courts and its officials (Lai 2017: chs. 4, 6).
4. ‘Jo of the North Sea said, “You can’t discuss the ocean with a well frog—he’s limited by the space he lives in. You can’t discuss ice with a summer insect—he’s bound to a single season. You can’t discuss the Way with a cramped scholar—he’s shackled by his doctrines. Now you have come out beyond your banks and borders and have seen the great sea—so you realize your own pettiness. From now on it will be possible to talk to you about the Great Principle” ’ (42/17/5–8; trans. Watson [1968: 175–6]).
5. References to sections of the *Zhuangzi* follow the numbers of the Harvard-Yenching concordance (*Zhuangzi Yinde*).
6. In citations I have, where necessary, altered transliterations of Chinese terms and names to the standard Pinyin for consistency. All other markings of text (e.g., italics) are the author’s or translator’s, unless otherwise specified.
7. See Lai (2006) for a detailed discussion of disputation and adjudication.
8. A *li* (里) measured approximately a third of a mile.
9. Ivanhoe notes, ‘[i]n his examples of skilful individuals, Zhuangzi completely abandons the perspectivist argument and reveals the foundation of his normative vision’ (1993: 652).
10. I suggest that the ‘state’ to which Yearley refers is in fact better described as a way of life that brings together its ethical, religious, political, social, and psychological dimensions.
11. The title of this chapter is ‘Discussion on Making Things Equal’ (‘Qiwu Lun’; trans. Watson 1968).
12. In fact, it seems strange for Hansen to assert, for example, both that Chinese philosophy had no place for abstractions, on the one hand, and that the *Zhuangzi* holds a metaperspectival view, on the other. On the topic of abstractions, Hansen writes:

I would like to argue for the claim that no Chinese philosophical system of the classical period in China was committed to the existence of or had roles for abstract (universal) entities in any of the traditionally important ways that Western semantics, epistemology, ontology, or philosophy of mind had roles for abstractions. (1983a: 37–8)

It would seem sensible, in light of this remark, to follow the view I propose here— that, on the topic of perspectives, Zhuangzi was an empiricist.

1. Steve Coutinho contends that the *Zhuangzi*’s scepticism is very much a ‘distant relative’ of ancient Greek scepticism (with which I agree). The point I make about readers’ agreement with the examples is taken from Coutinho’s discussion, although his point is about the *Zhuangzi*’s knowledge-claims. Coutinho writes,‘Unlike the ancient Sceptics, Zhuangzi makes many knowledge claims—indeed, he makes several such claims, on which his argument depends . . . Zhuangzi does not shy away from claiming to know such things’ (2004: 66).
2. In this way, the proposal here is similar to Hansen’s characterization of the *Zhuangzi*’s view as a meta-level and second-order thesis.
3. Some have argued that the illuminated position is one from which the sage sees a fundamental unity of opposites (e.g., Radice 2001: 33). Together with Wai Wai Chiu, I have argued against Radice’s interpretation: we have presented a detailed argument for viewing illumination as a higher-order stance and not simply as one that aggregates across different doctrinal positions (Lai and Chiu 2013).
4. I believe this is why it seems to many interpreters of the *Zhuangzi* that its doubt does not generate the anxiety that we might sense in some versions of skepticism. Angus Graham describes the *Zhuangzi*’s doubt in the follow way, in a phrase that has been cited numerous times in the literature: ‘there is no vertigo in the doubt’ (1989: 186). For discussions of the *Zhuangzi*’s position in relation to the debates of the day, see Wong (2005) and Lai (2006).
5. The context of this question is as follows:

Words are not just wind. Words have something to say. But if what they have to say is not fixed, then do they really say something? Or do they say nothing? People suppose that words are different from the peeps of baby birds, but is there any difference, or isn’t there? What does [*dao*] rely upon, that we have true and false? What do words rely upon, that we have right and wrong? How can the Way go away and not exist? How can words exist and not be acceptable? When the Way relies on little accomplishments and words rely on vain show, then we have the rights and wrongs of the Confucians and the [Mohists]. What one calls right the other calls wrong; what one calls wrong the other calls right. But if we want to right their wrongs and wrong their rights, then the best thing to use is [illumination]. (4/2/23–7; adapted from the translation by Watson [1968: 39])

1. The *Analects* is a text closely associated with the early Confucian tradition. It comprises short conversations that Confucius was supposed to have had with a range of people, including his followers. *Analects* 19.10 presents one of Confucius’s followers, Zixia, saying this:

Only once exemplary persons (*junzi* 君子) have won the confidence (*xin* 信) of the common people do they work them hard; otherwise, the people would think themselves exploited. Only once they have won the confidence of their lord do they remonstrate with him; otherwise, their lord would think himself maligned. (19.10; trans. Ames and Rosemont [1998: 220])

This conversation captures the difficulties of the roles of the officials, negotiating between the ruler and the people while maintaining their personal moral commitments. Many of the conversations in Book Four of the *Analects* dwell on how Confucian officials should adhere to their principles.

1. The character *xin* (心) refers to both cognitive and emotional capacities and therefore is most often translated ‘mind-heart’ in English language literature. Thinkers belonging to the Confucian tradition emphasized the cultivation of the mind-heart in such a way that one’s sensibilities and desires were attuned to Confucian commitments such

as benevolence (*ren* 仁). For example, Mencius emphasized that the mind-heart that would not be moved or distracted (*budong xin* 不動心) once it had been cultivated. See Shun (1997) and Chan (2002).

1. The discussion of these positions is as follows:

Suppose you and I argue. If you beat me instead of my beating you, are you really right and am I really wrong? If I beat you instead of your beating me, am I really right and are you really wrong? Or are we both partly right and partly wrong? Or are we both wholly right and wholly wrong? (7/2/84–6; trans. Chan [1963: 189–90])

See Lai (2006) on the nature of debate and adjudication.

1. Coutinho writes,

I am not sure that the similarities between the two are sufficient to outweigh the differences . . . I do concede that, once it is pointed out, the *family resemblance* between Zhuangzi and the ancient Sceptics is unmistakable, but it is, surely, at most a family resemblance of a distant relative. (2004: 66)

1. There might be a tendency to interpret performance as a process or occurrence *additional to* knowledge. The suggestion here, however, is that performance *is* knowledge. This understanding of performance takes from Ryle’s views on knowing and thinking. Ryle writes (1979: 24):

To X, thinking what one is doing, is not to be doing both some X-ing and some separately do-able Y-ing. It is to be X-ing under a variety of qualifications, such as X-ing on purpose, with some tentativeness, some vigilance against some known hazards, some perseverance and with at least a modicum of intended or unintended self-training. It is to X intentionally, experimentally, circumspectly and practisingly, and these by themselves are not additional things that he is doing or might be doing.

Chris Fraser (2009) explores notions of agency and performance.

1. The characterization of ‘self ’ or ‘no self ’ in the *Zhuangzi* is a fairly prominent line in *Zhuangzi* studies. Christian Jochim (1998) is wary of these representations, describing the various positions in detail and presenting arguments against the view that *Zhuangzi* advocates a ‘no self ’ theory.
2. The actions or responses of the skill masters in the various stories have often been characterized in terms of spontaneity (see, for example, Graham 1983 and Kupperman 1996). The Zhuangzi’s ideas and argumentative style continue to generate discussions in epistemology and action theory, especially in considerations of attention, spontaneity, and efficacy (Wu 1982; Jullien 1999, 2004; Slingerland 2003; Bruya 2010a, 2010b).

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