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PHILOSOPHY AND PHILOSOPHICAL REASONING IN THE *ZHUANGZI*: DEALING WITH PLURALITY

The *Zhuangzi* is noted for its skeptical attitude toward knowledge-claims and other assertions of universality. In opposition to proponents of the many debating schools—each claiming to hold the solution to the Warring States (475–221 BCE) unrest—the *Zhuangzi* seems to endorse a plurality of perspectives.

This was in many ways a fresh view in the ancient Chinese philosophical context, one that appears to stand above the philosophical rivalry between the different schools. However, many questions remain regarding the point of Zhuangzi’s philosophy. A key question relates to whether Zhuangzi has himself proposed a viable solution to the multiplicity of perspectives. Zhuangzi’s skepticism about the assertions of the many competing views seems at times to suggest that the outcome of a vibrant plurality is relativism. Yet whether his skepticism results in relativism remains a topic of controversy among scholars.¹

In this article, I examine Zhuangzi’s treatment of plurality. I argue that Zhuangzi is neither skeptical about plurality, nor is he skeptical about the validity of each assertion made from a singular perspective. But he is skeptical about the underlying assertions of universality and objectivity that normally accompany knowledge-claims. Does this commit him to relativism? I suggest that whether a particular perspectival view corresponds to truth, or reality, is not Zhuangzi’s central concern. His epistemology is self-reflective and encompasses a deep awareness of the limitations of individual points of view. Although one might worry about Zhuangzi’s apparent lack of concern about matters of fact, it needs to be kept in mind that the primary subject matter of the philosophical debates during the Warring States period was the *best* solution to the sociopolitical upheaval. Factual correspondence was not a priority in those debates. Or, at least, it should not have been, as Zhuangzi saw it.

If we accept that Zhuangzi's primary point is about the limitations of individual perspectives, it would follow that he is committed to the appreciation of different perspectives. Apprehending many perspectives broadens and enriches one's understanding of the world. This in turn engenders an attitude of openness in negotiation. In this case, Zhuangzi's philosophy can have broader implications for approaching discussions in a globalized context with its multiple value systems.

Debating the Correct View

Zhuangzi despairs at the debating Mohists and Confucians; there is no common ground and each is certain he is correct and the other wrong:

. . . we have the "That's it, that's not" of Confucians and Mohists, by which what is *it* for one of them for the other is not, what is *not* for one of them for the other is.²

From Zhuangzi's point of view, the debate is doomed from the start. In a debate, the debaters aim to persuade the other to see his or her point of view. The Mohists and Confucians are adamant that their respective views are the correct one. Their assertions of correctness assume both objectivity and universality: the Confucians believe that their solution to the unrest is the best—perhaps the only—solution, as do the Mohists of theirs. But of course they cannot both be correct. Their debate is marked by disagreement: what is and what is not; as Zhuangzi notes, what "is" for one of them is "not" for the other.

Many of the examples in the *Zhuangzi* draw on the diversity and plurality of experiences and perspectives. The juxtaposition of human against nonhuman seems playful yet profound; these comparisons are particularly effective in demonstrating the limitations of the human perspective. In chapter 18 of the *Zhuangzi* text, a poignant story is told about a marquis who inappropriately fed a much-treasured bird meat and wine, hence causing the bird's death:

Once a sea bird alighted in the suburbs of the Lu capital. The marquis of Lu escorted it to the ancestral temple, where he entertained it, performing the Nine Shao music for it to listen to and presenting it with the meat of the Tai-lao sacrifice to feast on. But the bird only looked dazed and forlorn, refusing to eat a single slice of meat or drink a cup of wine,

and in three days it was dead. This is to try to nourish a bird with what would nourish you instead of what would nourish a bird . . . Creatures differ because they have different likes and dislikes. Therefore the former sages never required the same ability from all creatures or made them all do the same thing.³

The marquis's presumptuousness has dangerous consequences. At the root of this misadventure is the marquis's assumption that his views are universal: music, meat, and wine fit for a marquis must also be fit for a bird. The point of this anecdote is easily extended to all those who presume that their individual views are objective and universal.

But it was not only the debating Confucians and Mohists⁴ who asserted their respective theories had the best fit with reality. The notable dialectician Gongsun Long (380 BCE–?) gave paramount importance to the correspondence of language with reality. Gongsun Long further perpetuated the underlying assumptions of the Confucian rectification of names (aligning names with reality) and argued for clear distinctions to be made:

When the name is rectified, then the “this” and the “that” are delimited. If designation of “that” is not limited to that, then the designation of “that” is not applicable. If designation of “this” is not limited to this then the designation of “this” is not applicable . . . To call that, and that only, “that”; and to call this, and this only, “this”;—this is right. To call this, “That,” and have this become also that, and to call that, “This,” and have that become also this—this is wrong . . . Of course, name is to designate reality.⁵

For these thinkers the test of the best theory seemed easy: which one provides the best fit with reality? But Zhuangzi was worried that the test of factual correspondence would not yield the best results. Although Zhuangzi did not specifically pose questions about correspondence (of names) with matters of fact, he was skeptical that these other thinkers would find a solution to their debate, in “reality” itself. For Zhuangzi, the more important question concerned how reality was “cut up”—artificially demarcated—every thing from its corresponding opposite. The passage below seems to directly address Gongsun Long's assertion about names designating reality. According to Zhuangzi, can we be certain that the delineations we make actually correspond with reality? More probingly, might the delineation impose an artificial fit?

The Way has never had borders, saying has never had norms. It is by a “That’s it” which deems that a boundary is marked. Let me say something about the marking of boundaries. You can locate as there and enclose by a line, sort out and assess, divide up and discriminate between alternatives, compete over and fight over . . . To “divide,” then, is to leave something undivided: to “discriminate between alternatives” is to leave something which is neither alternative.⁶

For Zhuangzi, the question of fit is not as easily resolved as the Confucians, Mohists, and Dialecticians would have it. These debating thinkers are of course implying they each have the solution that best fits with reality. But, for Zhuangzi, the requirement that language fit with reality—“that is”/“that is not” (*shi/fei*)—is problematic for three main reasons. First, the resolution to the debates (about the best solution to the unrest) is not the sort that can properly be settled by reference to the “facts” of the matter. Second, the method of checking the theory against reality presupposes a reality that is stable and uniform for all. Finally (and most importantly for Zhuangzi), even if we could assume a stable reality, can we be sure our characterization of it is not arbitrary? Zhuangzi’s passage cited above captures the arbitrariness with which some distinctions are made.

From Zhuangzi’s point of view, the fundamental issue is not a question about reality but rather one of criteria: which set of criteria do we use to assess the best solution or outcome?

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? Since between us neither you nor I know which is right, others are naturally in the dark. Whom shall we ask to arbitrate? If we ask someone who agrees with you, since he has already agreed with you, how can he arbitrate? If we ask someone who agrees with me, since he has already agreed with me, how can he arbitrate? If we ask someone who disagrees with both you and me to arbitrate, since he has already disagreed with you and me, how can he arbitrate? If we ask someone who agrees with both you and me to arbitrate, since he has already agreed with you and me, how can he arbitrate?⁷

As Zhuangzi sees it, there are no objective criteria for making distinctions that will apply universally. The naiveté of the Confucian, Mohist, and Dialectician arguments rest in their

assumption that there *are* objective criteria. But, for Zhuangzi, the choice of criteria is itself plagued by bias; there is no unbiased, ideal observer. If Zhuangzi is correct, how might we avoid an infinite regress of the criteria? In other words, how do we deal with the many and different perspectives?

Lodged Perspectives

The *Zhuangzi* text opens with a story of a cicada and a turtledove laughing at Peng the giant bird because the latter's flying height of ninety thousand *li*⁸ high is incomprehensible to them:

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* to the south!"⁹

But do they have the last laugh? These smaller creatures are quite aware of their limitations. However, viewed from another angle, their self-knowledge is constrained by their inability to conceive of possibilities beyond the experiences of the self: the smallness of their prospect blinds them to the magnificence of the giant bird. Zhuangzi augments the contrast between the giant bird and the little one:

When the P'eng journeys to the southern darkness, the waters are roiled for three thousand *li*. He beats the whirlwind and rises ninety thousand *li*, setting off on the sixth month gale. Wavering heat, bits of dust, living things blowing each other about—the sky looks very blue. Is that its real color, or is it because it is so far away and has no end? When the bird looks down, all he sees is blue too . . . If wind is not piled up deep enough, it won't have the strength to bear up great wings. Therefore, when the P'eng rises ninety thousand *li*, he must have the wind under him like that. Only then can he mount on the back of the wind, shoulder the blue sky, and nothing can hinder or block him. Only then can he set his eyes to the south.¹⁰

On the other hand, the sweeping perspective is not necessarily to be preferred. The giant bird may be large and impressive, but it cannot take flight unless the wind conditions are right. It is capable only of a broad view and is unable to discern finer details. It, too, has only a partial perspective. Zhuangzi does not demonstrate preference for either.

There is another important allegory in one of the chapters in the *Zhuangzi* text believed to have been authored by Zhuangzi's disciples:

The Overlord of the Northern Sea said, "You can't tell a frog at the bottom of a well about the sea because he's stuck in his little space. You can't tell a summer insect about ice because it is confined by its season. You can't tell a scholar of distorted views about the Way because he is bound by his doctrine . . ." ¹¹

What can be done about these partial perspectives? In his description of the argument scenario, Zhuangzi implies that there is no "view from nowhere." There is no disinterested or unbiased view as one person argues a point and the other it's opposite. We seek adjudicators who are unbiased, but Zhuangzi deems that an impossible task. There is no observer who can take the perspective from nowhere.

Alternatively, would Zhuangzi agree there is a privileged observer's view? In this case, the position of this privileged or ideal observer is the position all observers should ideally take. Using the example of the frog in the well, we could say that the best position for the frog is at the mouth of the well, where he can both be looking into the well, as well as around him. The mouth of the well would be where the ideal or privileged observer sits himself. But of course that is only the mouth of the well. Should we not move farther back, say, onto the branch of a nearby tree or even perhaps to take the perspective of Peng the giant bird? From Zhuangzi's point of view, the problem with the ideal observer theory is that we still do not have an identifiable set of criteria for determining the privileged observer perspective.

A third solution lies in simply aggregating the different perspectives. If the view of the summer insect is partial, what can we tell it? Perhaps we could collate views on behalf of the seasonal insects, compiling a full listing of insect-experiences in the seasons. But there are too many problems with this view: who will do the collating? Will the summer insect grasp this comprehensive list? Is it possible to have a comprehensive list? ¹²

As all perspectives are inevitably embedded, it is pointless trying to get the frog to see what is outside his well, or the Confucian to see the Mohist point of view or *vice versa*. In other words, these perspectives are unavoidably "lodged," each within its context. This form of disputation,

“saying from a lodging-place,” was identified by Zhuangzi, as A. C. Graham suggests.¹³ According to Graham, this disputation was used by Zhuangzi as an *ad hominem* argument: each perspective is trapped in its own standpoint. This stands in contrast to the sagely view which is able to move freely between lodging places. The only way to have a debate is to lodge oneself in the other’s lodging-place “because the meanings he gives to words are for him the only meanings, and he will not debate on any other basis.”¹⁴

If Zhuangzi is correct, all claims have an *ad hominem* characteristic; they are ultimately reflections of the self rather than expressions of reality. This view seems to have relativist overtones: if all views are ultimately lodged in their own perspectival reference frames, then the criteria for assessing them must be derived from within each perspective. A relativist solution is, of course, another way to deal with the issue of perspectival plurality.

But Zhuangzi is not simply expressing a relativist view of knowledge. He does not say that *both* the Mohists and the Confucians are correct from where they each see the world. Neither does he affirm each of the perspectives of the giant bird and the turtle dove—indeed, Zhuangzi seems to gesture at their individual shortcomings in light of the contrast with the other perspective: the turtle dove’s perspective is little and it knows only its little world; the giant bird skims across finer details. We learn about the limitations of each perspective *by way of contrast* with other perspectives.

Does this mean that *all* views are *ad hominem* postulations? Or are perspectivally bound arguments only one type of argument, to be contrasted with statements of fact, so to speak? There is no indication in the text that Zhuangzi believes statements of fact are possible. If that is the case, that is, if all assertions are perspectivally conditioned, how do we assess them?

The Search for Truth and the Aim of Philosophy

There is a number of ways to deal with a plurality of views, but none of the ones discussed so far seem to be Zhuangzi’s preferred method:

1. Perspectival relativism;
2. The sweeping, broad, bird’s-eye view;
3. The unbiased view from nowhere;

4. The ideal observer perspective;
5. The simple aggregation of perspectives.

In the light of these considerations, it seems unlikely that Zhuangzi would advocate an epistemological quest for an ultimate truth or reality that is objective and universal. For Zhuangzi, wisdom lies in the realization that one's individual insights and grand theories—however sweeping and inclusive they may seem—are ultimately perspectival. The assertions of knowledge from each perspective—like those by the Confucians, the Mohists, the cicada, dove, giant bird, the marquis, the frog in the well, and the summer insect—are limited. For Zhuangzi, the issue of limited perspectives lies not only in the narrowness of the *content* of knowledge but also in the inability of individuals to recognize their epistemological inadequacies.

Zhuangzi's philosophical method aims not to search for truth but to question its limits. In this sense, his insights are more subtle than what initially meets the eye. There is a personal message for the reader of the text. It prompts the reader to consider the limits of his/her own views.

Zhuangzi takes the reader in tow to entertain each perspective:

When a human sleeps in the damp his waist hurts and he gets stiff in the joints; is that so of the loach? When he sits in a tree he shivers and shakes; is that so of the ape? Which of these three knows the right place to live?¹⁵

Zhuangzi is not requiring that the reader accept or endorse each of these perspectives: the human, the fish, and the ape. He urges us to take a pause to reflect on each of these perspectives and to consider their validity from the respective lodging places. Each lodged perspective is a lived reality, not an abstractly determined view from nowhere. The recognition of difference and plurality is, for Zhuangzi, the critical first step in debate. Those who acknowledge the plurality of perspectives are more likely to enter into debates with a view to negotiate rather than dominate. Likewise, they should not expect that the successful solutions are only those that achieve unanimity. But how might we choose between these different and plural value commitments? For Zhuangzi, the criteria for choice are not fully disclosed in the world:

Allowable?—allowable. Unallowable?—unallowable. The Way comes about as we walk it; as for a thing, call it something and that's so.^{16,17}

Zhuangzi narrates the story of a grand old tree, left untouched because its wood is deemed useless. The criteria for determining its function are arbitrary, depending on what the wood of the tree might be used for. Ironically, the assessment of its wood as useless guarantees its eventual survival as a grand tree. There is a profound message in this story about the contingency of life due to the arbitrariness with which distinctions and decisions are made:

Carpenter Shih went to Ch'i and, when he got to Crooked Shaft, he saw a serrate oak standing by the village shrine. It was broad enough to shelter several thousand oxen and measured a hundred spans around, towering above the hills. The lowest branches were eighty feet from the ground, and a dozen or so of them could have been made into boats. There were so many sightseers that the place looked like a fair, but the carpenter didn't even glance around and went on his way without stopping . . . "It's a worthless tree! Make boats out of it and they'd sink; make coffins and they'd rot in no time. Use it for doors and it would sweat sap like pine; use it for posts and the worms would eat them up. It's not a timber tree—there's nothing it can be used for. That's how it got to be that old!" After Carpenter Shih had returned home, the oak tree appeared to him in a dream and said, "What are you comparing me with? Are you comparing me with those useful trees? The cherry apple, the pear, the orange, the citron, the rest of those fructiferous trees and shrubs—as soon as their fruit is ripe, they are torn apart and subjected to abuse . . . Their utility makes life miserable for them, and so they don't get to finish out the years Heaven gave them, but are cut off in mid-journey."¹⁸

Of course, this is just a story. But its underlying theme is profound: the naiveté of many lies in the assumption that their individual perspectives are hinged on fixed criteria set out in the objective structure and material of reality. But Zhuangzi focuses our attention on pragmatic considerations that are often situation-specific:

If a mass of water is not bulky enough it lacks the strength to carry a big boat. When you upset a bowl of water over a dip in the floor, a seed will make a boat for it, but if you put the bowl there it jams, because your boat is too big for such shallow water.¹⁹

Zhuangzi's philosophy is introspective and encourages critical self-reflection. For Zhuangzi, individual, perceptually limited, knowledge-claims do not constitute wisdom. Rather, wisdom consists in *understanding* that individual perspectives are limited. This conception of wisdom

stands out against the background of the debating schools of thought. As Zhuangzi points out, thinkers from other schools, like the Confucians and Mohists, competed to prove their knowledge or wisdom (*zhi*), yet, were sadly unaware of their limited perspectives. Here, we may apply the distinction between great knowledge (*dazhi*) and small knowledge (*xiaozhi*) alluded to in many Daoist texts and articulated in *Zhuangzi* chapter 17. According to the account articulated in this article, the criterion for distinguishing small knowledge from great knowledge is not in their respective contents but in their epistemologies. Both the viewpoints of the little cicada and the giant bird Peng constitute small knowledge—even though Peng enjoys broad sweeping views—as each is limited by its perspective. Great knowledge, by contrast, transcends assertions of truth. Its wisdom lies in knowing the limits of small knowledge.

Although Zhuangzi's philosophy is often characterized as mystical, there is a stark realism involved in recognizing and dealing with the limitations of individual perspectives. This philosophy holds significant insights for an increasingly globalized world that is characterized by a plurality of ethical and value commitments. It requires that we consider the validity of each perspective from the point of view of its associated concrete realities. It does not necessarily drive toward universal agreement or a standardized all-purpose outcome. Most importantly, it is an approach that values plurality. It seeks to augment self-understanding and to enrich the self in dialogue and interplay with the many different perspectives.

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Chinese Glossary

dazhi	大知
dao	道
Gongsun Long	公孫龍
Peng	鵬
shi/fei	是非
wanwu	萬物
xiaozhi	小知
zhi	知
<i>Zhuangzi</i>	莊子

¹ See the two excellent collections of essays in Victor Mair, ed., *Experimental Essays on the Chuang Tzu* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983) and Paul Kjellberg and Philip Ivanhoe, eds., *Essays on Skepticism, Relativism and Ethics in the Zhuangzi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).

² A. C. Graham, trans., *Chuang-Tzu: The Inner Chapters* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2001), chap. 2, 52.

³ Burton Watson, trans., *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), 116.

⁴ Cf. A. C. Graham, *Later Mohist Logic, Ethics and Science* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2003) (reprinted from the 1978 edition).

⁵ Yi-Pao Mei, “The Kung-sun Lung Tzu with a Translation into English,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 16 (1953): 434–35.

⁶ Graham (2001), 57.

⁷ Wing-tsit Chan, trans., *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), chap. 2, 189–90.

⁸ 2.78 li are equivalent to a mile.

⁹ Watson, *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings*, chap. 1, 24.

¹⁰ Watson, *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings*, 23–24.

¹¹ Victor Mair, trans., “Chapter 17: Autumn Floods,” in *Wandering on the Way: Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), 153.

¹² The comparison of views in the *Zhuangzi* and *Daodejing* texts is interesting at this point. According to the commonly accepted interpretation of *dao* in the *Daodejing*, the concept *dao* is the primary and overarching metaphysical concept that unifies all the narrower, smaller perspectives (those of the multitude, *wanwu*) and unites them. By contrast, the *Zhuangzi* achieves transcendence from narrowness by upholding a plurality of perspectives. Refer to the discussion of this issue by Chad Hansen in *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

¹³ A. C. Graham reads the three kinds of strategies in conjunction with chapter 2 of the *Zhuangzi* in order to shed light on what Zhuangzi might have meant. Graham argues that these three phrases are developed by Zhuangzi in his evaluation of argument strategies. Discussed in A. C. Graham, *Chuang-tzu: The Inner Chapters*, 25f.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, chap. 2, p. 58.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

¹⁷ The Chinese term “*dao*” is often translated “way,” “road,” or “path.” In Chinese, the term can designate both the physical path itself and the process of traveling along it. The phrase “the way comes about as we walk it (*dao xing zhi er cheng*)” captures the dual sense of *dao*. Zhuangzi here is clearly articulating the process aspect as more fundamental. This supports the argument in this article that Zhuangzi is less concerned with discovering the “truth” or the “way” than with how we select and travel on the different pathways.

¹⁸ Watson, *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings*, chap. 4, 59–60.

¹⁹ Graham (2001), chap. 1, 43.