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FOUR

*Zhuangzi's Attitude Toward Language and His Skepticism*¹

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A tension stands at the heart of the *Zhuangzi*. Sometimes, Zhuangzi seems to advocate radical skepticism and relativism. This occurs especially in his second chapter, the "Discussion on Making All Things Equal."² At other times, however, Zhuangzi seems to make a variety of factual claims and to endorse and condemn various ways of living, in apparent disregard of any skeptical or relativist considerations. His advocacy of uselessness in the fourth chapter, for example, would seem to be an instance of this (Watson 1968, 63–66). Naturally, then, the question arises: how can we reconcile Zhuangzi's apparently skeptical and relativist passages with his apparently nonskeptical, nonrelativist ones? Surely this is one of the most fundamental questions an interpreter of Zhuangzi must face. The answer given will color the rest of what one says about the text.

In recent years, a variety of answers to this question have been proposed. Some authors, like Chad Hansen, have argued that Zhuangzi is sincere in defending radical skepticism and relativism, at least regarding evaluative judgments. If Zhuangzi nonetheless expresses evaluative opinions, it is only because it is as natural for him to do so as it is for birds to sing in trees (Hansen in Mair 1983, 38–40).³ Others have tried to limit Zhuangzi's skepticism and relativism in various ways so there will be no conflict in his position. A. C. Graham believes that even if Zhuangzi sweeps away all moral and prudential standards, still the imperative "respond with awareness" will

remain in force (Graham in Mair 1983, 12 ff. and Graham 1989, 193). Presumably, then, Graham would say it is only this lesson and its natural adjuncts that Zhuangzi means to convey in the non-skeptical parts of his work. Robert Eno argues that Zhuangzi is relativistic only regarding what set of skills one ought to master to connect oneself to the Dao, but he is not relativistic at all regarding the value of connecting with the Dao by means of mastering *some* set of skills or other (Eno in Smith 1991, 24).^{*} Robert Allinson argues that Zhuangzi's relativistic and nonrelativistic statements fit into a coherent picture because they are meant to apply to people in "unawakened" and "awakened" states of consciousness, respectively (Allinson 1989, 122). And this is only a sample of the proposals that have been put forward to resolve the tension between the skeptical and nonskeptical, relativist and nonrelativist elements in Zhuangzi's work.

In this paper, I shall offer a solution to the interpretative puzzle at hand. My focus will be on Zhuangzi's skepticism, although I believe that many of the same arguments can be applied to his relativism. My position can be summed up rather simply: Although Zhuangzi *argues for* radical skepticism, he does not *sincerely subscribe* to it. In other words, Zhuangzi's skepticism is "therapeutic"—he endorses it more with the desire to evoke particular reactions in the reader than as an expression of his heartfelt beliefs.

I am aware that this position may strike the reader as something of a cop-out. It seems too easy. Faced with *any* passage that conflicts with one's interpretation, couldn't one just toss up one's hands and declare the author not to be speaking sincerely? I agree that there are excellent reasons to avoid this as a general interpretative method. But I hope in the course of this paper to convince the reader that Zhuangzi is an exceptional case.

It is difficult to tell to what extent this view has been anticipated by previous English-language interpreters of Zhuangzi. Certainly I disagree with those, like Hansen, who take Zhuangzi to be a sincere and radical skeptic, and also with those, like Graham, Eno, and Allinson, who take the skeptical passages in the *Zhuangzi* to be sincere arguments for a more limited sort of skepticism. One possible earlier proponent of the therapeutic view of Zhuangzi's skepticism is Arthur Waley. Waley does not seem to hold that Zhuangzi is very skeptical at all, attributing to him, among other things, such nonskeptical positions as opposition to war and the ideals of invulnerability and technological primitivism (Waley 1939, 94–95, 76–77, and 98–99, respectively). Although Waley translates two of the major skeptical passages from the *Zhuangzi* (the butterfly dream and the irresolvability of arguments), he puts the first at the end of a passage in a section called "death" and makes no comment on it (Waley 1939, 54 and 25–26). Regarding the second, he says only that it is a parody of the logicians (Waley 1939, 24). That Waley calls the passage a "parody" suggests that he thinks it is not to be

^{*} On the issue of skill, see also the contributions to this volume by Eno and Yearly.—Eds.

taken as a sincere endorsement of skepticism; but without further comment, this suggestion remains only a hint. H. G. Creel also finds it "doubtful that they [the Daoists] actually expected to be taken altogether seriously," but like Waley he does not follow through on the remark.⁴ A more recent author who discusses the therapeutic view of Zhuangzi's skepticism in some detail is Victor Mair, but his paper to this effect is infrequently cited (Mair 1983). Other recent authors discuss the therapeutic view, but with different ideas of its scope. Lee Yearley brings it up mainly to warn against it (Yearley in Mair 1983, 137–138). Paul Kjellberg applies it to Zhuangzi's relativism but not to his skepticism (Kjellberg 1993, 96–98, 126–146, 170–171). P.J. Ivanhoe applies it to Zhuangzi's *ethical* skepticism and relativism, but not elsewhere (Ivanhoe 1993).⁵

Since I believe that the key to a therapeutic interpretation of Zhuangzi's skepticism lies in a better understanding of his attitudes toward language, much of my paper shall be devoted to examining these attitudes. In particular, I shall defend two theses: first, that Zhuangzi hopes to elicit in the reader an inclination to take words less seriously than most of us tend to, and second, that Zhuangzi is willing to use assertions to provoke changes in the reader's attitudes, without much regard for the truth of these assertions or their consistency with the rest of the text. In the second half of the paper I shall argue that Zhuangzi is not a skeptic—at least not a radical skeptic. I shall draw a distinction between radical, or "philosophical," skepticism and "everyday" skepticism, and I shall argue that although Zhuangzi asserts philosophical skepticism, he does so only therapeutically, intending the reader to draw from his assertions a rather more sensible form of everyday skepticism.

The latter part of this paper depends upon the former in two ways. First, unless one accepts the general claim that Zhuangzi is willing to argue for things he does not believe, the claim that he does so in the particular case of skepticism will not seem plausible. Second, some sense must be made of what Zhuangzi is doing when he asserts philosophical skepticism, if he does not intend to be convincing the reader of its truth. I shall argue that Zhuangzi means to assist the reader in taking her beliefs less seriously. This view fits quite neatly with the view expressed in the first part, that Zhuangzi wishes to see the reader take words, and what people can express with words, less seriously.

Taking Words Less Seriously

As I have just suggested, I believe Zhuangzi would like to see us take what people have to say—the claims and evaluations they make, the distinctions they draw—less seriously.⁶ I shall often say simply that Zhuangzi wishes to see us take *words* less seriously. To take something "less seriously," for the

purposes of this paper, is to reduce one's esteem for it, put less stock and credence in it, and be willing to play around with it in a disrespectful way for humorous or other ends. I think it is rather clear that Zhuangzi takes this attitude toward those claims, evaluations, and distinctions that we may put into words. From beginning to end, the Inner Chapters are stuffed with passages seemingly designed to reduce our seriousness in the face of assertion, whether that assertion is Zhuangzi's own or someone else's.

The *Zhuangzi* begins⁷ with the story of Kun, a huge fish roe that turns into a bird thousands of miles across and journeys to the southern darkness (Watson 1968, 29–31). Zhuangzi claims that this story is recorded in a book called the *Universal Harmony*. Neither the claim about the fish nor the claim about the book seem sincerely intended to convince. Instead—as Watson suggests in a footnote⁸—Zhuangzi seems to be mocking the texts, histories, and tales of antiquity, as well as the philosophers of other schools who cite them to support their assertions. If so, then this passage is designed to incline us to take such stories and such philosophers less seriously.

But the story of the Kun has more to it than this. Zhuangzi also uses it to make a point about perspective.⁹ The cicada and the little dove laugh at the Kun (now called Peng) and say that when they make an effort to fly, they may get as far as the elm or sapanwood tree but sometimes they don't make it and just fall down on the ground. They are full of self-pride, and judging the Peng by comparison with themselves, they conclude that he cannot in fact make the full journey that the *Universal Harmony* records. I believe that there is meant to be an implicit comparison here between the reader and these small birds. Like them, we judge the tale by comparison with our own capacities and find it implausible. Being small creatures, we cannot understand great things like the Peng (and the rest of the *Zhuangzi*?). On this interpretation of the passage, Zhuangzi clearly hopes that we do not take our own views too seriously, realizing that we are small creatures with limited perspectives.

Finally, Zhuangzi is setting himself up to have what *he* says taken less seriously. He undermines his own credibility by telling such a tale and frustrates the reader's natural inclination to interpret the book as expressing the true opinions of its author. This passage, then, sets the stage beautifully for a book full of fantastical tales and wild assertions, and it casts doubt on the credibility of all the three players in any work of philosophy: the reader, the author, and the author's opponents. Except in the case of the reader and the little birds, Zhuangzi's focus is not so much on the merit of the positions as it is on the use of words. What is called into question in this passage is not Zhuangzi's or the other philosophers' *beliefs* so much as their honesty and the quality of their argumentative technique. In Zhuangzi's case, it is a lack of a reliable connection between what he says and what he believes that undermines his credibility. In the case of the other philosophers, it is a failure

to restrain themselves to only legitimate forms of support. For diverse reasons, then, what Zhuangzi, the philosophers, and the reader have to say has failed to earn respect.

A few pages later, Zhuangzi speaks more explicitly about language. A person named Jian Wu describes the speech of one Jie Yu as "big and nothing to back it up . . . wild and wide of the mark, never coming near human affairs." However, Lian Shu, who seems to speak for Zhuangzi, responds that "from his dust and leavings alone you could mold a Yao or a Shun" (Watson 1968, 33–34).¹⁰ The description of Jie Yu's speech sounds a bit like a description of Zhuangzi's own, or at least some of it. The Kun/Peng story could certainly be described as wild and never coming near human affairs. As if to bolster an implicit comparison here, Zhuangzi's friend Huizi a little later on describes Zhuangzi's words as "big and useless," and Zhuangzi does not object (Watson 1968, 35). I doubt, then, that Zhuangzi would be too bothered if the reader did not place much credence in his words.

In fact, Zhuangzi uses several devices throughout the Inner Chapters that seem deliberately intended to prevent the reader from taking too seriously anything he has to say. One such device is his straight-faced telling of fantastical tales. Another is putting his own words in other people's mouths.¹¹ More than half of the Inner Chapters is in quotation.¹² Zhuangzi's words are spoken by madmen, cripples, beggars, and dukes alike—and many of them by Confucius. Sometimes, especially with Confucius, it is hard to know whether the words being spoken are meant to have Zhuangzi's approval or disapproval.¹³ At other times, Zhuangzi will make a claim, apparently in his own voice, then turn around and bring it into question.¹⁴ One such example is the following: "Because right and wrong appeared, the Way was injured, and because the Way was injured, love became complete. But do such things as completion and injury really exist, or do they not?" (Watson 1968, 41). Zhuangzi goes on to discuss completion and injury further, but without any clear consequence for his claims about love and the Way. This first claim is left hanging, its presuppositions brought into doubt but never satisfactorily clarified.

If Zhuangzi seeks to prevent his own words from being taken too seriously, so also does he seek to prevent the words of others from being taken too seriously. Two techniques he uses toward this effect are mockery and reversal. Mocking someone's speech, if effective, is a direct way of dispelling seriousness about it. The mocker's usual aim in mockery is to discredit the subject of the mockery and get the hearers (or readers) to laugh at him. By reversal, I mean Zhuangzi's tendency to make statements that are the reverse of seeming truisms or ordinary judgments. To the extent that Zhuangzi may succeed in casting a truism in doubt, he succeeds to some extent in undermining the credibility of any statement that seems less certain than the truism initially did.

The *Zhuangzi* is full of mockery, but one of the most successful mockeries is the mockery of logic that occupies a large part of the second chapter. A. C. Graham tries valiantly to make logical sense of all the arguments in this chapter, but the attempt seems strained (Graham 1981, 52–56). The following passage, for example, is most naturally read as a deliberate jest at the expense of the logicians:

Now I am going to make a statement here. I don't know whether it fits into the category of other people's statements or not. But whether it fits into their category or whether it doesn't, it obviously fits into some category. So in that respect it is no different from their statements. However, let me try making my statement.

There is a beginning. There is a not yet beginning to be a beginning. There is a not yet beginning to be a not yet beginning to be a beginning. There is being. There is nonbeing. There is a not yet beginning to be nonbeing. Suddenly there is nonbeing. But I do not know, when it comes to nonbeing, which is really being and which is nonbeing. Now I have just said something. But I don't know whether what I have said has really said something or whether it hasn't said something. (Watson 1968, 42–43)¹⁵

In other parts of the Inner Chapters, Zhuangzi's mockery takes on a variety of other targets, including the sages, burial customs, and—a particular favorite of his—Confucius.

Another technique Zhuangzi employs to encourage his reader to take less seriously what people say is reversal, defined briefly above. Some of the ordinary truisms that Zhuangzi reverses include: that we should strive to be useful (see, for example, Watson 1968, 35, 63–66), that death is worse than life (see, for example, Watson 1968, 47, 80, 83–87), and that one should seek benevolence and righteousness (see, for example, Watson 1968, 90).¹⁶ One might read these reversals as evidence that Zhuangzi actually thought that we ought to be useless, disregard the difference between life and death, and forget benevolence and righteousness. But another possibility—one that I think coheres better with the body and the tone of the *Zhuangzi*—is to look at these reversals not as full-blown attempts to convince, but merely as attempts to undermine our faith in these truisms, to shake our convictions to a certain extent, and thereby reduce our likelihood of putting too much stock in such claims. Raising such doubts may be necessary for fruitful inquiry or action.

But I am anticipating myself somewhat, since my interpretation of what Zhuangzi is doing with his reversals depends on my view that Zhuangzi does not always subscribe to the positions he argues for, and my defense of this latter view does not come until later. The main point of the present section is only this: to make plausible the view that Zhuangzi wishes to see his readers

take what people have to say less seriously. Exactly which devices assist Zhuangzi toward this end may be a matter of some debate, although I think they include much of what we find in the *Zhuangzi*: improbable tales, statements made and then questioned, dubious and incomprehensible claims, Daoist utterances from unlikely or disreputable sources, mockery, inconsistencies, and reversals of ordinary judgments.

Reasons to Take Words Less Seriously

I have argued that Zhuangzi wishes us to take less seriously what people have to say, but I have not yet provided any reasons *why* Zhuangzi might wish such a thing. What follows are three reasons I think Zhuangzi may have had for wishing us to take words less seriously. In discussing these three reasons, I shall be laying out the basic components of what I take to be Zhuangzi's philosophy of language.*

*First Reason To Take Words Less Seriously: the Ineffability of Skill*¹⁷

Zhuangzi wishes to provoke in the reader a certain amount of disrespect for human assertion in part, I believe, because he sees people as tending to overestimate the capacity of words, and rules expressible in words, to capture what is important in the world and to provide a successful basis for action.¹⁸ The clearest statement of Zhuangzi's views on this point, ironically, is found in the Outer Chapters and so may not have come from Zhuangzi himself.¹⁹ The passage is worth quoting in its entirety.

Duke Huan was in his hall reading a book. The Wheelwright Pian, who was in the yard below chiseling a wheel, laid down his mallet and chisel, stepped up into the hall, and said to Duke Huan, "This book Your Grace is reading—may I venture to ask whose words are in it?"

"The words of sages," said the duke.

"Are the sages still alive?"

"Dead long ago," said the duke.

"In that case, what you are reading there is nothing but the chaff and dregs of the men of old!"

"Since when does a wheelwright have permission to comment on the books I read?" said Duke Huan. "If you have some explanation, well and good. If not, it's your life!"

Wheelwright Pian said, "I look at it from the point of view of my own work. When I chisel a wheel, if the blows of the mallet are

* Compare Schwitzgebel's account of the problem with language to Kjellberg (page 13), Loy (page 57) and Berkson (page 112).—Eds.

too gentle, the chisel slides and won't take hold. But if they're too hard, it bites in and won't budge. Not too gentle, not too hard—you can get it in your hand and feel it in your mind. You can't put it into words, and yet there's a knack to it somehow. I can't teach it to my son, and he can't learn it from me. So I've gone along for seventy years and at my age I'm still chiseling wheels. When the men of old died, they took with them the things that couldn't be handed down. So what you are reading there must be nothing but the chaff and dregs of the men of old." (Watson 1968, 152–153)

For Wheelwright Pian, rules expressible in words are inadequate to convey the special knack required for the successful carving of wheels. Likewise, he believes that explicit rules and statements cannot convey whatever it is the duke seeks in the book he is reading.²⁰ Since the duke's book contains the words of sages, we might suppose that he hopes to get from it the keys to virtue, power, happiness, successful living, or some such. If Wheelwright Pian is speaking for Zhuangzi, we may guess that Zhuangzi holds these things also to elude adequate formulation in words.

In the Inner Chapters, the clearest example of a special knack like the wheelwright's which cannot be conveyed in words is in the story of Cook Ding.²¹ As Cook Ding describes himself, when he first began cutting oxen he could see only the whole ox, but as time passed he saw less and less of it. Now, he says, "I go at it by spirit and don't look with my eyes. Perception and understanding have come to a stop and the spirit moves where it wants" (Watson 1968, 50–51). Cook Ding, in setting aside perception and understanding, seems to be doing what "Confucius" later describes as "fasting of the mind" (Watson 1968, 57–58). It is important to note that Cook Ding is described as having latched on to "the secret of caring for life," since this suggests, as does the story of Wheelwright Pian, that what Zhuangzi sees as ineffable are not just the skills of particular crafts, but the skills required for successful living in general.

Perhaps there are others in the Inner Chapters who are meant as negative examples, performing actions artlessly and clumsily, in the rigid fashion that would presumably be characteristic of those who use explicit doctrines and linguistically expressible rules to guide their behavior. The logician Huizi would be an obvious candidate (at least when he is not exercising his skill at logic-chopping), and indeed in the first chapter we find him smashing a huge gourd because he cannot find a use for it that fits with his simple rules for the use of gourds—the gourd was too heavy for a water container and too large and unwieldy for dippers (Watson 1968, 34). Zhuangzi is disgusted with him and suggests that he might have used the gourd as a great tub for floating around on rivers and lakes. On the same page, we find reference to a man of Song who is successful in selling ceremonial hats in Song, but fails to sell them in Yue where the people have different customs and no use for

such hats. The error common to both Huizi and the man of Song is that they find a practice successful in their usual context and so attempt to apply it in a new and different situation, where it fails. Perhaps it is not that Huizi and the man of Song follow rules in their behavior that leads them astray *per se*—more sophisticated rules would have sufficed to save them from their errors—but the errors they make are characteristic of the types of errors that anyone who is rule- and doctrine-bound will tend to make. They are errors of excessive rigidity.

Think of the difference between a beginning and an expert cook. The beginning cook will follow the directions in the cookbook exactly, and so doing may be successful in a limited range of circumstances. She guides her behavior by explicit, linguistically formulated rules, the rules in the cookbook.²² If there is any kind of change in circumstances—if the ingredients available are just a little different from what is called for, or if there is a shortage of oven space, or if the diners have tastes that require some accommodation—the beginning cook runs a substantial risk of failure. Like Huizi or the man of Song, she will be at a loss if the rules she knows do not lead to the result she desires. As her cooking improves, however, she will begin, like Wheelwright Pian, to develop a skill that eludes precise formulation in words. She will be able to improvise on recipes and adapt to a wide variety of changes in circumstance; she will know how and how much to knead a loaf of bread to get the rise she desires; she will know how the soup would taste if she added another bay leaf. This kind of knowledge is acquired only by practice, and could not be expressed in a thousand cookbooks.*

Zhuangzi would like his readers to appreciate that most things of human importance are like cooking in this respect. Consider as further examples: walking, talking, teaching, making a good impression, being a good husband or wife, maintaining one's health. To all these things, there is a knack that cannot be summed up in words. This is part of why Zhuangzi would like to see us take words less seriously.

Second Reason To Take Words Less Seriously: the Limitations of Human Judgment

It would be a mistake, I think, to hold that the ineffability of skill is the only, or even the primary, reason for Zhuangzi's stand against taking what people have to say too seriously. Another very important set of considerations are

* Note that Schwitzgebel here values skill for the efficiency and adaptability with which it accomplishes its goals. This is different from Yearley's focus on the psychological or "spiritual" fulfillment that accompanies skillful performance (p. 158). It is also different from Kjellberg's emphasis on the ability of the skillful individual to select goals well in a changing and unpredictable world (p. 12), the absence of which ability keeps Huizi from being a paradigm of skill even though he is an effective arguer. —Eds.

Zhuangzi's opinions about the limitations of human judgment. If what we believe about a subject is suspect, then clearly, so also is what we have to say about the subject.

I shall not at this point, however, discuss Zhuangzi's views regarding the limitations of human judgment. I do not mean to slight the importance of these considerations as justification for Zhuangzi's view that we should take less seriously the things people say and the claims they make. On the contrary, I believe that such considerations may be the strongest among those that Zhuangzi can adduce in favor of such a conclusion. Nonetheless, a discussion of Zhuangzi's views about the limitations of human judgment could only be properly conducted hand-in-hand with a discussion of Zhuangzi's skepticism, since obviously the two are intimately related, perhaps even indistinguishable; and the discussion of skepticism awaits the elaboration of some further points. I pause here only to highlight one thing: To the extent Zhuangzi manages to bring into question the warrant for our beliefs, he grants us license to take with a grain of salt any claims we may make on the basis of those beliefs.

Third Reason To Take Words Less Seriously: What Words Have To Say Is Not Fixed²³

Finally, I shall consider what probably comes to mind most readily when Zhuangzi's "view of language" is discussed: what he explicitly says about language in the "Discussion on Making All Things Equal." Like most of Zhuangzi's other claims in this chapter, I think his claims here about language are exaggerated. But even under the weakest possible interpretation, what Zhuangzi says about words in this chapter suggests that he thinks they ought to be taken less seriously.

Zhuangzi's claims about language in this chapter are rather mysterious at a first reading. One thing that seems to be important are boundaries. Zhuangzi says, "The Way has never known boundaries; speech has no constancy. But because of [the recognition of a] 'this', there came to be boundaries" (Watson 1968, 43). Boundaries and categories are also associated with the injury of the Way (Watson 1968, 41), and presented as foreign to it (Watson 1968, 40–41). Apparently on the basis of such claims, Zhuangzi says that the sage does not discriminate, and that "those who discriminate fail to see" (Watson 1968, 44). What can Zhuangzi mean by all this?

It is crucial to notice that the use of words requires drawing boundaries between things. Thus, the remarks about boundaries and speech are related. Suppose the two of us are together at an aquarium and I remark, "How beautiful that green and yellow striped fish is!" To make such a remark meaningfully, I must presume that distinctions of some sort can be drawn between a fish and what is not a fish, what is green and what is not green, what is beautiful and what is not beautiful, and so on. I need not

presume that these distinctions can be made absolutely precise, nor do I need to be able to outline plausible criteria for distinguishing between the things in question—but I do need to be able to pick out to my own satisfaction at least a few clear cases on either side of these distinctions. If I would be at a loss to think of any design that I would not call a stripe, or if I could not to my own satisfaction come up with plausible examples of things that were not fishes, my remark at the aquarium would be meaningless. Or, if meaningful, its meaning would at least be inscrutable to those around me.²⁴ I might just as easily have said it while pointing at a water fountain.*

Thus, boundaries are crucial to language. Seeming to acknowledge this, Zhuangzi says that the Way has never known boundaries and that the sage does not discriminate between things. Of particular importance in understanding this claim, I think, is a passage a few pages farther along in which talk of “discriminations” surfaces again. A man named Wang Ni three times says he doesn’t know (actually he *asks* how he could know), and then says,

If a man sleeps in a damp place, his back aches and he ends up half paralyzed, but is this true of a loach? If he lives in a tree, he is terrified and shakes with fright, but is this true of a monkey? Of these creatures, which one knows the proper place to live? Men eat the flesh of grass-fed and grain-fed animals, deer eat grass, centipedes find snakes tasty, and hawks and falcons relish mice. Of these four, which knows how food ought to taste? Monkeys pair with monkeys, deer go out with deer, and fish play around with fish. Men claim that Maoqiang 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? (Watson 1968, 45–46)

In this passage, Wang Ni adopts a type of relativism toward aesthetic and moral judgments, and uses it as a basis for rejecting aesthetic and moral discriminations.²⁵ Since this is one of the clearest examples of a passage in the Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi* in which a reason is given for the rejection of discriminations, we might look at it as a clue. We wish to know what basis there might be for the general rejection of discriminations that Zhuangzi says characterizes the sage. Perhaps it is some more general form of relativism?

If we continue to look at the Watson translation, as we have been doing, it is hard to find any passage that unambiguously suggests such a generalized

*Compare Berkson’s account of “relational relativism” (p. 104).—Eds.

form of relativism. There is a passage, however, that although ambiguous on Watson's translation, comes out strongly relativistic on Chad Hansen's translation (Hansen in Mair 1983). In Hansen's translation, 是 *shi*, when contrasted with 非 *fei*, is intended to mean affirmation, and *fei* denial. Where a slash divides two words the first is Chinese, the second an English translation. Colons separate alternate English translations.

There is nothing that is not bi/that, there is nothing that is not shi/this. From bi/that you do not see it; from zhi/know:mastery you zhi/know it. Thus it is said: "bi/that comes from shi/this and shi/this is based on bi/that." This is the theory of the simultaneous birth of *shi-bi*. . . Shi/this is also bi/that. Bi/that is also shi/this. There is one *shi-fei*, here is one *shi-fei*. Is there really shi/this and bi/that? Or is there no shi/this and bi/that? Where neither shi/this nor bi/that is in opposition, we call "axis of daos." When the axis begins to generate a circle you can respond without limit. There is no limit to what you can *shi* and no limit to what you can *fei*.²⁶

Having already noted the importance for language of categories—boundaries between "that" and "this"—we can see that this passage suggests a radical view of words and distinctions. For any distinction we might wish to make, Zhuangzi argues, and for any object that might be classified on one side or the other of the distinction, there is a perspective from which the object will be classified on one side (this) and a perspective from which the object will be classified on the other (that). Thus, from one perspective the green and yellow striped thing I am pointing at will fit into the category "fish"; from another perspective, it will not fit into that category. From one perspective the "fish" is green and yellow, from another perspective it is not. There is no limit to what one can affirm and deny.²⁷ As if to illustrate, Zhuangzi says (a few pages later), "There is nothing in the world bigger than the tip of an autumn hair, and Mount Tai is tiny. No one has lived longer than a dead child, and Pengzu died young. Heaven and earth were born at the same time I was, and the ten thousand things are one with me" (Watson 1968, 43).²⁸ If however, as Zhuangzi seems to suggest in these passages, words cannot reliably be attached to things, any word potentially picking out any object, then there can be no verbal communication or transfer of meaning between people, unless merely by accident. Zhuangzi raises this possibility at the beginning of his discussion of words, suggesting that they may really be no different from the peeps of baby birds (Watson 1968, 39).

This is a very radical position to ascribe to Zhuangzi, and it runs against objections and difficulties similar to those surrounding his skeptical arguments. If Zhuangzi thinks words have no meaning, what are we to make of his text? Should we just give up on the task of interpreting him at all? Although it is a tired observation, I think it is a compelling one: if Zhuangzi

thought words had no meaning, it would be strange of him to say so. It is worth observing that at one point Zhuangzi even *corrects* Huizi's interpretation of a phrase, saying "that's not what I mean" (Watson 1968, 75).

My response to what Zhuangzi has to say about words is very much like what I shall say about his skeptical arguments. Zhuangzi need not mean all that he says and need not believe all that he argues for. In fact, I shall argue, it is appropriate for him not to, given his philosophical stance. Still, we should not grant that Zhuangzi speaks purposelessly or presents arguments completely at odds with what he believes. It would seem that Zhuangzi's point in bringing up the perspective relativity of words and statements is to attack other philosophers—Confucians, Mohists, and other "ordinary men" who make fine discriminations "and parade their discriminations before others" (Watson 1968, 44). To the extent that Zhuangzi raises doubts in our minds about the fixity of words and the universality of judgments, he prevents our taking too seriously such doctrines and discriminations. Regardless of whether one takes Zhuangzi at his word in these passages on language or whether one takes a more moderate view like my own, the passages indicate that Zhuangzi believes some reduction of our faith in the credibility of categories and distinctions is in order.

The three arguments just presented are intended to be arguments Zhuangzi might have given for taking what people have to say less seriously. As stated, however, they do not prove exactly what I wish them to prove. Even if in each of the three cases the arguments were to be taken literally and found wholly persuasive, it seems that their end is only this: to show that we ought not put too much stock and credence in what people have to say. The two conclusions are not quite equivalent. One might imagine, for example, a deadly earnest skeptic who did not put much faith in people's words, but nonetheless took those words quite seriously and in a grave and diligent manner sought in every case to prove their claims groundless. The difference between reducing one's stock and credence in a claim and refusing to take it seriously is one of attitude. One who does not take a claim seriously will be willing, for example, to play around with it with disrespectful humor. One who merely finds a claim not entirely credible may or may not be so willing.

Zhuangzi does not provide any *argument* that one should, in reducing one's stock and credence in what people have to say, also go the extra step and take what they have to say less seriously. Still, I think it is clear that he wishes the reader to go this extra step. In the first section of this paper, I outlined some of Zhuangzi's rhetorical devices toward this end. In the present section I have outlined some arguments he may have given to encourage the reader to cast aside at least the most substantial obstacle to her taking words less seriously: an undue faith in the reliability and usefulness of what people have to say.

Must Zhuangzi Mean What He Says?

So far I have only explored the first of the two attitudes toward language I attribute to Zhuangzi. I have gone into the issue in some depth not only because it has relevance to the remainder of this paper but also because I feel it warrants elaboration in its own right. In what follows, however, I shall be more brief.

Recall that the central aim of this paper is to defend the position that Zhuangzi is not a skeptic in any strong sense of the word. Since I believe that there are passages in the Inner Chapters of a radically skeptical sort, I am faced with a tension that requires resolution. We might formulate this tension as a question: If Zhuangzi is not a skeptic, why does he appear to make skeptical arguments? I seek to resolve this tension by arguing that Zhuangzi does not sincerely endorse the radical skepticism he defends. In other words, when speaking as a skeptic, Zhuangzi does not mean what he says.²⁹ If there is an important point to be drawn from Zhuangzi's skeptical passages (and I think there is), it is not what one would gather from a literal reading of them. However, because there is a strong presumption that an author, when speaking as a philosopher (and not as a writer of fiction), believes what he asserts, I hope to show two things to counteract this presumption: (a) that Zhuangzi both has a general disposition to assert things he does not believe and has a good reason for doing so, and (b) that strong evidence exists elsewhere in the text to suggest that Zhuangzi is not a skeptic. The argument toward (b) shall not appear until the next section of this paper. The present section is devoted to the defense of (a), which may be seen as a restatement of what I described in the opening section as Zhuangzi's second attitude toward language.

It should be clear that Zhuangzi's first attitude toward language feeds into his second. To the extent Zhuangzi is disinclined to take words seriously he will be predisposed to utter things without careful regard for their truth. Like Zhang Wuzi (Watson 1968, 47), Zhuangzi speaks reckless words and hopes to be listened to recklessly. He tells absurd tales such as that of the Kun/Peng and that of the shaman who could predict the fortune of a man and the day of his death "as though he were a god himself" (Watson 1968, 94-95). He weaves fanciful dialogues in which it is sometimes hard to judge what voice, if any, is meant to be his own. He mocks, teases, and mouths absurdities. In short, Zhuangzi exhibits a *playfulness* with language that pays little heed to truth. Some examples of such playfulness have already come out in this paper. Many more can be found in the text. Just to cite one further example:

Tian Gen was wandering on the sunny side of Yin Mountain.
When he reached the banks of the Liao River, he happened to

meet a Nameless Man. He questioned the man, saying, "Please may I ask how to rule the world?"

The Nameless Man said, "Get away from me you peasant! What kind of dreary question is that! I'm just about to set off with Creator. And if I get bored with that, then I'll ride on the Light-and-Lissome Bird out beyond the six directions, wandering in the village of Not-Even-Anything and living in the Broad-and-Borderless field. What business do you have coming with this talk of governing the world and disturbing my mind?" (Watson 1968, 93-94)

Often, as here, it is clear that Zhuangzi intends to be taken with a grain of salt.

But even when Zhuangzi seems to be speaking in earnest, we cannot be sure that the conclusions most obviously to be drawn from his tales are exactly the conclusions he endorses. Consider this story from the Outer Chapters:³⁰ "Zhuangzi was walking in the mountains when he saw a huge tree, its branches and leaves thick and lush. A woodcutter paused by its side but made no move to cut it down. When Zhuangzi asked the reason, he replied, 'There's nothing it could be used for!' Zhuangzi said, 'Because of its worthlessness, this tree is able to live out the years Heaven gave it'" (Watson 1968, 209). So far the story looks quite familiar: it is similar to two parables in the Inner Chapters about trees whose uselessness enables them to live out their natural term (Watson 1968, 63-65). The moral of all three stories seems obvious, if a little perverse: strive to be useless, so that you may live undisturbed and uninjured by the demands of others (cf. the story of Crippled Shu, Watson 1968, 66). But the story in the Outer Chapters continues,

Down from the mountain, the Master stopped for a night at the house of an old friend. The friend, delighted, ordered his son to kill a goose and prepare it. "One of these geese can cackle and the other can't," said the son. "May I ask, please, which I should kill?"

"Kill the one that can't cackle," said the host.

The next day Zhuangzi's disciples questioned him. "Yesterday there was a tree on the mountain that gets to live out the years Heaven gave it because of its worthlessness. Now there's our host's goose that gets killed because of its worthlessness. What position would you take in such a case, Master?"

Zhuangzi laughed and said, "I'd probably take a position halfway between worth and worthlessness. But halfway between worth and worthlessness, though it may seem to be a good place, really isn't—you'll never get away from trouble there. It would be very different, though, if you were to climb up on the Way and its Virtue and go drifting and wandering, neither praised nor damned, now a dragon, now a snake, shifting with the times, never willing to hold one course only." (Watson 1968, 209)

In this last part of the story, Zhuangzi goes halfway back on his original position, settling between worth and worthlessness; then he suggests that even this position is not the ideal, and offers an alternative that is rather difficult to comprehend, probably half in jest and half as a pointer toward something he cannot or does not wish to state explicitly.³¹ Quite possibly his point is one about the rejection of rigid rules on the matter (which might be seen by the unenlightened as a kind of "halfway" position). But if we take this dialogue to be authentic, it casts into question the function of the parables on uselessness in the Inner Chapters. Why should Zhuangzi tell a parable with a moral to which he himself does not subscribe?

Perhaps Zhuangzi knows that his readers could not be convinced to abandon completely their desire to be useful. What he hopes for instead, and what he aims at in telling these parables, is to persuade the reader to rethink her commitment to usefulness, reduce it, and bring it into line with an appreciation of uselessness. In Lee Yearley's words, Zhuangzi may be employing a "rhetoric of exaggeration" intended to shake our normal perception of the world (Yearley in Mair 1983, 137).³²

Yearley offers an example of how the rhetoric of exaggeration might work in another situation. We are supposed to imagine ourselves having a gangrenous leg and Zhuangzi's advising us not to go to the hospital to have it treated. Zhuangzi points out that the leg has a variety of new colors and really is much more interesting than the usual sort of leg. If we object that the complications may be fatal? Zhuangzi's response, in this imaginary dialogue, would be to ask why it is we think life better than death. The function of such a stance on Zhuangzi's part would be merely to provoke reflection and generate new ideas. He himself, we imagine, would go to the hospital in a similar situation. If the parables on uselessness in the Inner Chapters are indeed meant to function like this imaginary dialogue, as is suggested by the story from the Outer Chapters cited above, then they provide an example of a gap between what Zhuangzi says and what he believes—and not just when Zhuangzi is mouthing obvious nonsense or speaking *qua* fiction writer, but when he is making a substantial philosophical point.

Even if the story from the Outer Chapters is not authentic, it should strike us as plausible. Given the wildness of some of Zhuangzi's claims, it is natural for the reader to suspect that at least sometimes Zhuangzi employs, in the Inner Chapters, a rhetoric of exaggeration. And if we admit this possibility, why not concede the chance that Zhuangzi, in his skeptical arguments specifically, does not subscribe to the position for which he seems to be arguing?

Before concluding this section, I have two more remarks to make in defense of the view that Zhuangzi does not always mean what he says. The first remark is this: If Zhuangzi sincerely believes something like what I have presented as his "first reason to take words less seriously"—that is, that most of what is important in the world is not expressible in words—then he prob-

ably does not think that his ideas, no matter how earnestly he attempts to express them, can be given full justice by the words he uses. Thus, to some extent he cannot quite believe what he says. Furthermore, if Zhuangzi sincerely adopts anything like the perspectivism about categories that I offered as his "third reason to take words less seriously," then for this reason also we have license to wonder about the connection between what he appears to be saying and what he believes. I think these points are worth noting, although by themselves they cannot quite explain the appearance of skeptical passages in a nonskeptical text. The first cannot do so because it cannot account for *radical* deviations between what Zhuangzi says and what he believes, but only for small deviations and for confusing approximations. I believe that the second cannot do so because I believe that Zhuangzi does not in fact subscribe to a perspectivism about categories sufficiently radical to justify our attributing such a large divergence between what he appears to say and what he means to be saying by it.

As noted in earlier sections, Zhuangzi sees limitations and problems with the use of words that lead him to advocate their being taken less seriously. However, if Zhuangzi were simply to say that he thinks words ought to be taken less seriously, he would risk undermining his own project, for he would tempt the reader to take him as speaking in a serious vein. The reader, then, might reject Zhuangzi as a man who does not practice what he preaches; or, if the reader found Zhuangzi's arguments convincing, she might be inclined to replace a serious Mohism, for example, with a serious adherence to what Zhuangzi says. The latter, I suspect, Zhuangzi would judge to be a scant improvement. Thus, Zhuangzi is better off not quite saying what he thinks about any particular issue, or at least making it unclear which among the things he says are the things he means sincerely. Zhuangzi does best to work by example and parable, weaving ridiculous tales, confounding and mocking his opponents, squawking absurdities. And if in the end the reader takes no doctrine, no earnestly expressed judgment, no concoction of words too seriously, Zhuangzi's or otherwise, Zhuangzi will have succeeded in his project. We ought to be quite wary, then, of what Zhuangzi says, since he has good reason to connect it only tenuously with what he believes.

Zhuangzi's Skepticism

Finally, I am ready to present my position on the apparently skeptical passages in the *Zhuangzi*. First I shall draw a distinction between skepticism in the philosopher's sense, or radical skepticism, and skepticism in an everyday sense. Then I shall defend the following position: Although Zhuangzi argues for radical skepticism, in the end he is only a skeptic in the everyday sense. This claim may be broken into three component claims: (1) Zhuangzi argues

for (at least one version of) radical skepticism; (2) Zhuangzi is not a radical skeptic; and (3) Zhuangzi is a skeptic in the everyday sense. Each of these component claims shall be supported in turn.

Two Kinds of Skepticism

When nonphilosophers speak of a skeptic, they usually mean either someone who does not subscribe to a particular claim or body of claims (for example, a "skeptic about parapsychological phenomena" or a "religious skeptic"), or they mean someone who holds higher standards of evidence than most, usually in a particular domain (for example, "she tends to be skeptical about what she reads in the newspapers," or "he is skeptical about the claims of modern science," although one might also hear "so-and-so is a skeptical person in general, and hard to convince"). The philosophical position "skepticism," in any of its various forms, is something quite different. Roughly, a skeptic is someone who thinks that none of her beliefs constitute knowledge, or at least none of her beliefs in some quite broad and general domain, such as beliefs about the "external world," or beliefs arrived at inductively. Although your Uncle Randolph may be a skeptic about paranormal phenomena and quite a skeptical fellow in general, it is unlikely that he is a skeptic in the philosopher's sense, unless he is either a madman or (perhaps) a philosopher.

Up to this point, when I have claimed that Zhuangzi is not a skeptic, I have meant that he is not a skeptic in the radical, philosopher's sense. From this point on, however, I shall not refer to "skepticism" *simpliciter*, but to either "radical skepticism" or "everyday skepticism."*

Zhuangzi Argues for Radical Skepticism

I shall now defend the first component of my position on Zhuangzi's skepticism: that he argues for radical skepticism. My strategy shall consist primarily in just presenting what I see to be the more radically skeptical passages from the Inner Chapters, since I think they more or less speak for themselves.

In saying that Zhuangzi argues for radical or philosophical skepticism, I do not mean to presume that there is a single unified position, "philosophical skepticism," for which Zhuangzi argues. Rather there are a number of positions that fall into a class the members of which might be described as "philosophical skepticisms."³³ As noted above, these positions have in common radical, unusual doubt regarding some broad range of propositions. Descartes' skepticism about knowledge obtained via the senses is a famous example of such skepticism. Because we cannot be sure we are not dreaming, Descartes

* See editors' note on page 29.—Eds.

argues in his first *Meditation*, we cannot have knowledge through our senses; so long as it is possible that we are dreaming, sensory knowledge is an impossibility.³⁴ Zhuangzi makes a point that may be construed in a similar way. "Once Zhuang Zhou dreamt he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting and fluttering around, happy with himself and doing as he pleased. He didn't know he was Zhuang Zhou. Suddenly he woke up and there he was, solid and unmistakable Zhuang Zhou. But he didn't know if he was Zhuang Zhou who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Zhuang Zhou. Between Zhuang Zhou and a butterfly there must be some distinction! This is called the Transformation of Things" (Watson 1968, 49). Heavy weather has been made over this passage, and I do not wish to provide a detailed analysis of it.³⁵ However, it is easy to construe as an example of radical, philosophical skepticism. Zhuangzi does not know whether he is a butterfly or a human being. Presumably, then, he cannot arrive at any knowledge through his senses: he does not know whether there is really a writing desk and ink in front of him or whether there are flowers in front of him instead. If he did, he would know whether he was a butterfly or not.³⁶ Furthermore, no indication is given in this passage to suggest that any of us are better off than Zhuangzi in this respect.

Another passage, which perhaps warrants comparison with Sextus Empiricus' skepticism regarding the resolvability of arguments,³⁷ is the following: "Suppose you and I have had an argument. If you have beaten me instead of my beating you, then are you necessarily right and am I necessarily wrong? If I have beaten you instead of your beating me, then am I necessarily right and are you necessarily wrong? Is one of us right and the other wrong? Are both of us right or are both of us wrong? If you and I don't know the answer, then other people are bound to be even more in the dark" (Watson 1968, 48). Still another skeptical passage is the discussion between Nie Que and Wang Ni:

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 things know nothing?"

"How would I know that? However, suppose I try saying something. What way do I have of knowing that if I say I know something I don't really not know it? Or what way do I have of knowing that if I say I don't know something I don't really in fact know it?" (Watson 1968, 45)

Other passages in the *Zhuangzi* seem to presuppose some form or other of radical skepticism:

Now I have just said something. But I don't know whether what I have said has really said something or whether it hasn't said something. (Watson 1968, 43)

If the process continues, perhaps in time [the Creator will] transform my left arm into a rooster. In that case I'll keep watch on the night. Or perhaps in time he'll transform my right arm into a cross-bow pellet and I'll shoot down an owl for roasting. Or perhaps in time he'll transform my buttocks into cartwheels. Then, with my spirit for a horse, I'll climb up and go for a ride. What need will I ever have for a carriage again? (Watson 1968, 84)

Moreover, when he is changing, how does he know that he is really changing? And when he is not changing, how does he know that he hasn't already changed? (Watson 1968, 88)

There are a number of other examples. Given the brevity of the Inner Chapters, such radically skeptical passages warrant a fair bit of attention.

I do not think that one who chooses to read these passages as sincere attempts by Zhuangzi to express some form of philosophical skepticism can avoid the conclusion that Zhuangzi's skepticism is enormously broad and unconstrained. Those who would limit Zhuangzi's skepticism must contend with these passages in one way or another. It has been proposed by Kjellberg and Ivanhoe, for example, that Zhuangzi is merely a skeptic about the capacity of language accurately to describe things in the world.³⁸ Such a form of skepticism might, with only a little strain, account for the Nie Que and the irresolvability of arguments passages, but Zhuangzi's butterfly dream passage does not seem to depend on language in any way, nor, arguably, does the passage cited from page 84 or the animal relativism passage on p. 44–45 (since animals have no language).³⁹ Even Hansen, who seems to be willing to allow that Zhuangzi's skepticism and relativism are quite extreme, says that they are confined to "evaluative distinctions made in prescriptive discourse" (Hansen in Mair 1983, 33).⁴⁰ Thus Hansen's account runs against the same passages that Kjellberg's and Ivanhoe's do.⁴¹

Graham's account has difficulty with different passages. Graham claims that Zhuangzi's relativism does not extend to the imperative "respond with awareness," which, he says, "we all take for granted" (Graham 1983, 11–12). But to support this position, Graham must set aside the Wang Ni passage, for Wang Ni (at least in the part of the passage quoted above⁴²) seems unlikely to endorse *any* imperative, no matter how universally agreed upon. Graham says of his imperative that it amounts only to preferring intelligence to stupidity and reality to illusion (Graham in Mair 1983, 12). But couldn't one dispute these preferences? Then, following the irresolvability of arguments passage (Watson 1968, 48), Zhuangzi would be forced into skepticism on this matter also.

It may sound as though I am objecting to these authors' attempts to limit Zhuangzi's skepticism. I am not. I sympathize completely with their wish to read Zhuangzi as less than utterly skeptical. In fact, I believe the text demands such a reading. The point here is rather that no interpretation of the *Zhuangzi* along such lines could possibly cohere with a literal interpretation of everything in the Inner Chapters. At some point, the alert interpreter of the *Zhuangzi* will have to admit that Zhuangzi does not always mean what he says. Once this is admitted, if the interpreter wishes to go on and defend a view of exactly what it is Zhuangzi is skeptical about, mere appeal to passages in the *Zhuangzi* that support the proposed form of skepticism is not enough. Some general account of when and when not to take Zhuangzi at his word is required. I would like to see interpreters of the *Zhuangzi*, in general, pay more attention to this issue.

After reading the whole of the Inner Chapters, there is a natural temptation to try to read passages such as those cited above as not broadly and radically skeptical, since the overall tone of the Inner Chapters does not suggest such utter skepticism. The result of succumbing to this temptation is likely to be an unfortunate compromise: on the one hand, to do justice to the rest of the Inner Chapters these passages may be interpreted as less skeptical than they actually are, while on the other hand, to do justice to these passages, Zhuangzi's overall view may be seen as more skeptical than it really is. So long, however, as we are willing to grant a distinction between what Zhuangzi *argues for* and what he *believes*, there is no need either to twist these passages into something other than they immediately appear to be, or to see Zhuangzi as actually subscribing to skeptical views that stand starkly in tension with the rest of his work.

Zhuangzi Is Not a Radical Skeptic

Despite the fact that Zhuangzi argues for radical philosophical skepticism, I do not think he is a skeptic in this sense. Although this is the central thesis of this paper, it is a thesis for which it is difficult to provide a single coherent argument, since much of what I think makes it believable is an overall impression of the Inner Chapters that cannot be conveyed in any particular short collection of passages.

Still, I think the view admits of some defenses that may be put down on paper. One defense is to point to certain ideas in the Inner Chapters that seem to shine through the fog created by Zhuangzi's playful and frustrating use of language. Zhuangzi would like to see a greater appreciation of uselessness, less fear of death and poverty, less dogmatism, less ambition, less devotion to the state. Only a person reading with her eyes half-open could miss these themes in the book. Zhuangzi seems to have definite convictions, then, about how people ought to live. But if he were a philosophical skeptic of the radical sort suggested by the passages above, such convictions would be totally out of place.

Another defense of the view that Zhuangzi is not a philosophical skeptic is to issue a challenge to the reader: If Zhuangzi were a philosophical skeptic, then there would have to be some particular set of propositions or issues about which he was skeptical. What could this set be? The set would have to be broad enough to warrant the sweeping skepticism that inhabits the passages cited above, yet consistent with the various positive stands he seems to take through the rest of his work. Could it be that Zhuangzi rejects the possibility of sensory knowledge? Then he would have to deny that Cook Ding or Wheelwright Pian knew what they were doing. Could Zhuangzi be a skeptic regarding the issue of how one ought to live? Then his advocacy of equanimity in the face of death and the appreciation of uselessness, et cetera, would hardly make sense. Zhuangzi might be a skeptic about the power of words to convey unchangeable truths, but as I noted earlier such a skepticism would hardly be sufficient to account for the passages cited above. The butterfly dream passage, for instance, makes no reference to words.

On page seventy, Zhuangzi has a character say that you ought to "know what you can't do anything about" and be content with it. On page ninety-three, he has another character say that the sage, when he governs, "makes absolutely certain that things can do what they are supposed to do, that is all." Zhuangzi also says that "he who knows what it is that Heaven does, and knows what it is that man does, has reached the peak" (Watson 1968, 77). On the same page it is suggested that the True Man, whoever he is, has true knowledge. A little earlier on, Zhuangzi describes a man who "governs Heaven and earth, stores up the ten thousand things, . . . unifies the knowledge of what he knows, and in his mind never tastes death" (Watson 1968, 69). In all these passages, Zhuangzi seems explicitly to presuppose the possibility of various sorts of knowledge. These passages do not command as much attention as his philosophically skeptical passages and they primarily concern people in their (possibly unattainable) ideal state, but these passages may nonetheless be of some value in the argument that Zhuangzi is not a philosophical skeptic.

The idea that it would be odd or inappropriate for Zhuangzi to advocate changes in our ways of life if he were a philosophical skeptic requires a little more clarification. Although I hope that it seems plausible enough on its surface, this claim rests on a presumption that may be challenged, that is, that a philosophical skeptic regarding propositions or issues of a certain type would not advocate any position that falls within the scope of his skepticism. But this is not obviously the case. For example, one might be a philosophical skeptic not because one has any greater doubt about things than an ordinary person, but rather because one sets impossibly high standards on what is to count as knowledge. Then, one may be a philosophical skeptic and advocate as much as one pleases, so long as one avoids the word "know" (知 *zhi*) and its cognates.⁴³ I suppose one could resolve the tension between Zhuangzi's skeptical claims and his substantive positions by taking such a

line, but one might think that if Zhuangzi had a definitional focus of this sort, he would be careful not to use "know" in the passages cited above. Likewise, such an explanation of Zhuangzi's "skepticism" could hardly explain such things as his positive appraisal, without any reference to the word "know," of Clansman Tai who sometimes thought he was a horse and sometimes thought he was a cow (Watson 1968, 92).

Another way to excuse Zhuangzi for making positive claims despite global philosophical skepticism is suggested by Chad Hansen (Hansen in Mair 1983, 39). According to Hansen, Zhuangzi, though a philosophical skeptic, naturally has opinions and a desire to express them, by virtue of being human. It would make no more sense for him to attempt to prevent himself from opining and disputing than it would for him to try to stop the wind in the hollows or the peeps of baby birds. Although I believe this view of Zhuangzi has merit, it would attribute to him a degree of inconsistency I find difficult to accept. On Hansen's view, presumably, Zhuangzi is both of the opinion that a driving success for political ambition is misguided (the opinion he naturally has and expresses) and of the opinion that moderate ambition is no more warranted than driving ambition (his skeptical/relativist position).⁴⁴ I would prefer, if at all possible, to see Zhuangzi's views as more coherent and ordinary than this.

The best argument that Zhuangzi is a radical skeptic is that he sometimes seems to advocate radical skepticism. Although initially this looks like quite a compelling argument, I hope I have been able to take some of the sting out of it with my defense of the view that Zhuangzi does not always believe what he seems to endorse. Thus, the door is opened for arguments of the sort given in this section to convince us that Zhuangzi is indeed not a radical skeptic.

The reader may raise another objection at this point, for it might appear that I have worked myself into something of an interpretive predicament. On the one hand I argue that Zhuangzi does not wish for his words to be taken too seriously and that he does not always mean what he says. On the other hand, I ascribe to Zhuangzi particular views on the basis of what he does say. But if I think that there is no firm and reliable connection between what Zhuangzi says and what he believes, what is to prevent me from thinking, for instance, that he was an orthodox Mohist who simply scribbled down a lot of things he did not believe?

My answer to this objection depends on considering Zhuangzi as having been reasonably capable of predicting what effects his writings might have had upon the sympathetic reader.* I think it is fair for us to assume that

*Compare Schwitzgebel's attention to the expected effect of Zhuangzi's arguments on the reader to Kupperman's accounts of them as "educating" the emotions (p. 193) and to the descriptions of Zhuangzi's project as "therapeutic" by Kjellberg (p. 7) and Ivanhoe (p. 200).—Eds.

Zhuangzi thought these effects would be salutary, and to infer from facts of this sort something about his real philosophical positions. (I would, in fact, advocate this as a general technique for interpreting the Inner Chapters.) I have discussed at length one such effect that Zhuangzi might have hoped to induce in the reader: an inclination to take words less seriously. If we suppose that Zhuangzi did in fact aim at this effect, then it seems reasonable to infer that he thought people in general (or perhaps his audience in particular—scholarly, philosophical types) ought to take less seriously what people have to say. Another effect at which I think Zhuangzi aimed was the reduction of the reader's confidence in her own beliefs. I believe that he hoped to achieve this effect in part by means of the skeptical passages. But this is the topic of the next, and final, subsection.

Zhuangzi Is a Skeptic in the Everyday Sense

If Zhuangzi is not a philosophical skeptic and does not subscribe to the positions he endorses in his more philosophically skeptical passages, the question naturally arises, why did he write these passages in the first place? I believe he wrote these passages with a therapeutic intent—that is, to jolt the reader into a certain kind of everyday skepticism, a kind of open-mindedness that consists in putting somewhat less faith than is standard in one's own and others' beliefs.⁴⁵ Such open-mindedness may be both an epistemic and a moral boon, leading not only to a receptiveness to new evidence but also to a tolerance of people with different beliefs.*

Such a project would clearly be akin to Zhuangzi's project of making us take less seriously what we have to say. In fact, it may be described as the project of making us take less seriously what we believe. As I noted in an earlier section, the second project supports the first: if we refuse to take our beliefs too seriously, we cannot take too seriously the claims we use to express these beliefs. One might attempt to separate the two projects, arguing that although Zhuangzi wishes to have us take our words less seriously, he hopes that we hold our beliefs in earnest. To me this sounds like an improbable scenario. Not only do the skeptical passages, even if read as insincere, suggest against this, but so also do Zhuangzi's frequent attacks on conventionally accepted beliefs (such as that one ought to be useful) and his humorous endorsement of those who have quite peculiar beliefs. It is likely, then, that Zhuangzi does in fact aim to reduce the seriousness with which we take our beliefs. If so, then the skeptical passages seem a useful tool toward that effect.

It is possible of course that the skeptical passages will be too effective, and produce in the reader a full-blown philosophical skepticism, rather than a more modest kind of everyday skepticism. Possible, but unlikely. Few philosophical skeptics are made by the reading of philosophical skepticism. By far

* See Ivanhoe's discussion of David Wong's views (pp. 207–209). —Eds.

the more common effect is a momentary twinge of doubt, a brief amusement, and eventually a willingness to concede that we probably do put more stock in our beliefs than they truly deserve. My position is that Zhuangzi appreciated all this. His skeptical arguments are not meant to be taken literally and are not intended to convert the reader to any sort of radical skepticism. Rather, what Zhuangzi sought to do with his skeptical arguments was to generate the more modest type of doubt that is the province of the everyday skeptic.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Kirk Gable, Kim Kempton, P. J. Ivanhoe, and Bryan van Norden for their kind and useful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

2. See Watson 1968, 38–49. “Discussion on Making All Things Equal” is Watson’s translation of the Chinese *Qi Wu Lun*, the title of the second chapter of the *Zhuangzi*. There has been some debate over how exactly to translate the title of this chapter (see, for example, Allinson 1989, 133–137, and Graham 1981, 48), but for my purposes nothing in particular hinges on it.

In the paper, I will be focusing almost entirely on the Inner Chapters (chapters one through seven) of the *Zhuangzi*, which I take to be the authentic core of the book. It may be that the writer of the Inner Chapters was not named “Zhuangzi.” These chapters may not have even been written by a single person. I do not think that it matters much for my arguments one way or another. The Inner Chapters have a stylistic and thematic unity that suggest the work of a single person or multiple people of similar mind and intent. It is to that person or those people that I mean to refer when I use the name “Zhuangzi.”

3. Hansen alters his position somewhat in *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

4. Herrlee Creel, *Chinese Thought from Confucius to Mao Tse-Tung* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 114.

5. In Allinson 1989 there are also occasional suggestions that a therapeutic approach to Zhuangzi’s relativism might be appropriate (see, for example, p. 23), but these suggestions evaporate in Allinson’s more detailed analysis of relativism and in his discussions of particular skeptical passages (Watson 1968, 14–22, 78–96, 122–126). Allinson does, however, seem to want to attribute therapeutic intent to some other types of passages, such as those that consist of double-headed questions and the passages about use-

lessness (see, for example, 23–27, 167). Wong 1984 also briefly discusses a therapeutic view of Zhuangzi, but without particular attention to his skepticism, as does Wu 1982, 33–36.

6. See Mair 1983 for a rather different defense of this view.

7. Whether this is due to Zhuangzi himself or later compilers is uncertain, and for my purposes it does not really matter.

8. Watson 1968, 29. See also Wu 1990, 59.

9. What exactly this point is has been the subject of much debate. See, for example, Allinson 1989, 41–44, Hansen in Mair 1983, 51, and Wu 1990, 69–75.

10. Yao and Shun were legendary sage kings of the past, cultural heroes held up as exemplars by the Confucians.

11. Allinson 1989, 38 makes a similar point.

12. Although there are no quotation marks in Classical Chinese, the form “X yue” clearly indicates direct quotations.

13. See Allinson 1989, 157–166, for an interesting discussion of Zhuangzi's use of Confucius as a mouthpiece.

14. Graham may be right in interpreting some of these claims as doctrines of opponents, merely brought up for dispute and so not really asserted—but even Graham does not venture to interpret in such a way all the claims Zhuangzi makes and then questions. The example I give is not so interpreted by Graham. See Graham 1981, 51–56 for some examples of this interpretive technique.

15. I use the Watson translation here, as usual. Graham's translation is quite different, and he attempts to reconstruct something of a coherent argument from it in a long note that follows. As one might guess, however, even Graham's reconstruction only makes dubious sense.

16. Actually, these truisms seem less obviously truisms once one realizes that they are key assumptions of Mohism, Yangism, and Confucianism, respectively. On seeking and forgetting, especially, see Cua 1977.

17. Many of the ideas expressed in this section are extensions of ideas suggested to me by P. J. Ivanhoe, and can be found in his 1993. See also Eno 1991, Kjellberg 1993, 99–112, and Graham 1989, 199–202.

18. In the contemporary West, the most ardent spokesman for this position has been Michael Polanyi. See, for example, chapters 9–12 of his *Knowing and Being: Essays*, Marjorie Greene, ed. (London: Routledge, Kegan, and Paul, 1969).

19. Graham considers this passage to be from the "School of Zhuangzi." See Graham 1981, 139–140.

20. It is interesting to note that even if the sages were alive, Wheelwright Pian would have to hold that their writings could not convey what it is the duke seeks. The issue of their death is a red herring.

21. Following Watson's translation, I shall refer to the cook as "Cook Ding," but see Kjellberg 1993, 34, and Wu 1990, 285, for different interpretations of the cook's name.

22. Actually, even understanding and carrying out linguistically formulated rules requires certain ineffable skills. But this only means that the same kind of analysis can be applied at different levels of behavior: the clumsy cook may be very skillful at walking across the room to pull ingredients off the shelf.

23. This section owes a substantial debt to Hansen in Mair 1983 and Graham 1989. They are surely right in casting the kinds of arguments that appear here as part of a dialogue with the Mohists and the School of Names. I shall not explore issues of historical context here, however.

24. I do not intend to be taking any controversial stands here on the use of the word "meaning." My central point is the one about inscrutability, which I take to be fairly obvious. Notice, however, that not every noun and adjective in English works in the way I describe. For example, one can use the word "thing," even if one cannot imagine anything that is not a thing.

25. It is interesting to note, however, that Wang Ni's argument for moral relativism here hinges entirely on aesthetic examples.

26. Hansen in Mair 1983, 45–46. The passage translated here is the same as the one translated in Watson 1968, 39–40. Italics are Hansen's. Hansen's Wade-Giles romanization has been converted to Pinyin.

27. Graham and Hansen also take this to be the natural conclusion of Zhuangzi's arguments. See Graham 1981, 53 and Hansen in Mair 1983, 45–46.

28. Mount Tai is a paradigm example of a large mountain. Pengzu lived from the twenty-sixth to the seventh centuries B.C.E. by traditional dating.

29. I suppose one could quibble at this point about what Zhuangzi is really "saying" in the skeptical passages. If we allow that in some sense he is "saying" something rather different with the passages than what is conveyed by their literal meaning (such as that we should be more modest in our epistemic self-evaluations), then in the same sense we can allow that Zhuangzi does "mean what he says."

30. Graham considers this passage to be from the "School of Zhuangzi." See Graham 1981, 121.

31. The passage contains an ambiguity I shall leave unresolved: Is the final position meant to express a change of mind (or phrasing) and a revision of his "halfway" position, or is Zhuangzi drawing a distinction between the position he would take and the ideal course, which perhaps he is incapable of taking? For my discussion, nothing of import hangs on the resolution of this ambiguity.

32. Yearley does not counsel that we unreservedly see Zhuangzi as employing a rhetoric of exaggeration. He would like us to see also a radical side of Zhuangzi—a side of Zhuangzi that I am doing my best to render mundane, or as Yearley would say, "conventional."

33. Ivanhoe 1993 discusses several such skepticisms in relation to Zhuangzi.

34. See Descartes, and for a useful discussion of it, Barry Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984). Of course, Descartes' skepticism is not confined to dream-doubt in the early *Meditations*, and Descartes argues against philosophical skepticism in his later *Meditations*.

35. Some of the heaviest weather is drummed up in Allinson 1989, 71–110, and Wu 1990.

36. This assumes what is sometimes called "the closure of knowledge under known consequence"—that is, that if one knows that *p* and one knows that *p* implies *q*, then one knows that *q*. Although this principle of closure seems plausible, at least when one is consciously considering both *p* and *p* implies *q*, some have argued against it. See for example Fred Dretske, "Epistemic Operators," *Journal of Philosophy* 67 (1970).

37. For a comparison of Zhuangzi and Sextus, see Kjellberg 1994.

38. See Kjellberg 1993 and Ivanhoe 1993. Eno 1991 and Yearley in Mair 1983 seem to endorse similar views.

39. The latter passage is cited on pp. 110–111 of this paper. Ivanhoe 1993, 642–643 interprets the butterfly dream as a general allegory on spiritual awakening (which presumably involves, among other things, skepticism about linguistic categories; Ivanhoe 1993, 648–651), and so, apparently, does not take the passage as revealing sincere doubt about the possibility of knowledge through the senses. Kjellberg describes the passage as marked by Zhuangzi's "usual hyperbole" (1993, 134).

40. Compare his *Language and Logic in Ancient China* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983), 92, and *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 292–296.

41. Hansen strives admirably, but not quite satisfactorily I think, to show how such passages can be worked into a linguistic view of Zhuangzi's skepticism in Hansen 1992, 292–296.

42. That is, the first part of the passage in question. As the passage continues, Wang Ni seems to grow less and less skeptical, until, at the end of the passage, he is sketching a portrait of the "Perfect Man" (Watson 1968, 46). I do not think this change in Wang Ni undermines my point at all. Indeed, I take it as support for my position that Zhuangzi does not sincerely subscribe to Wang Ni's skepticism (though he may not support Wang Ni's conception of the Perfect Man, either).

43. Or, in the Chinese, 知 *zhi*. I take Peter Unger to be advancing a skepticism of this sort in his *Ignorance: a Case for Skepticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

44. Actually, Hansen argues in his 1992, 290 that the relativist cannot compare perspectives along an evaluative dimension at all, even to say they are equal. But this only moves my objection up a level: on the one hand Zhuangzi seems to be comparatively evaluating approaches to life while on the other hand, as a relativist, according to Hansen, he must deny that such approaches are evaluatively comparable.

45. I take the ideal of open-mindedness I am arguing for here to be compatible with that laid out by Kjellberg in his 1993, 139–146.