Death, Self, and Oneness in the Incomprehensible Zhuangzi

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The ancient Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi defies interpretation. This is an inextricable part of the beauty and power of his work. The text – by which I mean the “Inner Chapters” of the text traditionally attributed to him, the authentic core of the book – is incomprehensible as a whole. It consists of shards, in a distinctive voice – a voice distinctive enough that its absence is plain in most of the “Outer” and “Miscellaneous” Chapters, and which I will treat as the voice of a single author. Despite repeating imagery, ideas, style, and tone, these shards cannot be pieced together into a self-consistent philosophy. This lack of self-consistency is a positive feature of Zhuangzi. It is part of what makes him the great and unusual philosopher he is, defying reduction and summary.

i.

We don’t know the order in which the Inner Chapters were originally written (the text didn’t take its current form until around 300 C.E.), but the opening passage of the text as we now have it is a striking introduction.

There is a fish in the Northern Oblivion named Minnow, and Minnow is quite huge, spanning who know how many thousands of miles. He transforms into a bird named Breeze, and Breeze has quite a back on him, stretching who knows how many thousands of miles….

*The Tales of Qi*, a record of many wonders, reports: “When Breeze journeys to the Southern Oblivion, the waters ripple for three thousand miles.
Spiraling aloft, he ascends ninety thousand miles and continues his journey for half a year.”

– It’s a galloping heat-haze! – It’s a swirl of dust! – It’s some living creature blown aloft on a breath of air! And the blue on blue of the sky – is that the sky’s true color? Or is it just the vast distance, going on and on without end, that looks that way? When Breeze looks down, he too sees only this and nothing more (p. 3-4).¹

Let’s suppose it’s an important part of the text’s design that it starts this way. An odd start for a book of philosophy!

For one thing, it’s false. Of course, there’s no such fish that turns into a giant bird, nor was there ever (probably) a text called the The Tales of Qi that Zhuangzi supposedly drew this story from. It’s absurd!

It’s also a parable. A bit further along, the passage continues:

The cicada and the fledgling dove laugh at him, saying, “We scurry up into the air, leaping from the elm to the sandalwood tree, and when we don’t quite make it we just plummet to the ground. What’s all this about ascending ninety thousand miles and heading south?” …

A small consciousness cannot keep up with a vast consciousness; short duration cannot keep up with long duration. How do we know? The morning mushroom knows nothing of the noontide; the winter cicada knows nothing of the spring and autumn. This is what is meant by short duration. In southern Chu

¹ Except where specified, I use the Ziporyn translation (Zhuangzi ⁴th c. BCE/2009), modified by following Kjellberg’s (Zhuangzi ⁴th c. BCE/2005) literal translations of non-historical characters’ names. Here, I have replaced Ziporyn’s translation of the text’s name as Equalizing Jokebook with Kjellberg’s more neutral Tales of Qi.
there is a tree called Dark Genius, for which five hundred years is a single spring and another five hundred years is a single autumn. In ancient times, there was even one massive tree whose spring and autumn were each eight thousand years long. And yet nowadays, Pengzu [reputed to have lived eight hundred years] alone has a special reputation for longevity and everyone tries to match him. Pathetic, isn’t it? (p. 4).

As I read it, this passage serves at least the following three functions.

First function: It signals that what Zhuangzi says is not to be taken at face value. Zhuangzi emphatically does not do philosophy in the way Mozi, Aristotle, or Kant does philosophy, by laying out a series of statements presented as truth. In fact, throughout the text Zhuangzi uses a wide variety of devices to dislodge the typical reader’s general assumption that philosophical texts are in the business of stating truths. He makes seeming assertions, then raises objections or questions about those assertions, then fails to resolve those questions. Much of the text is in quotation from people whose wisdom we might wonder about: a butcher, a speaking tree, a “madman”, a convicted criminal with an amputated foot, a hunchbacked woman, miscellaneous dubious sages with funny names, and especially “Confucius” who says a mix of things, some of which Zhuangzi would presumably reject and some seemingly closer to what Zhuangzi might accept. Zhuangzi uses humor, parody, paradox, absurdity. He explicitly contradicts himself. He seems to say almost nothing with an entirely straight face. The giant flying minnow-bird is only the start of this.

Second function: The principal import of the parable seems to be this: Small things cannot comprehend large things; and just as short-lived insect cannot understand the change of seasons, we human beings should not be able to understand things vastly larger than ourselves.
And the world does contain things vastly larger than ourselves, even if not exactly the ones Zhuangzi mentions. Now it’s crucial to understanding the bearing of this parable on the remainder of the text to know whether Zhuangzi includes himself among the small beings with limited understanding. You might read him otherwise. You might read him as setting himself up as a sage whose wisdom is beyond ordinary human understanding. You might read him as saying: Reader, you are like the cicada and this book is like the giant bird. You will not understand it, at least not in your first, second, or third read, but that is because you are small and limited and have not yet achieved my level of wisdom. I do think philosophers often try to intimidate readers into thinking that if there is something they don’t understand or something that seems mistaken, the readers themselves must be the ones at fault, rather than the philosopher whose text it is. This is an authoritarian and cowardly practice. I don’t think this is what Zhuangzi is doing. Rather, I propose, Zhuangzi regards himself too as one of the cicadas.

If so, this would explain the first feature of the text that I pointed out: his constant self-undermining. Zhuangzi does not want the reader to take his words as authoritative. The opposite. Presumably, he wants the reader to find some philosophical value in reading the text, but he works constantly against the human tendency, when we are reading philosophy we enjoy, to accept the text we enjoy as truth. The text is too full of explicit self-doubt, too absurd, too self-contradictory, for it to be truth. It is literally, as whole, incomprehensible – as incomprehensible as the world itself, at least to little doves like us. If I am right, there is not, beneath the text, a single coherent message that could have been said plainly, if only Zhuangzi had wished to do so. I will develop this point more, in connection with Zhuangzi’s passages about death, self, and oneness. For now, just consider this: Zhuangzi is presumably either presenting himself as a limited animal baffled by the greatness of things or as someone of great
understanding by whom we of lesser understanding will be baffled. There are at least tentative reasons to favor the former view.

Third function: The passage introduces two themes that recur throughout the text, in addition to the recurring theme of limited human knowledge: self and death. In the first two sentences of the text, a giant minnow transforms into a giant bird. This only the first of several cross-species transformations in the text, and it raises the question of what, if anything, remains constant in such transformations, whether we ourselves could undergo radical transformations while continuing to exist. Thus, the question of self, of what makes us the beings we are, is broached, and a liberal attitude toward transformation is hinted at but not explicitly developed. On the topic of death, Zhuangzi seems to be doing at least two things. One is to admire the long-lived, at least for their broad vision and possibly for their longevity itself. Another is to challenge our own attitudes toward longevity: Viewed in a large enough perspective, even an 800-year life is not that long, not really much different from what we would normally regard as a brief life.

Zhuangzi seems to think it’s a good thing to “live out your years” – whatever that means. This view is, I believe, a genuine strand in the text, though there are other strands that problematize it, and it’s not clear what it really amounts to. When I say that the text is “incomprehensible”, this is the sort of issue I have in mind. I don’t mean that individual passages are incomprehensible, nor that all ways of reading Zhuangzi on death are equally good or bad. Let’s walk through the case.
Ziporyn translates the title of Chapter Three as “The Primacy of Nourishing Life” (p. 21). It begins with a passage that seems to recommend us “to maintain our bodies, to keep the life in them intact, to nourish our parents, and to fully live out our years” (p. 22).² It continues with a story about a butcher so skilled that after nineteen years of cutting oxen his knife is still sharp as if straight from the whetstone, on which a king comments, “Wonderful! From hearing the cook’s words I have learned how to nourish life!” (p. 23). Zhuangzi appears to advocate that you “live out all your natural years without being cut down halfway” (p. 39). Zhuangzi celebrates trees that are big and useless and are thus never chopped down (p. 8, 30-31). Zhuangzi seems to prefer the yak who cannot catch mice over the weasel who can and who thus, hurrying about, dies in a snare (p. 8). In the voice of “Confucius”, Zhuangzi seems to think it bad if a disciple is killed by a tyrant (p. 25; similarly, p. 29-30). The Inner Chapters conclude with the story of an emperor who lacks the seven holes in his head that the rest of us have, and who dies when his well-meaning friends drill him holes — a story both sad and funny, and in which presumably the emperor’s death implies that something has gone wrong (p. 54). In light of these passages and others, it seems reasonable to suppose that Zhuangzi, or at least one strand of Zhuangzi, shares with most of us the rather un-radical view that living out one’s full life-span is a good thing, and preferable to dying young.

Yet, though “the sage” likes growing old, the sage equally likes dying young (p. 43). And Zhuangzi’s Confucius, confronted with two men evidently more wise than he, who have been singing a goofy, joyous song to a friend’s corpse, says that “Men such as these look upon

² Replacing Ziporyn’s “those near and dear to us” with the less English and more Confucian “parents”, following Watson (Chuang Tzu, 4th c. BCE/ 1968, p. 50) and Graham (Chuang-tzu, 4th c. BCE/1981, p. 62). Kjellberg has “raise your family” (p. 224). Original: 可以養親.
life as a dangling wart or swollen pimple, and on death as its dropping off, its bursting and draining” (p. 46-47). Zhuangzi also says:

The Genuine Human Beings of old understood nothing about delighting in being alive or hating death. They emerged without delight, submerged again without resistance. Swooping in they came and swooping out they went, that and no more (p. 40).

Royal Relativity, who seems to speak for Zhuangzi, says that “even death and life can do nothing to change” (Kjellberg: “make no difference to”; Watson: “have no effect on”; Graham: “alter nothing in”) the “Consummate Person” (p. 18). ³

On the face of it, it seems like Zhuangzi is saying or assuming, in some places, that we should prefer living out our years to being cut down early; while in other places he seems to be portraying sages and other sorts of superior people as not preferring long life over death. How might we reconcile these apparently conflicting strands in the text? I will review some possibilities drawn from the recent Anglophone literature on Zhuangzi.

One possibility is suggested by A.C. Graham: Phrases like “nourishing life” and “living out one’s years” are familiar from the Yangist school of philosophical thinking in ancient China (best represented in selected “Yangist” chapters identified by Knoblock and Riegel in their translation of The Annals of Lü Buwei, 3rd c. BCE/2000). According to the Yangists, one’s primary aim should be to nurture the body and preserve life, especially one’s own body and life. The Yangist-seeming strands and phrases in the text might reflect a residue of Zhuangzi’s

³ The original Chinese phrase that I have presented the four translations of here is 死生無變於己.

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thinking earlier in his career, possibly reflecting Yangist schooling, before he matured into equanimity.  

Another possibility is suggested by Robert E. Allinson (1989): Different strands in the text might speak to readers at different levels of understanding. Passages about nurturing life might be directed toward readers of lower understanding, for whom nurturing life would be a step forward; passages about sages’ indifference to death might be directed toward readers at a more advanced stage.

Nothing in the texts, I think, compels us to reject either of those approaches. However, neither matches my own sense of the text. One consideration against Graham’s view is that both the preferring-life passages and the not-prefering-life passages are scattered through the whole of the “Inner Chapters”. There would have to be quite a lot of temporal mangling of the text for the strands to reflect different stages in Zhuangzi’s development. One consideration against Allinson’s view is that it seems to give us a Zhuangzi who sees himself as so superior to the reader that he is ready to dispense pablum advice to that segment of his readership who would do well to advance even partway toward his own level of understanding. This is not the self-doubting, anti-authoritarian Zhuangzi I see in the text, who treats the reader as an equal.

Another possible interpretation is this: Skillful action requires equanimity, including equanimity in the face of risks to one’s life. Skillful responsiveness to nature can help one live out one’s years rather than being cut down early. Semi-paradoxically, then, if one hopes for longevity, one ought not care too much about it. Perhaps something like this fits with interpretations of Zhuangzi that emphasize the importance, for him, of skillful, spontaneous

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4 See Graham’s commentary from p. 116-118 of his *Chuang-tzu* (4th c. BCE/1981). Graham is not clearly committed to seeing the Inner Chapters in this way: In his 1989 (p. 202) he seems to prefer something like the skill interpretation which I offer below.
responsiveness without critical linguistic judgment (Graham 1989; Hansen 1992; Ivanhoe 1993; Carr and Ivanhoe 2000).

There are two main difficulties with this interpretation as a means of resolving the apparent tension in Zhuangzi’s remarks about death. One difficulty is that many of the most important skill passages in the Zhuangzi are outside of the Inner Chapters, and thus of dubious authenticity. The Inner Chapters themselves contain one clear celebration of skillfulness, the butcher’s skill in carving oxen, offered as a means of “nourishing life” (p. 22-23), but elsewhere skillfulness is not marked for praise: the weasel’s skill in catching rats leads to its death (p. 8), Huizi’s logical skill ends in obscurities about “hard” and “white” (p. 15) and maybe harms his life (p. 38), and games of skill are said to lead to competitive strife (p. 28); simultaneously, Zhuangzi praises useless, unskilled trees and yaks, and also people with disabilities that limit their skill at traditionally valued tasks.

The other main difficulty is that if equanimity about death is subsidiary to some greater aim of preserving life, then Zhuangzi’s sages and Consummate People have strangely lost track of their priorities, for it seems that they no longer care about this greater aim. Perhaps they live longer as a result, but it is only by having forgotten what really, on this interpretation, has value. It is actually we, with our more conventional valuing of life over death, who better know the proper value of things.

Still another resolution emphasizes the following passage:

The Great Clump burdens me with a physical form, labors me with life, eases me with old age, rests me with death. So it is precisely because I consider my life good that I consider my death good (p. 43).
This sounds like an argument. A first pass thought might be this: Life is impossible without death. So if I value life I must therefore also value death. But if this is the argument, it is a poor one. Perhaps life as we know it is impossible without death at some point, as a resolution. Nonetheless, a long, healthy life of eighty years is perfectly conceivable as a valuable life; and nothing about the necessity of death prevents one from strongly preferring that type of life over a short life of twenty years. But if we take at face value the passages about the sage liking dying young, the sage does not appear to have that preference, which is exactly the oddity to be explained. Another possible reading of this argument emphasizes that physical form is a “burden”, life is a “labor”, old age is “ease”, and death is a way of “resting”. This sounds a bit like the pessimistic view that life is an unpleasant hassle that one is well rid of; but that doesn’t fit so well with the upbeat and joyful attitude that Zhuangzi seems to favor elsewhere.

The passage continues, ending with a remark that I had briefly paraphrased above:

You may hide a boat in a ravine or a net in a swamp, thinking it is secure there. But in the middle of the night, a mighty one comes along and carries it away on his back, unbeknownst to you in your slumber. When the smaller is hidden within the larger, there remains someplace into which it can escape. But if you hide the world in the world, so there is nowhere for anything to escape to, this is an arrangement, the vastest arrangement, that can sustain all things.

This human form is merely a circumstance that has been met with, just something stumbled into, but those who have become humans take delight in it nonetheless. Now the human form in its time undergoes ten thousand transformations, never stopping for an instant – so the joys must be beyond calculation! Hence, the sage uses it to roam in that from which nothing ever
escapes, where all things are maintained. Early death, old age, the beginning, the end – this allows him to see each of them as good (p. 43).

With this passage in mind, Chris Fraser (2013) suggests that Zhuangzi is embracing an “aesthetic attitude” that celebrates the constant stream of transformations that is the Dao, the way of things – the stream of transformations that gives you life and then, soon or not quite as soon, gives you death. Similarly, Roger Ames (1998) sees Zhuangzi as inviting us to reconceptualize life as “life-and-death”, a series of transformations, in a “ceaseless adventure” (1998, p. 66).

Despite the merit of these interpretations, especially as approaches to this particular passage, they do seem to strain against the substantial thread in Zhuangzi that seems to favor nurturing life and living out one’s natural span of years rather than being chopped down early. If every transformation is as good as every other, why not see the chopping as just another exciting transformation? Why not celebrate the weasel’s being caught in the snare, the tree’s being shaped into boards by an energetic carpenter and becoming someone’s house?

Still another possibility here might be drawn from Amy Olberding’s (2007) reading of passages from the Outer and Miscellaneous Chapters describing Zhuangzi’s reaction to the death of his wife and his friend Huizi. (Also see Wong 2006.) Whereas Graham sees the different strands in Zhuangzi as reflecting different phases in his philosophical career and Allinson sees them as speaking to different target audiences, Olberding suggests that Zhuangzi’s attitude might vary during the process of personal mourning for loved ones. Olberding suggests that Zhuangzi reacts to death by recognizing its disvalue, but only briefly, before shifting to a recognition of

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5 In earlier work, Fraser (2011) suggests something like the equanimity-for-skillful-responding interpretation discussed above. In that work, he allows that that this interpretation introduces a “fundamental tension” between different parts of the text. However, it’s unclear whether Fraser would embrace the views I express here regarding that fundamental tension.
death as part of what gives life its value and interest, in a series of transformations that is overall to be celebrated.

Olberding thus appears to attribute conflicting attitudes to Zhuangzi – interpreting him as embracing one attitude in some moments (that death is bad, his feeling in moments of immediate personal grief) and another attitude in other moments (that death is not bad but another transformation to be celebrated, his feeling as he distances himself from personal grieving). If so, this puts her view close to my own: I think Zhuangzi genuinely expresses both of these conflicting opinions about death.

But there are, I think, at least two more dimensions of complexity to this picture. First, we have not yet seriously confronted the strangeness of the metaphysical view that Zhuangzi seems to be embracing in this last passage and in some others – that human form is simply a circumstance that you are temporarily met with. More on this in sections iv and v. And second, there are Zhuangzi’s skeptical remarks about death, to which I now turn.

iii.

Zhuangzi sometimes expresses radically skeptical views – especially but not exclusively in Chapter 2, “Equalizing Assessments of Things”. When Toothless asks Royal Relativity, who seems to speak for Zhuangzi, “Do you know what all things agree in considering right?” Royal Relativity replies “How could I know that?” When Toothless then asks if he knows that he doesn’t know, Royal Relativity again replies, “How could I know that?” (p. 17). In the voice of Master Long Desk Zhuangzi asks:
Suppose you and I get into a debate. If you win and I lose, does that really mean you are right and I am wrong? If I win and you lose, does that really mean I’m right and you’re wrong? Must one of us be right and the other wrong? Or could both of us be right, or both of us wrong? If neither you nor I can know, a third person would be even more benighted (p. 19).

In both of these passages, the seeming assertion of skepticism is tempered both by placing it in another’s mouth – someone it’s natural to regard as speaking for Zhuangzi, but who might not – and also by posing skeptical doubts as questions rather than positively asserting the truth of skepticism. However, in a way this makes the passages even more skeptical: Like Royal Relativity, Zhuangzi here seems unwilling to assert anything, not even that he lacks knowledge.

In previous work (Schwitzgebel 1996), I have argued that such passages should be taken at face value as expressions of radical skepticism, rather than tempered or tamed or qualified, despite the fact that this renders the text as a whole inconsistent. And since the text as a whole is inconsistent, Zhuangzi’s aim in presenting these radically skeptical passages might be something other than to persuade the reader to embrace radical skepticism as the final correct philosophical theory.

Two other skeptical passages bring us directly into issues of death and self. The first is, again, in the voice of Master Long Desk.

How, then, do I know that delighting in life is not a delusion? How do I know that in hating death I am not like an orphan who left home in youth and no longer knows the way back? Lady Li was a daughter of the border guard of Ai. When she was first captured and brought to Qin, she wept until tears drenched her collar. But when she got to the palace, sharing the king’s luxurious bed and feasting on
the finest meats, she regretted her tears. How do I know the dead don’t regret the way they used to cling to life? …

Perhaps a great awakening would reveal all of this to be a vast dream (p. 19).

The second passage is perhaps the most famous passage in the Zhuangzi:

Once Zhuang Zhou dreamt he was a butterfly, fluttering about joyfully just as a butterfly would. He followed his whims exactly as he liked and knew nothing about Zhuang Zhou. Suddenly he awoke, and there he was, the startled Zhuang Zhou in the flesh. He did not know if Zhou had been dreaming he was a butterfly, or if a butterfly was now dreaming it was Zhou. Surely, Zhou and a butterfly count as two distinct identities! Such is what we call the transformation of one thing into another (p. 21).

The Lady Li passage starts with Master Long Desk seeming to admit that he hates death. He then raises doubts about the grounds of his hatred. It is possible, in fact I think natural, if one jettisons commitment to seeing Zhuangzi as entirely self-consistent across passages, to interpret this as a confession on Zhuangzi’s part: Zhuangzi, too, hates death, wants to nourish life and live out his years. He is not like the “Genuine Human Beings” he celebrates elsewhere in the text, who emerge without delight and submerge without resistance or the men who see life as a swollen pimple and death as draining it.

In this passage, Zhuangzi does not say that he (or Master Long Desk) is wrong to have such an attitude. He only expresses the more skeptical thought that he might be wrong, that he might be like Lady Li when first captured, that he might wake up and find his new situation to be a vast improvement over the current situation that he normally regards as waking life.
So I believe I hear not just two but three distinct voices in the text: one that takes for granted that nourishing life and living out your years is preferable to being cut down early, one that values life and death equally and sees nothing to regret in dying young, and one that hates death but entertains doubts about the wisdom of that hatred. I am not proposing that these are three different authors. There is a commonality of philosophical style among them, and all three voices weave together throughout the text. I am proposing instead that Zhuangzi, like many of us, is ambivalent, inconsistent, confused, cannot quite see how everything hangs together, and the text reflects this in an open, self-revealing way. Zhuangzi is not offering us a unified vision of the True Theory of Things and the One Right Way to Live. He is sharing his wonder and bafflement.

iv.

Let’s take Zhuangzi at his word in the butterfly passage: He thinks it at least possible that he is a butterfly dreaming that he is a human. Bracketing Kripkean (1980) worries about metaphysical vs. epistemic modality, this passage suggests that Zhuangzi does not regard himself as necessarily human or essentially human. This of course fits with Zhuangzi’s remark, quoted earlier, that “human form is merely a circumstance that has been met with” (p. 43). Another related passage is in the voice of Master Arrive:

Now, suppose a great master smith were casting metal. If the metal jumped up and said, “I insist on being nothing but the great sword Moye!” the smith would surely consider it to be an inauspicious chunk of metal. Now, if I, having

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6 Replacing Ziporyn’s Westernized “an Excalibur”.

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happened to stumble into a human form, should insist, “Only a human! Only a human!” then the maker of changes would certainly consider me an inauspicious chunk of person. So now I look upon all heaven and earth as a great furnace, and the maker of changes as a great blacksmith – where could I go that would not be all right? All at once I fall asleep. With a start I awaken (p. 46).

Master Arrive is portrayed as saying these words as he is at the very edge of his own death. Shortly before, his friend Master Plow has already commented similarly, “Do not disturb his transformation!... What will it make you become; where will it send you? Will it make you into a mouse’s liver? Or perhaps an insect’s arm?” (p. 45).

These passages envision radical changes in physical form while the self or the “I” (or something like that) continues to exist: “I” might wake and find myself a human, which I was not before, and then “I” might wake again and find myself something else, such as a bug’s arm. Taking the passages at face value, Zhuangzi seems to be envisioning a re-awakening of consciousness after these changes. The Lady Li passage suggests there might even be memory of one’s previous form, regret for the way I previously clung to life.

We have a choice, I think, between treating these passages as what P.J. Ivanhoe calls “heroic metaphysics” (2010) and treating them as what I will call real possibilities. If we read Zhuangzi as a heroic metaphysician, then we read him as committed to a metaphysical system containing not only an agent who intentionally executes the transformations (the “Great Clump” who has burdened us with our temporary human forms) but also, more radically, conscious selves that run through mouse livers and bug arms, possibly recalling their previous lives. (Elder’s 2014 interpretation of the death passages seems “heroic” in roughly this sense.) I see

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two reasons to resist reading Zhuangzi as a heroic metaphysician. One is that he spends no time developing and defending such a metaphysics. You’d think that if Zhuangzi literally thought that bugs’ arms were conscious, he’d give us a better sense of how this works, how this fits into a larger (panpsychic?) picture, and why we should accept such an unusual picture as true. However, he does no such thing. The other reason to doubt the heroic interpretation is Zhuangzi’s skepticism: Heroic metaphysics is an enterprise of the boldly self-assured, who think they have discerned the ultimate structure of reality; whereas Zhuangzi seems to think that the ultimate structure of reality is elusive, possibly beyond human comprehension. Zhuangzi says many absurd, or at least absurd-seeming, things which he presumably doesn’t expect us to take seriously as the literal truth – the opening passage about the giant fish-bird among them. Perhaps these passages are the same.

And yet I doubt that Zhuangzi offers these ideas as mere absurdities. Maybe the idea that one might literally waken after death to discover that one is a bug’s arm is a bit of colorful fun, but the idea that our consciousness might in some way survive our bodily death, merging somehow into nature or arising in a new form, is not a historically unusual view; and it’s a defensible enough sceptical thought that what one now regards as waking life might indeed be a dream from which one will waken to a very different reality. Although I think it loads Zhuangzi with too much confident metaphysics to insist that he is committed to the truth of awakening to continued survival either as another piece of this reality or in some higher reality – and notice that these are different metaphysical options that don’t fit comfortably together – it seems entirely consistent with Zhuangzi’s skepticism to allow that these are for him real possibilities, possibilities which can give genuine comfort in the face of death.
Zhuangzi speaks repeatedly about “oneness”. It’s tempting to think he must have a theory of oneness or at least a consistent view about it. His remarks about oneness, though puzzling, are neither as baldly contradictory as his remarks about death nor as patently strange as his remarks about the self, though the three topics are closely related. If you aren’t armed with a deflationary understanding of the text, you might think he’s aiming to be profound and mystical. You might think he’s trying to deliver us a truth that he knows, a truth about the deep oneness of things, a truth that is, however, difficult to express in words and thus sounds strange or paradoxical.

I don’t think it does violence to the text, exactly, to read Zhuangzi in that way. But I don’t think that we must read him in that way; and I think declining to read him as aiming toward mystical profundity yields a more interesting text.

Here’s a sampling of Zhuangzi on oneness:

1. “Heaven and earth are born together with me, and the ten thousand things and I are one. But if we are all one, can there be any words? But since I have already declared that we are ‘one,’ can there be no words?” (p. 15-16).

2. “So no thing is not right, no thing is not acceptable. For whatever we may define as a beam as opposed to a pillar, as a leper as opposed to the great beauty Xishi, or whatever might be strange, grotesque, uncanny, or deceptive, there is some course that opens them into one another, connecting them to form a oneness” (p. 13).
3. “Therefore his liking was one and his not liking was one. His being one was one and his not being one was one. In being one, he was acting as a companion of Heaven. In not being one, he was acting as a companion of man.”

And my favorite:

4. “Making a point to show that a point is not a point is not as good as making a nonpoint to show that a point is not a point. Using a horse to show that a horse is not a horse is not as good as using a nonhorse to show that a horse is not a horse. Heaven and earth are one point, the ten thousand things are one horse”.

Now wait. Stop! You’re probably trying to fit these passages into a theory, trying to figure out how this can all make consistent sense. (Either that, or you’ve stopped listening.) But working to hang it together into a sensible theory is exactly what I don’t want you to do.

Notice the surface of the text: Zhuangzi asks how there can be words if everything is one, but also how there can be no words if he’s already said something. He offers no good answer to this dilemma. He says, “His being one was one and his not being one was one”. At least superficially, this is either nonsense or plain logical contradiction. He says, “The ten thousand things are one horse”. This is the absurd conclusion of what I read as a jovial parody of the logicians of Zhuangzi’s era, like Gongsun Long, who argued in all seriousness that a white

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8 For this passage, I use Watson’s translation, which seems to me plainer than Ziporyn’s (4th c BCE/1968, p. 79-80). Kjellberg’s translation is similar. Ziporyn has “Thus, what they liked was the oneness of things, but what they disliked was also the oneness of things. Their oneness was the oneness, but their non-oneness was also the oneness. In their oneness, they were followers of the Heavenly. In their non-oneness, they were followers of the Human” (p. 42). Graham interprets it in still a different way (“they were one with what they liked…”). The original is:

其好之也一，其弗好之也一。其一也一，其不一也一。其一，與天為徒；其不一，與人為徒。天與人不相勝也，是之謂真人。

9 Here I use Kjellberg’s translation (p. 218). Where Kjellberg has “a point” for 指, Ziporyn has “this finger” (p. 12), Watson has “an attribute” (p. 40) and Graham has “the meaning” (p. 53).
horse is not a horse. We are not meant to sit down and figure out how the entire universe is in fact a horse.

This isn’t to say that the passages are just silly joking around with no point. Zhuangzi does, I think, actually have some serious points, even if there’s no consistent view behind them. Consider this passage, where Zhuangzi’s Confucius character is talking about a one-footed convict, Royal Nag [King Worn-Out Horse: 王駘], whom he admires as a great sage:

Life and death are a great matter, but they are unable to alter him. Even if Heaven and earth were to topple over, he would not be lost with them…. Looked at from the point of view of their differences, even your own liver and gallbladder are as distant as Chu in the south and Yue in the north. But looked at from the point of view of their sameness, all things are one. If you take the latter view, you become free of all preconceptions about which particular objects might suit the eyes and ears. You just release the mind to play in the harmony of all Virtuosities. Seeing what is one and the same to all things, nothing is ever felt to be lost. This man viewed the chopping off of his foot as nothing more than the casting away of a lump of soil (p. 33).

Looked at from a narrowly specific perspective, I am not the same person as the ten-year-old boy who was called “Eric Schwitzgebel”. Looked at from a much broader perspective, the thoughts and feelings and ideas that I think of as central to myself are repeated with variations in all of you, in a way that might be interpretable as a matter of overlapping identities. Looked at from one perspective, I lose nothing of myself when my foot is removed. My foot is as far from me as the state of Chu. Looked at from another perspective, everything around me is part of me, and I lose a crucial part of myself when I lose treasured objects or when a beloved friend dies. We are
not compelled to regard the boundary of the skin as the one true boundary of the self. We are not compelled to regard the date the baby emerges in 1968 and the date the man dies, hopefully at a ripe age in the 2050s, as the one proper set of temporal boundaries in conceiving the self.

I think that’s the main thing Zhuangzi is saying in this one particular passage. Royal Nag is portrayed both as taking so narrow a view of the self that his foot is no part of himself so that casting it away is like casting away a clump of soil and as taking the most radically broad possible view of all, in which nothing is ever cast away but the entire cosmos is already always himself. The ten thousand things are one Royal Nag. The temporal version of this idea is to flip between a radically narrow view on which every momentary change is a new death and a radically broad view on which you precede the birth of that baby in the past and continue past the death of that old person in the future, either with or without a continuation of your consciousness.

But notice that there are two layers of separation between Royal Nag’s view and Zhuangzi’s authorial perspective. First, Zhuangzi has his Confucius character speak these words. Confucius is not a reliable bearer of truth in the Inner Chapters. Second, Confucius does not embrace this view as his own. Rather he says that it is Royal Nag’s view – and although he plainly admires Royal Nag, Royal Nag also sounds a lot like those sages and Consummate People I discussed above who are startling indifferent to death and who, I’ve argued, constitute only one strand in Zhuangzi’s thinking.

I suggest that we don’t try to tame, or render sensible, or render coherent with the rest of the text, Zhuangzi’s radical, bizarre, and sometimes incomprehensible claims about oneness. Zhuangzi is not a heroic metaphysician developing the one correct mystical metaphysics of universal unity. He espouses different conflicting positions, constantly contradicting and
undermining himself. I suggest that we see Zhuangzi’s remarks about oneness as the radical edge, or rather one of several partly conflicting radical edges, of his intellectual diversity – of his singular lack of oneness.

vi.

An idea that seems to shine through the Inner Chapters, especially Chapter 2, is the inadequacy of philosophical theorizing. Words, Zhuangzi suggests, lack fixed meanings, distinctions fail, and well-intentioned philosophical efforts end up collapsing into logical paradoxes and the conflicting rights and wrongs of the Confucians and the Mohists (esp. p. 11-12).

If Zhuangzi does indeed think that philosophical theorizing is always inadequate to capture the complexity of the world, or at least always inadequate in our small human hands, then he might not wish to put together a text that advances a single philosophical theory. He might choose, instead, to philosophize in a fragmented, shard-like way, expressing a variety of different, conflicting perspectives on the world – perspectives that need not fit together as a coherent whole. He might wish to frustrate, rather than encourage, our attempts to make neat sense of him, inviting us to mature as philosophers not by discovering the proper set of right and wrong views, but rather by offering us his hand as he takes his plunge into wonder and doubt.

That delightfully inconsistent Zhuangzi is the one I love – the Zhuangzi who openly shares his shifting ideas and confusions, rather than the Zhuangzi that most other philosophical
interpreters seem to see, who has some stable, consistent theory underneath that for some reason he chooses not to display in plain language on the surface of the text.10

References


10 For helpful discussion, thanks especially to Kelly James Clark, Daniel Korman, Amy Olberding, readers at The Splintered Mind, and the audience at the Varieties of Self conference at Scripps College. Kwong-loi Shun has suggested that perhaps the inconsistency frustrates our attempts to hear with our xin (mind) so that we can better hear with our qi (vital energies), as “Confucius” recommends to Huizi (p. 26).

The present essay builds on an earlier essay of mine (Schwitzgebel 1996), which explores Zhuangzi’s self-undermining use of language in more depth and argues that we should take Zhuangzi’s skeptical passages at face value, despite the fact that this renders the text as a whole inconsistent. In that paper I argued that Zhuangzi’s aim, in presenting his inconsistent passages on skepticism, was to induce not radical skepticism but a weaker sort of “everyday skepticism”. However, I now think that I should not have assumed that Zhuangzi, or the Inner Chapters as a text, needs to display a consistent set of aims or to have a single consistent “therapeutic” goal.


