

Death, Self, and Oneness in the Incomprehensible Zhuangzi

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The ancient Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi defies coherent 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 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

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*.

spring and autumn. This is what is meant by short duration. In southern Chu 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.² 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.

² For more on this point, see Schwitzgebel 1996 and Wang 2004.

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 the reader doesn't understand or something that seems mistaken, the reader must be the one at fault, rather than the philosopher whose text it is. I understand the temptation! But to yield to that temptation is both authoritarian and cowardly.³ I don't think this is what Zhuangzi is doing. Rather, I propose, Zhuangzi regards himself too as one of the cicadas – though perhaps one more humbled by greatness than the one in his parable.

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

³ For more on this issue, see Sperber 2010; Schwitzgebel 2011.

self-contradictory, for it to be truth. It is literally, as a 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, in this passage, 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 is only the first of several cross-species transformations in the Inner Chapters, 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.

Might that large perspective also be limited, but in a different way? When Breeze looks down, he too sees only blue on blue, missing the details – failing to see, perhaps, some details important to us, but too minor for him to bother about, like the difference between a twenty-year

and an eight-hundred-year life? If so, there may be no single perspective from which everything is visible.⁴

ii.

Zhuangzi seems to think it's a good thing to "live out your years" rather than dying early through strife or self-exhaustion. This view is, I believe, a genuine strand in the text, though some other strands problematize it. 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).⁵ 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 this, 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

⁴ On "perspectivism" in Zhuangzi, see Ziporyn 2003; Lai 2006; Connolly 2011. One concern I have about perspectivism as an approach to Zhuangzi is that it sounds a bit too much like a philosophical doctrine of the sort that Zhuangzi might want to resist. However, stripped of its doctrinality – reduced to the more minimal interpretative idea that Zhuangzi finds philosophical value in expressing a variety of (inconsistent) perspectives, a perspectival approach might be similar to the approach I favor in this essay.

⁵ Replacing Ziporyn's "those near and dear to us" with the 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.

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 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).⁶

⁶ The original Chinese phrase that I have presented the four translations of here is 死生無變於己.

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 be a residue of Zhuangzi’s thinking earlier in his career, possibly reflecting Yangist schooling, before he matured into equanimity.⁷

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-preferring-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

⁷ See Graham’s commentary from p. 116-118 of his *Chuang-tzu* (4th c. BCE/1981). This might not be Graham’s final considered opinion about the Inner Chapters: In his 1989 (p. 202) he seems to prefer something like the skill interpretation which I offer below.

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 pabulum 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 one's circumstances 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 responsiveness without critical linguistic judgment (Graham 1989; Hansen 1992; Ivanhoe 1993; Carr and Ivanhoe 2000).

There are two main difficulties with the skill 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 commonly valued tasks.

The other main difficulty with the skill interpretation 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 prefer long over short lives, which is exactly the oddity to be explained. Another possible reading of this passage 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.⁸ 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 strain against the substantial thread in Zhuangzi that seems to favor nurturing life

⁸ 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.

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 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 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 read Zhuangzi as genuinely expressing 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 below. 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.⁹ 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.

⁹ Compare Moser 1999 and Wong 2005 on “interrogative” vs. “declarative” skepticism.

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 probably 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 attitudes in the text: one that takes for granted that nourishing life and living out your years is preferable to being cut down early, one sees wisdom in valuing life and death equally and thus 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 attitudes 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!"¹⁰ the smith would surely consider it to be an inauspicious chunk of metal. Now, if I, having 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).¹¹

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 that¹²) 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

¹⁰ Replacing Ziporyn's Westernized "an Excalibur".

¹¹ Following Kjellberg's "maker of changes". Ziporyn: "Creation-Transformation". Watson: "the creator". Graham: "he that fashions and transforms".

¹² Maybe an "arena of presence and action" (Cheng 2014, drawing the concept from Johnston 2010).

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 “heroic metaphysics” (in Ivanhoe 2010's memorable phrase for a common way of interpreting some other authors) 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 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 skeptical 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.

Similarly, some passages of the Inner Chapters invite magical or mystical interpretation. For example: “There is a Spirit-Man living on the distant Maiden Mountains with skin like ice and snow... [who] rides upon the air and clouds” (p. 7; cf. Leizi on p. 5, the Consummate Person on p. 18). “That is what allows the joy of its harmony to open into all things... taking part everywhere as the springtime of each being... your own mind becomes the site of the life-giving time. This is what is called keeping the innate powers whole” (p. 37). “Xiwei got it and thereby put the measure around heaven and earth. Fuxi got it and thereby inherited the matrix of vital energy.... Pingyi got it and thereby inherited the power of Mt. Kunlun.... Pengzu got it any thereby remained alive all the way back from the time of Shun Youyu down to the time of the Five Tyrants” (p. 44). We might connect these passages with passages that appear to hint of meditative techniques, such as Yan Hui's “fasting of the mind” (p. 26) and his ability to “just sit and forget” (p. 49). Engage in the right meditative or mystical practices and achieve longevity, insight, and spiritual power! Harold D. Roth is among those who have recently emphasized the mystical (less so the magical) dimension of the text (Roth 1999, 2003).

I favor treating such passages like the “bug’s arm” passage. Zhuangzi, the same skeptic who thinks we might wake up to find that this has all been a dream, would also I think not rule out the possibility that connection with a mystical energy or life force *might* deliver powers or longevity far beyond our mundane experience. Some people believe in such things; and I see no reason to suppose that Zhuangzi would insist that the world is mundane and non-magical. He might be inviting the reader to reconsider mystical and magical folk traditions devalued by the Confucians and logicians he seems to have regarded as his primary interlocutors. We can allow Zhuangzi to take the mystical and magical seriously as possibilities without reading him as fully accepting the truth of such claims or as fully endorsing the aim of transforming oneself into a magical being through the right spiritual practice. Indeed, he seems sometimes to exaggerate the claims to the point of silliness; and he reminds us that even Pengzu’s eight hundred years looks pathetic from a large enough perspective.

Thus, we might see in these passages a trio of attitudes similar to the trio I’ve argued are at work in the passages about death: a strand that genuinely embraces the search for mystical transformation, another strand that pokes fun at the absurdity of such a search, and a third strand (which needn’t be final or privileged over the other two) which doubts the wisdom of both of those other strands. I see no reason to insist that a single author or narrative voice must achieve a resolution among these competing thoughts.

v.

Zhuangzi speaks repeatedly of “oneness”. If you begin with those passages, 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. You might think he's trying to convey a profound truth that he knows, a truth about the deep oneness of things, a truth that is, however, difficult to express in words and which 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 univocally aiming toward mystical profundity yields a more interesting text.

Here's a sample 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."¹³

¹³ 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:

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”.¹⁴

Now wait. Stop! If you’re trying to fit these passages into a theory, trying to figure out how this can all make consistent sense, that’s 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 horse is not a horse. We are not meant to sit down and figure out how the entire universe is in fact one horse.

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

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。

¹⁴ 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).

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).

In this passage, selfhood and oneness meet. Here's a possible reading: Looked at from a narrowly specific perspective, I am not really 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. We might go narrower; we might go broader.

Is the broader perspective better overall – perhaps even so broad a perspective that the entire cosmos is just my own body? Though the Inner Chapters as a whole tend to value the broad over the narrow, I see no reason to suppose that Zhuangzi definitely resolves in favor of a broad view, especially once he has put us on the slippery slope toward the most radically broad

view of all. But neither does Zhuangzi definitely resolve in favor of the equality of all perspectives, nor in favor of a somewhat broader but not radically broad view.

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.

If we insist on seeing the vision of the Inner Chapters as a coherent vision, then whenever Zhuangzi appears to be endorsing a radical, far-out position, we will face a tension between three strands similar to those I have identified in the passages on death and oneness. There will be a strand that accepts the radical claim at face value (“dying young is no worse than living to old

age”, “everything is literally part of my body”), there will be a more moderate vision that seems to fit with a more mundane and charitable reading of the Inner Chapters as a whole (maybe something like “it’s better to live to old age, but people get too emotionally fussed up about it”, “the line between myself and other things or people is blurry and overemphasized”), and there will be a skeptical strand that doubts both the radical and the moderate positions (“*maybe* death is actually better than life”, “*maybe* I can leave my body behind entirely and become something else or somehow flow into a great oneness with creation”).

To render the radical, the moderate, and the skeptical strands coherent with each other requires compromising at least two of the three.¹⁵ But why should we compromise? Maybe we can instead just let Zhuangzi remain incomprehensibly incoherent. In my work as a philosopher of psychology, I have highlighted our splintering tendencies to speak and act in ways that conflict with each other. Such splintering is, I think, a central part of the human condition, especially in the matters we care about most (e.g., in professing high moral principles, in our attitudes toward things like money and reputation, in disavowed implicit prejudice of various stripes, in our religious attitudes: Schwitzgebel 2010, 2013). When philosophers seem to be incoherent, maybe that’s just because they’re like the rest of us. Zhuangzi might be in the unusual position of taking that fact about himself in stride rather than seeing it as a failure.

vii.

¹⁵ In Schwitzgebel (1996) I compromised the radical and the skeptical in favor of the moderate. If pushed to settle upon one coherent interpretation, the moderate Zhuangzi (who says radical things mainly to knock you out of your dogmatism) is still the one I would choose. But today I am trying out a different interpretative approach, despite the fact that it renders my readings of the Zhuangzi inconsistent with each other. See also Hansen (2003) on not needing to treat the Inner Chapters as coherent. (But then Hansen does come close to favoring a coherent interpretation, I think, by compromising the skeptical and radical strands in the text.)

One 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, who will not stay put with any idea, who playfully frustrates the reader's attempts to imbue his words with sagely seriousness. I hope that was the real, historical Zhuangzi; I think I hear him in the text. I prefer this Zhuangzi to the Zhuangzi that most other philosophical interpreters seem to see, who has some stable, consistent position beneath, which for some reason he chooses not to display in plain language on the surface of the text.¹⁶

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