Epistemology and Ethics in Zhuangzi

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Abstract: On a prima facia reading, Zhuangzi seems to endorse some form of skepticism or relativism. This seems at odds with Zhuangzi as one of the two main sources of classical Daoism, considering the ideals of virtue and self-development promoted by that philosophy. However, Zhuangzi’s metaphorical and allegorical style lends itself to a number of interpretations of his epistemology, as well as the kind of self-knowledge and ethical development it might allow. A survey of the relevant literature shows that the epistemological debate is not easily solvable, but by narrowing the range of interpretations, a coherent picture of his ethics begins to emerge, one in which some form of knowledge, especially self-knowledge, is still possible, as is an ethics of self-actualization.

Keywords: Zhuangzi; Daoism; ethics; epistemology; skepticism

Chad Hansen is among the scholars often cited as interpreting Zhuangzi as a skeptic or relativist. Specifically, Hansen takes Zhuangzi’s perspectivism as a kind of relativism, which then, in turn, entails a radical form of skepticism. On Hansen’s view, Zhuangzi treats dao not as a metaphysical absolute (as it often is in Daoism) but as a form of discourse. Per Hansen: “The guiding ideal of this classical period of Chinese thought is to get a constant dao—a form of discourse that reliably guides behavior” ([1], p. 5) Hansen’s view, as Ewing Y. Chinn concisely summarizes it, is that “Zhuangzi stands out as a relativistic sceptic, contending that the interminable debate among the Confucians, the Mohists, and others is explained by the fact that all the conflicting daos in question are in principle equally admissible” ([2], pp. 208–209). Christian Helmut Wenzel also sees Hansen as interpreting Zhuangzi as “some kind of relativist and skeptic” ([3], p. 115). He notes Hansen’s focus on Zhuangzi’s treatment of indexical demonstratives and the relativism that supposedly implied by it: “[Zhuangzi] extends this argument about indexicals to claim that all dichotomies of language behave in the same way . . . all such ways of speaking are equally natural . . . admissible from some perspective” ([4], pp. 45–46).

If Hansen is correct and Zhuangzi is a radical skeptic, then that obviously presents some challenges for any notion of self-knowledge: if knowledge is generally impossible, then self-knowledge seems specifically impossible. In fact, Zhuangzi’s emphasis on perspectives, especially those related to the personal and ethical points of view of those who follow this or that school, suggests that he is more concerned with the difficulties of having objective self-knowledge of one’s personal and ethical perspective and practice. In particular, Zhuangzi’s relativistic skepticism would make any ideal of self-transformation and self-actualization highly problematic, since any version of the self would have to be as good as any other. Without knowledge of some objective standard by which to judge, no one version of the self is any better than another: one does not improve; one simply changes from one state to another, neither better nor worse than the other.

Even if we remove relativism as the basis for Zhuangzi’s skepticism and interpret him as a non-relativistic radical skeptic, the problem remains, though perhaps in a slightly different form. A non-relativistic radical skeptic might allow that there is some objective standard but would still have to deny that one could ever have knowledge of that standard. On that view, self-improvement might technically be possible in the sense of changing
from a worse to better state, but it might just as well not be, since one would never know. Any explicit ethics of self-knowledge and self-actualization seems hopeless, since one has no basis for advocating any particular ethical theory or practice that could utilize the self-knowledge required to assess one’s current state of being and to improve to a better one, nor to evaluate one’s newer self as better or worse than the previous one. Wenzel points out the challenge of reading Zhuangzi as a relativistic skeptic: “Most stories in the Zhuangzi only teach us how to reach a certain goal once the goal is set. They do not show us which goal we should accept and set for ourselves . . . But in moral issues the criteria themselves are the problem. Moral problems go deeper” ([3], pp. 119–120). On such a reading, it is difficult to see even what value Zhuangzi could have to us. Such a reading is also at odds with so much of the text seemingly putting forward values and ideals, especially that of self-transformation. As R. E. Allinson states, “The point in analyzing the Zhuangzi is to ensure that its key theme of self-transformation is not undermined. If there is no such theme in the Zhuangzi, it becomes then a mere minor text of limited philosophical interest” ([5], p. 240). Proceeding on the assumption that Zhuangzi does indeed have value, it falls on us to clarify his epistemology or at least to narrow it down to a range of reasonable interpretations, after which we may see what it has to teach us about self-knowledge and self-transformation.

One option is to deny that Zhuangzi’s skepticism is of the radical epistemological variety and interpret him as using a kind of methodological skepticism instead, a questioning and doubting, not unlike those of Socrates or Descartes, used to reveal the truth rather than deny knowledge of it. It is quite telling that Zhuangzi begins with a tale that, although seemingly about the relativity of different perspectives, is really about the theme of transformation that runs throughout the text: “There is a fish in the Northern Oblivion named Kun, and this Kun is quite huge, spanning who knows how many thousands of miles. He transforms into a bird named Peng, and this Peng has quite a back on him stretching who knows how many thousands of miles . . . ” ([6], p 3). This passage is often cited as evidence of Zhuangzi’s relativism or skepticism, but it need not be interpreted so radically. It seems an objective fact (within the story) that a transformation has taken place: Kun has transformed into Peng. They certainly have different perspectives on things, but it is worth noting the rhetorical force of the questions that follow: “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 Peng looks down, he too sees only this and nothing more” ([6], pp. 3–4). Nothing in this passage explicitly denies objectivity; it simply seems asks us to consider the information we might receive from different perspectives, especially as we transform from one state of being to the next. As Ken Berthel puts it, this “suggests only re-evaluation of the relationship between what our senses tell us and the reality without altogether denying any knowable reality” ([7], p. 566). Berthel characterizes this as a sort of “therapeutic relativism” (not unlike methodological skepticism) which functions as a “rhetorical device for preparing [Zhuangzi’s] interlocutors to accept his higher order argument about the limitations of the possibilities of conventional modes of knowing and acting as leading to a fulfilling or skilled life” ([7], p. 569). In this way, Zhuangzi proceeds much as Socrates does, questioning his interlocutors, breaking down their façade of knowledge, and triggering their confusion (aporia in Greek, and the typical result of Socrates’ elenchus or “refutation”). Whether or not Socrates himself went further than that is a matter of some debate, but the Socrates of Plato’s mature works uses this as no more than a first step before continuing on with a positive dialectic. Republic is an excellent example of this, where the elenchus is largely limited to book one, before the dialectic takes over for the rest of the text.

This is certainly not the first time that similarities between Zhuangzi and Socrates have been noted. Lisa Raphals makes great use of the commonalities to argue that Zhuangzi has far more methodological skepticism than the radical skepticism or relativism ascribed by some scholars. She argues that much of the discussion is obfuscated by a lack of clear distinctions among various kinds of skepticism. Specifically, she distinguishes among
skepticism as thesis or doctrine (a denial of knowledge), skepticism as recommendation (a bit of practical advice to withhold judgment about an issue), and skepticism as method (a style of argument meant to challenge various philosophical positions but intending to promote clearer thinking). Examining the “Equalizing Assessment of Things” chapter and by drawing parallels to Socrates’ arguments in Plato’s *Theatetus*, Raphael argues that the actual text, so often used by those who argue the “skepticism as thesis” interpretation of *Zhuangzi*, contains very little actual evidence for that position but instead provides ample evidence for methodological skepticism (though perhaps a bit of “skepticism as recommendation” as well, depending on the passage). Such an examination and comparison “illustrates the importance of skeptical methods in both texts, a similarity that would simply not be apparent if the discussion focused on either skeptical doctrines or skeptical recommendations” ([8], p. 517). An example of her argument involves the following passage from *Zhuangzi*: “Speech has something of which it speaks, something it refers to. Yes, but what it refers to is peculiarly unfixed. So is there really anything it refers to? Or has nothing ever been referred to? You take it to be different from the chirping of baby birds. But is there really any difference between them? Or is there no difference?” ([6], p. 11). Raphael points out: “The force of this passage is to question the possibility of fixed meaning or an external verification of any statement. It uses a series of rhetorical questions to ridicule the distinctions (bian) of the Neo-Mohists and Sophists. Yet it does not offer a skeptical doctrine, that there is no difference between human language and bird calls, or a skeptical recommendation, that conventional meaning or language be ignored” ([8], p. 507). Instead, the skepticism of the passage is rather straightforwardly methodological.

R. E. Allinson takes a similar approach. As previously mentioned, Allinson sees transformation as the central theme in *Zhuangzi*: “This particular interpretation arises from a comprehensive analysis of many passages found in the inner chapters, the systematic order of the literary structure, the dialectical progression of the gallery of characters . . . and from the fact that key passages such as the fish-bird narrative and the Great Sage dream only make sense when they are understood as metaphors for spiritual transformation” ([5], p. 239). For Allinson, transformation is the central theme, only in light of which the text can be understood, much less appreciated or valued. With that in mind, *Zhuangzi*’s skepticism must be read as attacking dogmatism rather than knowledge, “to show that one should never attach oneself to a rigid, fixed standpoint or else one will not possess the openness of mind to be capable of rising to a higher standpoint” ([5], p. 240). On this reading, *Zhuangzi*’s methodological skepticism bears a strong resemblance to that of Descartes, whose systematic doubting (especially against the received wisdom of the time from the scholastics and others) leads to the very foundations of knowledge itself. Descartes’ epistemological priorities were perhaps different, focusing as he did on more abstract philosophical and scientific realms of knowledge, though he too was interested in the more practical and even ethical applications of knowledge. In *Zhuangzi*, at least, the ethical component is clearer, since it is in the context of the goal of personal transformation that we must seek self-knowledge at every level of being. In order to transform from one state to another, we must know ourselves at each state and see how we have evolved as we have transformed between states. “We must always be on the lookout to question our ordinary ways of thinking and consider that a higher wisdom is available . . . It is possible for us to transform ourselves from the Great Fish to the Big Bird” ([5], p. 250).

The preceding interpretation of *Zhuangzi*’s skepticism as methodological rather than radical or relativistic is perhaps the most generous view of his epistemology. If this interpretation is correct, then there is nothing particularly troublesome about it: knowledge is indeed possible. Given that the central theme of *Zhuangzi* is, arguably, self-transformation, then there is an important place for self-knowledge in *Zhuangzi*’s thought: self-knowledge is both possible, and even necessary, in order to assess one’s current state of being and the means to transforming to the next and higher state of being. However, one might be forgiven if this view is a bit too generous, considering a number of other passages in *Zhuangzi* which may be interpreted as more substantially relativistic or skeptical. If
Zhuangzi’s skepticism is more than simply methodological, then some concerns about self-knowledge still remain. To that end, we must consider other reasonable interpretations.

One such interpretation is that Zhuangzi is a realist but a perspectival one. On this view, Zhuangzi’s skepticism is more than simply methodological: objective truth and knowledge, free from a particular perspective, are not possible. However, that does not entail the kind of relativistic skepticism that Hansen posits, since some perspectives are still better than others. Truth with a capital T, as it were, may not be available to humans, but we are capable of achieving truth within a perspective and have ways of evaluating perspectives as better or worse compared to one another. If this is right, then knowledge, especially self-knowledge, is possible, if understood within the context of a perspective; more importantly, we can use our current perspective-based self-knowledge as a guide to self-transformation, not merely changing from one state to another, but improving as one goes, while (unlike mere methodological skepticism) recognizing that this process may not come to an end in ultimate objective knowledge, self or otherwise.

Ewing Y. Chinn advocates such a view: “‘skepticism’ [sic] and ‘relativism’ are inappropriate labels of Zhuangzi’s highly original philosophical position, a position that I will call ‘perspectival realism’” ([2], p. 209). To this end, he offers an interpretation of certain passages that suggest that Zhuangzi was actually arguing against relativism and skepticism. In Zhuangzi’s dialogue between himself and Huizi, there is an interesting (and funny) exchange about the happiness of fish. Responding to Zhuangzi’s claim that the fish is happy.

Huizi says: “You are not a fish, so whence do you know the happiness of fish?”

Zhuangzi said: “You are not I, so whence do you know I don’t know the happiness of fish?”

Huizi said: “I am not you, to be sure, so I don’t know what it is to be you. But by the same token, since you are certainly not a fish, my point about your inability to know the happiness of fish stands intact.”

Zhuangzi said: “Let’s go back to the starting point. You said, ‘Whence do you know the happiness of fish?’ Since your question was premised on your knowing that I know, I must have known it from here, up and above the Hao River.” ([6], p. 76).

Though we might question the validity of the argument, it does appear that Zhuangzi is arguing against skepticism by pointing out its self-refuting nature, since any questioning or doubting of knowledge starts from a presupposition of knowledge to be questioned and doubted in the first place.

Similarly, one of Zhuangzi’s dream arguments, often used by Hansen and others to argue for the relativist or skeptical interpretation, finds a completely different application through Chinn’s interpretation. After giving examples of the illusory and deceptive nature of dreams, Zhuangzi concludes: “While dreaming you don’t know it’s a dream. You might even interpret a dream in your dream—and then you wake up and realize it was all a dream” ([6], p. 19). Zhuangzi’s point seems exactly like Chinn’s interpretation of perspectival realism: though we might be fooled into thinking we are awake when we are in the perspective of dreaming, we realize that we were merely dreaming once we inhabit the perspective of being awake. Of course, there is the possibility of dreaming within a dream, but the point seems to be that the higher/outer perspectives rule out the lower/inner ones. Once we wake from a dream, we realize it was a dream, and waking from a dream of dreaming allows us to realize both were dreams. Perhaps, we cannot ever know that we are truly and fully awake—even this “waking” may be a dream—but the next level of waking still grants us the knowledge that the previous dream was merely that.

Of course, the more famous of Zhuangzi’s dream arguments is that of the butterfly: “Once Zhuang Zhou dreamt he was a butterfly . . . Suddenly he awoke . . . 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” ([6], p. 21). A standard relativistic or skeptical reading suggests that Zhou does not know if he himself is Zhou or the butterfly, but that seems not to be the actual claim. Rather, Zhou is wondering whether he is real and the butterfly is a dream, or if the butterfly is real and Zhou himself is nothing more than a dream—but either way, he is still Zhou! Chinn suggests that the story is simply a playful way of pointing out that our existence, whether “real” or not, is always bound to our perspective. “The point is that if what is real is perspective bound, if there is no such thing as ‘objective reality’ or reality in itself, then [Zhou] may imagine that there are alternative perspectives. But the perspective of the butterfly or any other possible perspectives are beyond his comprehension. Thus he cannot sensibly conceive of any reality other than his own” ([2], p. 217). Piggybacking on that train of thought, we must also conclude that there is no other self than the one that one inhabits at the moment, and no real question of the knowledge of that self. It is simply the warning that this self-knowledge is bound to the perspective of one’s current state of being. However, personal transformation is still possible, as the last line of the dream argument states explicitly, thus allowing for the possibility of eventually inhabiting other perspectives tied to each new self, with its own self-knowledge.

Donald Sturgeon points out other exchanges between Huizi and Zhuangzi that make a similar point; although perfect knowledge may not be possible, we are still in a position to acquire knowledge relative to certain perspectives, which in turn allow us to judge some knowledge as greater than others. Discussing a huge, gnarled tree, Huizi claims that it is useless, just as Zhuangzi’s words are. “Even if it were growing right in the middle of the road, a carpenter would not give it so much as a second glance. And your words are similarly big, but useless, which is why they are rejected by everyone who hears them”; Zhuangzi, however, suggests that its uselessness guarantees that “since it has nothing for which it can be used, what could entrap or afflict it?” ([6], p. 8). Such a tree, he points out, would be an excellent place to nap! Another exchange shows Huizi and Zhuangzi discussing the use of giant gourds. Huizi claims they are so big that they cannot serve traditional uses such as drinking vessels, and so “because it was so useless, I finally smashed it to pieces,” but Zhuangzi responds: “How is it you have never thought of making it into an enormous vessel for yourself and floating through the lakes and rivers in it?” ([6], pp. 7–8). According to Sturgeon, the point of these examples is that “we can improve our epistemic situation by considering other perspectives on the matter under consideration. A commitment to a knowledge claim that holds from a broader range of perspectives will put us in a better epistemic position than a commitment to a claim holding to a narrower range of perspectives” ([9], pp. 901–902). However, a knowledge claim independent of any perspective seems out of the question, and even a non-relative knowledge claim based on the synthesis and comparison of all possible perspectives simply seems out of reach, and “this may simply be an aspect of the human condition that we should learn to live with” ([9], p. 902).

Other philosophers have taken similar perspectives on Zhuangzi’s perspectivism. Thomas Radice argues that Zhuangzi allows for privileged (rather than merely relative) perspectives, especially that of the Sage. In particular, the Sage has clarity (ming) that illuminates the unity of opposites (yin and yang, right and wrong, Confucianism and Mohism, etc.). This is clear in Zhuangzi’s story of the monkeys and their trainer, in which the trainer fools the monkeys simply by restating their feeding schedule without actually changing it: “this change of description and arrangement caused no loss, but in one case it brought anger and in another delight . . . Thus the Sage uses various rights and wrongs to harmonize with others and yet remains at rest in the middle of Heaven . . . ” ([6], p. 14). As Radice puts it: “though Zhuangzi advocates a kind of relativism, he still believes that one perspective—that of the Sage—is superior to all others” ([10], p. 35). Notice that the “kind of relativism” that Radice has in mind is not the strict relativism of Hansen’s interpretation but coheres better with Chinn’s perspectivism: “there are relativistic aspects of Zhuangzi’s thought. Radical relativism, however, fails to explain these passages adequately, as they
fail to account for apparent non-relativist passages” ([10], p. 39). Radice does differ from Chinn and Sturgeon in suggesting at least one potentially objective perspective—that of the Sage—but otherwise, he interprets Zhuangzi in a way very similar to Chinn, allowing for what is “correct” to be relative to a particular perspective, such as Zhuangzi’s example of the good cook who learns the correct way to cut joints and is thus superior to the mediocre cook: “A good cook changes his blade once a year: he slices. An ordinary cook changes his blade once a month: he hacks” ([6], p. 22). Note the suggestion of transformation, and the role of self-knowledge implicit in this distinction. The ordinary cook much come to know that she is ordinary so that she can learn to improve her knife skills and work to become a good cook. Once again, we have a parallel with Socrates’ use of the *elenchus* to cure us of our pretentions to knowledge, granting self-awareness of that ignorance (“Socratic Ignorance” as it were) so that we may search for real knowledge.

David B. Wong takes a related view, also arguing against Hansen’s interpretation, and offering instead the view that Zhuangzi’s supposed skepticism still “suggests the possibility of changing perspectives, even broadening one’s original perspectives, to take in more of what the world has to offer” ([11], p. 92). On Wong’s reading, Zhuangzi means us to see skepticism as a way of engaging with the world, much like methodological skepticism, but with a more substantive contribution to knowledge by way of expanding and improving our perspectives: “Skeptical questioning of our current perspectives leads to more openness to new ones, but as the new ones loosen the grip of the old perspectives on us, we are aware that their grip on us is subject to loosening by still further new perspectives” ([11], p. 99). In a sense, skepticism acts as a kind of personal virtue, a form of self-knowledge that one can always open oneself to more: “It is a continuous willingness to be surprised, an openness to being jolted, even an enjoyment in being jolted, that is the thread underlying this process” ([11], p. 99). Similarly, Zhuangzi’s skeptical perspectivism encourages an increasing self-awareness of one’s limits and the adoption of the personal virtue of humility: “Consider the perspective of ourselves as very limited creatures, small parts of the natural world, who are just smart enough to figure out what a very narrow range of sensory stimuli is available . . . This view of ourselves is a genuine discovery . . . but it is also a humbling one . . . This is very much the perspective we are invited to take” ([11], p. 102).

Of course, not everyone agrees with such an interpretation. There are those who would argue something more akin to Hansen’s view of radical skepticism or something even more radical than that. One particularly interesting view is that of Deborah and David Soles, who argue that Zhuangzi is what they call an epistemological nihilist. On this view, knowledge is simply not possible because the very ideas and terminology of “knowledge”, “truth”, etc., are themselves meaningless. On their view, Zhuangzi believes that all knowledge is perspective-based; however, they deny that Zhuangzi believes there are privileged perspectives. To this point, they draw attention to passages in Zhuangzi such as: “Monkeys take she-monkeys for mates, bucks mount does, male fish frolic with female fish while humans regard Mao Quang and Lady Li as great beauties—but when fish see them, they dart into the depths, when birds see them they soar into the skies, when deer see them they bolt away without looking back. Which of these four ‘knows’ what is rightly alluring?” ([6], p. 18). So too: “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? . . . If neither you nor I can know, a third person would be even more benighted . . . But if he already disagrees with both of us can he straighten it out? So neither you nor I not any third party can ever know how it is—shall we wait for yet some ‘other’?” ([6], pp. 19–20). On this view, the fact that our ideas and claims are perspective based entails that we can never really speak to the validity of one perspective over another.

According to Soles and Soles, the result of this is not quite the typical radical skepticism of Hansen’s interpretation, but rather something even more radical: “Zhuangzi does much more than merely raise skeptical doubts or argue that we can have no objective criteria of knowledge. He calls into question the legitimacy of the category of knowledge
itself... Zhuangzi’s position is best described as a form of epistemological nihilism; it admits that we may use terms such as ‘truth’, ‘knowledge’, ‘reality’, and ‘being’, but it insists that these expressions do not express any genuine categories or classifications” ([12], pp. 160–161). However, not all is lost. Such a conclusion is neither self-refuting nor epistemologically useless, since the recognition of the limits of epistemological language allows us another sort of understanding, intuitive, and non-linguistic. “For Zhuangzi, we should respond to his words not as designators or delineators of a reality, but as tools that can help us break free from a perspective-bound understanding” ([12], p. 162). This may put some readers in mind of the quietism of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, in which language and logic are merely a ladder that must be thrown away once used. Zhuangzi says similarly: “A snare is there for the rabbits. When you have got hold of the rabbit, you forget the snare. Words are there for the intent. When you have got hold of the intent, you forget the words” ([6], p. 114). As Soles and Soles conclude: “a paradoxical use of words may allow one to ‘see’ past the parameters of one’s perspective. To be sure, this ‘seeing’ cannot be judgmental; its content cannot be conceptualized; it cannot be described” ([12], p. 163). If this is correct, then what is left for “knowledge” of the self, much less any ethics that springs from it?

Though he does not use the term “epistemological nihilism”, there is much in Christian Helmut Wenzel’s approach to Zhuangzi that fits with Soles and Soles’ interpretation and that allows us to consider the question of “knowledge” and ethics in Zhuangzi, even with a fairly radical interpretation of his epistemology. Referring to Hansen’s interpretation of Zhuangzi as a radical skeptic, Wenzel says: “Such a relativist reading certainly is not unjustified. But I think this cannot be the whole story. Zhuangzi also has something positive to say, something more than ‘anything goes’ or ‘go with the flow’... Hanson’s relativist reading ... sees only the Heavenly point of view, a view that is not human... Zhuangzi here seems to indicate more than the Heavenly point of view” ([3], pp. 115–116). With that in mind, Wenzel takes the time to draw out Zhuangzi’s notion of “awareness,” from which we can derive and ethics that springs from, among other things, self-awareness, even without traditional epistemological notions of objective knowledge, self- or otherwise.

Wenzel notices that even relativist readings of Zhuangzi allow for a notion of awareness: “There is the awareness of the plurality of possible points of view, and there is the awareness of the specific material the craftsman is dealing with, an awareness the craftsman must have in order to succeed in what he is doing” ([3], p. 117). Our awareness of our own perspective allows for an awareness of the self, at least in the moment of this or that perspective; furthermore, this awareness can be generalized and projected onto others and their perspectives, allowing for the possibility of an ethic of interpersonal interaction. The key to this is Zhuangzi’s notion of skills. Zhuangzi gives many examples of the skilled craftsman: the cook who is skilled at cutting, the ferryman who is skilled at navigating, the diver who is skilled at swimming, the woodworker who is skilled at choosing raw wood for his projects, etc. For the skilled craftsman, explicit “knowledge” has been left behind, or we might say, thoroughly internalized, so that she rarely must think about her craft explicitly. However, there may be new and more challenging circumstances in which one must think more explicitly. “Once learned, this seems to work automatically, but when unusually difficult situations arise, one has to consciously watch out, reflect, and learn again” ([3], p. 118). This provides an implicit pattern for moral behavior as well, in which one must step out of one’s perspective of implicit self-knowledge and think explicitly about the position of the other: “Dealing with another person whom I recognize as my equal seems to be something fundamentally different from dealing with water, wood, or numbers, because in the case of a person I have to be aware of aspects in which he is equal to me. I have to imagine myself in his position. The other has a face. Looking at the other as my equal seems to be somewhat like looking into a mirror” ([3], p. 120).

In other words, it is precisely one’s self-knowledge that is projected onto the other to allow for ethical behavior. When we come across others in situations where our behavior toward them is not easy and obvious—precisely ethical situations—we must be like the
skilled craftsman: “A skilled craftsman’s awareness also involves awareness of possibilities, awareness of his abilities, and even awareness of himself [using] interpretation and reflection, reflection not only of what is outside, as does a mirror, but also of our inner states” ([3], p. 122). In this way, Wenzel sees similarities between Zhuangzi and Kant: “Zhuangzi’s notion of awareness can . . . be extended to the moral realm. Kant wants us to be aware of the idea of a man under moral laws . . . and to respect this idea. Awareness and autonomy go well together” ([3], p. 123).

Zhuangzi’s poetic and metaphorical writing style certainly does not lend itself to easy elucidation of his epistemology. Considering the wide range of text-based interpretations, the challenge of determining the correct view on his seemingly relativistic or skeptical outlook may not be perfectly solvable. Fortunately, there is still good reason to think that an ethics based on self-awareness and self-transformation is available regardless of his specific epistemology, other than perhaps the most traditional kind of radical skepticism. Ultimately, Zhuangzi still provides a view of the good life that is consistent with the spirit of classical Daoism, almost no matter how we choose to see his philosophy of knowledge.

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**Notes**

1. Paul Kiljeberg makes a similar argument in “Dao and Skepticism,” comparing Zhuangzi to Sextus Empiricus and arguing that “Zhuangzi does not and cannot provide a solution to the [skeptical] problems his text raises” ([13], p. 299). In this way, Zhuangzi seems to engage with *aporetic*, rather than dogmatic skepticism, as Kiljeberg puts it.

2. Trowbridge also picks up on this anti-dogmatism in Zhuangzi, making connections to the skepticism of the ancient Greeks, “where skepticism is understood not merely as a negative epistemology, but rather as a nondogmatic or aporetic attitude of open-mindedness, that was seems as contributing to a set of ethical recommendations for living a productive life” ([14], p. 249). The skepticism of Sextus Empiricus, for example, was aimed at achieving a kind of peace of mind (*ataraxia*) and engaging in the world. So too does Zhuangzi: “The Greek skeptics, like Zhuangzi, were primarily interested in the question of how to live well” ([14], p. 254).

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