

Zhuangzi*, perspectives, and greater knowledge

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Although the text of the *Zhuangzi*¹ seems to present many prima facie skeptical arguments, there has been much debate as to the nature of its skeptical stance, and even whether or not its stance is substantively skeptical at all.² Chad Hansen and Chris Fraser have argued that the *Zhuangzi* does take a substantively skeptical position, but that this position is more nuanced than simply holding skepticism about the possibility of all knowledge.³

This paper will attempt to build upon Chris Fraser's proposal that the *Zhuangzi* is skeptical about our ability to know a privileged class of ultimately correct ways of drawing distinctions (果是 *guo shi* and 果非 *guo fei*), but does not question our ability to know how to distinguish things in an ordinary, provisional and commonsense sense. I will attempt to engage with both sides of the debate, by firstly accepting that the *Zhuangzi* takes a substantive skeptical stance, but also arguing that in doing so the text also provides a positive account of how to improve our epistemic position – an account which

* Forthcoming in *Philosophy East and West* 65:3.

¹ This paper will focus on knowledge and skepticism in the anthology known as the *Zhuangzi*, beginning with ideas presented most clearly in the *Qiwulun* chapter, but will also consider how these ideas cohere with those presented elsewhere in the anthology – including in passages that may be later additions to the text by one or more distinct authors or editors. Even where this is so, it still seems useful to ask how – if at all – these ideas fit together, and why they might have been collected together in such an anthology. I shall use the term “Zhuangist” to refer to the broadly coherent set of ideas I identify in this paper – within which there may be some scope for variation – without meaning to suggest that these ideas are uniformly endorsed by all passages of the entire anthology.

² E.g. Wong 2005, Ivanhoe 1993.

³ Hansen 2003, Fraser 2009.

might be suggestive of one motivating factor of the Zhuangist ethical stance.⁴ My argument will focus on Zhuangist attitudes to different types of knowledge, specifically what the text refers to as “lesser knowledge (小知 *xiao zhi*)” and “greater knowledge (大知 *da zhi*)”, and the relationship between the two. I will attempt to show that, far from promoting “epistemological nihilism”,⁵ the Zhuangist stance is actually that of a “positive skeptic” who can offer wide-ranging practical advice on how to improve our own epistemic situation, while at the same time warning us of the ultimate limits of what we can come to know.⁶

Skeptical background

A radically skeptical interpretation of the *Zhuangzi* faces serious obstacles. It is certainly true that many stories in the *Zhuangzi* present characters we are presumably expected to empathize with questioning whether it is possible to know something. However, these arguments generally proceed from assumptions that it seems all characters in the story presuppose – in other words, take as being known and therefore knowable. Is the *Zhuangzi* guilty of committing the fallacy which the Mohists accuse it of, “declaring all doctrine perverse” – itself a perverse doctrine?⁷

⁴ This paper therefore represents an attempt to “strike out in another direction” as suggested in Wong 2005, p.97-98.

⁵ Soles and Soles 1998, p.161.

⁶ Since I submitted this paper for publication, a paper taking a broadly similar line of interpretation on “greater knowledge” and “lesser knowledge” has been published elsewhere (Tim Connolly, 2011, “Perspectivism as a Way of Knowing in the *Zhuangzi*”, *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, 10, 487-505). Although I am unable to respond to it here, I think that Connolly’s interpretation is largely compatible with the one I offer, and I recommend it to the interested reader.

⁷ Mozi: 67/41/21, 74/43/82-83.

The work of Hansen and Fraser has shown that this is not the case. The *Zhuangzi* is not skeptical about ordinary contingent knowledge claims as they apply from particular circumstances and perspectives.⁸ No doubt is expressed about whether “monkeys live in trees”, or what “monkeys” are; rather, the skeptical doubts apply to knowledge of absolutely or ultimately correct action-guiding distinctions. This limiting of skeptical doubt to a narrower scope than that of all knowledge claims is essential to the *Zhuangzi* avoiding the obvious criticism of a claim to know that nothing is knowable – namely, “then how do you know that?”⁹

Perspectives in the *Zhuangzi*

The *Zhuangzi* is sometimes described as taking up a perspectivist position;¹⁰ in order to avoid possible confusion, I will first attempt to clarify what I mean by “perspectives”, and in what sense I think they are important to the *Zhuangzi*.¹¹

References to the text of the *Zhuangzi* and *Mozi* cite page, section, and line numbers in the appropriate volume of the Harvard-Yenching concordance series; references to all other texts cite section, page, and line numbers in the corresponding ICS concordance.

Locations in the text of all the textual references given in this paper can also be determined using the Chinese Text Project website concordance tool:

<http://ctext.org/tools/concordance>

⁸ Hansen 2003, p. 145; Fraser 2009, p.446.

⁹ A number of commentators on the *Zhuangzi* take this line of criticism as showing that skepticism is self-refuting or incoherent (see Hansen 2003, p.155 note 4). However, there is nothing obviously incoherent or self-refuting about being skeptical of some types of knowledge, yet not skeptical about others (Fraser 2009, p. 441-442).

¹⁰ E.g. Ivanhoe 1993, p.645; Hansen 2002, p.150.

¹¹ My core focus here will be on suggestions made about knowledge in the *Qiwulun* and how these cohere with other ideas in the *Zhuangzi* – this may include ideas and passages that can be identified as later additions to the text by subsequent authors or editors. Even where it may be the case that certain passages are of later authorship, and even assuming that this can be reliably determined in specific cases, it still seems useful to ask how – if at all – the ideas in these passages fit together, and why they might become lumped together in an anthology such as the *Zhuangzi*. In the discussion below, I shall use the term “Zhuangist” to refer to ideas that I shall argue constitute a recurring theme throughout

Broadly speaking, by perspective I mean some set of background assumptions, cognitive and affective attitudes, physical and psychological states which have a bearing upon how one thinks, feels, and acts. In particular, in the *Zhuangzi* we often find stories relating to one of two related types of perspective in this broad sense. Firstly, there is perspective in the sense of “being in someone else’s (or one’s own) shoes” – thinking about a situation as it would be if one were in fact someone else, i.e. were in his or her physical and psychological state. For example, the perspective of a monkey would be the view of the world that I would likely have if I were in fact a monkey. In this case understanding a perspective usually takes the form of a counterfactual – if I were in someone else’s position, what would I think about some particular matter at hand. Secondly, there is also the sense of thinking about some situation while primarily paying attention to some particular aspect of it. For example the “perspective of utility” would be the view of the world (or more specifically some particular matter under consideration) that I would have if I placed emphasis primarily upon the matter of “utility”. Again this can be seen as a counterfactual – how I would see things if I were to consider primarily some particular aspect of a situation, which I may or may not in fact consider important.

Perspectives in both these senses are a recurring theme in the *Zhuangzi*. Often those who view matters from a narrow, close-minded perspective appear to be mocked or ridiculed as failing to see something important – the small bird that laughs at the giant Peng bird’s long journeys without seeing that from the Peng’s perspective the flight of little birds must seem laughably inconsequential, and the preconceived notions of people such as Zi-chan who, seeing that a person is deformed or crippled, focus only on the

much of the *Zhuangzi*; I do not intend to claim that these ideas – or the textual passages that I cite – constitute the work of a single author.

negative aspects of his situation and so assume he must be lacking virtuosity (德 *de*).¹² Typically such cases are those in which one is seen as appreciating only one's own perspective and ignoring the possibility of distinct but somehow closely related perspectives, the consideration of which might be of value to oneself either in better understanding the world or in interacting with it successfully. In this respect, the *Zhuangzi* seems to be making a criticism similar that that of the *Xunzi*, in saying that people are easily misled or "blinkered" by one aspect of things. Nonetheless, from the tone of the *Zhuangzi*, and particularly the numerous stories in which an unexpected or unusual perspective is pointed out as an alternative way of looking at things, it seems clear that the *Zhuangzi* does not see engagement with the world from particular perspectives as being inherently epistemically or ethically misguided. Unlike the *Xunzi*, which seems to consider perspectives as primarily being a cause of blinkering,¹³ the *Zhuangzi*, though it acknowledges perspectives *can* cause such blinkering, also accepts that in reality, ordinary beings *inevitably* see the world from some perspective.¹⁴ Most obviously, we see the world from our own perspective; but also, as the *Zhuangzi* seems to be encouraging us to do, we can consider how the world might be from other perspectives.

¹² The *De Chong Fu* chapter gives several examples challenging such assumptions: Wang Tai, whose feet had been cut off yet had more followers than Confucius (12/5/1-6); Shen Tu Jia, whose feet had also been cut off, yet appears to convince Zi-chan that it would be wrong to take his outward appearance as evidence of a lack of virtuosity (13/5/13-24); "toeless" Shu Shan, who is initially overlooked by Confucius on the basis of his appearance, then praised by him, then goes on to diagnose Confucius' failings in a discussion with Lao Dan (13/5/24-31); and the ugly yet charismatic Ai Tai Tuo who attracts the devotion of all those around him (13/5/31-14/5/43).

¹³ The *Xunzi* diagnoses the failures of a list of thinkers including Mozi, Huizi, and Zhuangzi, each in terms of their being blinkered by some particular perspective (21/103/8-9). He contrasts this with Confucius, who was "benevolent and wise, and not blinkered" (21/103/15).

¹⁴ Though the "pivot of the Dao" (道樞 *dao shu*) discussed in the *Qiwulun* chapter seems to challenge this assumption by suggesting that one can endlessly choose among available perspectives, ultimately as soon as we act, we commit ourselves to some particular perspective. To refuse to take up any perspective on anything would seemingly not be possible in any recognizably human way of life.

Knowledge and wisdom

Before entering into a discussion of knowledge in the *Zhuangzi*, it seems useful to note a few points about the word “knowledge” as it appears in the text. Firstly, in transmitted texts of the pre-Qin period, the words which later came to be distinguished as “知 (knowledge)” and “智 (wisdom)” were both commonly written using the same character “知 (*zhi*)”, and very likely shared the same pronunciation.¹⁵ Secondly, on the pre-Qin conception of knowledge, generally no clear category distinction was made between knowing-of, knowing-that, and knowing-how. Relatedly, the word “知” could take many things as its direct object, including a person or thing which one might be acquainted with (“to know Confucius”, “to know black and white”), the holding of a state of affairs (“to know that black is not white”), or an ability which one might or might not possess (“to know how to ride a bike”).¹⁶ Whereas in English these differences are suggested by surface grammar (e.g. “know *that*” versus “know *how*”), this is not the case in classical Chinese.¹⁷ Thirdly, knowledge was conceived of as being intimately connected with action, to the extent that failing to act in a particular way in some particular situation was considered to be conclusive evidence not only that one did not *know* the correct way to act in that situation, but even that one did not *know* the relevant concept involved or how to distinguish it. Thus on the pre-Qin conception of knowledge, it would make perfect

¹⁵ E.g. Bernhard Karlgren, *Grammata Serica Recensa*, entry 863.

¹⁶ Numerous examples of each are available in pre-Qin texts, for instance: “晏子知禮乎” (*Han Shi Wai Zhuan*: 4.12/28/26); “知是之非此也” (*Mozi*: 71/43/37); “古之民未知為舟車時” (*Mozi*: 7/6/27).

¹⁷ Christoph Harbsmeier (1993, p.15-16) points out that there are grammatical differences in what follows *zhi* when it plays the role of “know-that” and “know-how”; however, these differences are considerably more subtle than in English where words “that” and “how” often appear as markers.

sense to say simply that a wise person was one who possessed knowledge,¹⁸ a person who knew a great deal, because being knowledgeable would in itself entail that the person acted in a wise manner in a wide range of situations. Being wise is just knowing many things, where “knowing” is understood in the expanded sense which implicitly includes guiding one’s action.

As a result, while it is tempting to try to clarify each instance of “知” as meaning either “knowledge” or “wisdom”, and indeed there may be clear cases where only one of the two would make sense or seem appropriate in translation, in order to avoid introducing confusion by using different translations for the same Chinese character, the following discussion in will translate “知” consistently as “knowledge”, with the proviso that this should be understood as meaning “knowledge (知)” in the sense pre-Qin thinkers took it to be rather than as a narrower Western conception of propositional or other knowledge. Particularly in cases where “知” is used non-verbally, it is often the case that either translation would make equally good sense.

Improving our epistemic situation

In what follows I adapt the terminology of “epistemic situation” or “epistemic position” from DeRose’s discussion of contextualism, for a broadly similar purpose – that is, in order to talk about necessary conditions for knowledge, without committing to any particular account of what these conditions actually might be. In DeRose’s terminology, “To be in a strong epistemic position with respect to some proposition one believes is for one’s belief in that proposition to have to a high extent the property or properties the

¹⁸ This is precisely what Mengzi claims, using “知” in what we might say were the two senses of “wisdom” and “knowledge”: “知者無不知也” (*Mengzi*: 13.46/72/31).

having enough of which is what's needed for a true belief to constitute a piece of knowledge."¹⁹ My use of the term attempts to extend this to all knowledge in the pre-Qin sense: being in a strong epistemic position with respect to some potentially knowable thing is to have to a high extent the property or properties the having enough of which is what's needed for one to know it. By "potentially knowable thing", I mean merely anything that can function as the direct object of "知 *zhi*" – for example a kind term, a state of affairs, or an ability – in contrast to DeRose's use in which an epistemic position is always considered with respect to a proposition.

Intuitively, then, epistemic position refers to how *well* a person knows some thing; it refers to the *quality* of knowledge a person possesses at a particular time – how well he knows – as distinct from the notion of *quantity*, or the number of things he knows (insofar as this might be quantifiable). With the pre-Qin conception of knowledge in mind, there are various dimensions in which one's epistemic position at time A might be better than that at time B; these include knowing something with greater justification, knowing something in greater detail or clarity, and having greater practical success with respect to something.

Strength of justification is perhaps the most obvious way in which a person's epistemic situation might change. For example, having heard repeatedly from mutual acquaintances that my co-worker Jones owns a Ford, I might come to have a significant amount of those properties needed for me to know that he does indeed own one; but my epistemic situation with respect to my tentative belief that "Jones owns a Ford" would surely be strengthened further if I were to see him driving a new Ford about town, or were he to show me a receipt from the car dealership. Presumably, radical skepticism and

¹⁹ DeRose 2009, p.7.

Gettier cases aside, there would come a point at which I would be in a strong enough epistemic position for me to *know* that Jones owns a Ford.

A second dimension in which one epistemic position can be superior to another relates to the detail or depth of our knowledge. This factor is especially relevant to pre-Qin ideas of knowledge because “to know X” where X is a noun was such a common use of “know”. On the pre-Qin conception of knowledge, if I know tables, then I must be able to distinguish tables from non-tables in a reliable fashion; but even given that I have this ability, there remains a great deal of uncertainty regarding *how well* I know tables. To avoid accusations of “not knowing X”, I need not only to be able to distinguish things which are X from things which are not, but also to have some understanding of how to interact correctly with X; not merely to be in possession of a functional description of X (“tables are hard raised flat surfaces for writing and putting things on”), but to actually interact with them correctly: to know that tables are used for writing on (and therefore, on the pre-Qin conception of knowledge, to use them as such when appropriate); to know that tables are used for putting things on; to know that tables are generally used with the hard flat surface facing upwards, and so on. Although there is presumably some minimum standard above which one would not normally be accused of not knowing X, there still may be room for knowing X better – in the sense of knowing more about X. Possession of other knowledge, not necessarily propositional knowledge, may also contribute to “better” knowledge in this sense: an accomplished carpenter undoubtedly knows tables better than the casual table-user.

This idea of depth of knowledge may also be extensible to propositional knowledge in interesting ways. Consider the claim to knowledge that the Earth is flat, versus the claim to knowledge that the Earth is round. Although a straightforward purely propositional account of knowledge might argue that the former simply is not knowledge

but a once widely-held untrue belief, while the latter may indeed be genuine knowledge, there also seems to be a respect in which the latter is a refinement of the former rather than a straightforward denial of it. The claim that the Earth is round is implicitly understood as building on our commonsense understanding that the Earth as we see it in our everyday experience is flat; rather than denying that this is in any sense the case, it leads us to accept that from another perspective, namely that of a greater distance, the Earth is round. From an even further off perspective, it might be that the Earth is simply a point in space. All three of these claims are approximations, which are valid only from a certain range of perspectives – strictly speaking, the Earth is no more absolutely round than it is absolutely flat. Knowledge of any one of these three claims seems, in some important respect, to be less good than an understanding of all of them combined – and less good again than this together with an understanding of the limitations shared by all three.

In skill knowledge too, it seems clear that we can make sense of knowing more or less well in a further dimension to that of greater justification or depth, namely, that of how well we are able to perform the skill in practice. A competent bicycle rider knows cycling better than a child riding for the first time, and though a professional cyclist knows it better than either of them, professional-level skill is not required for us to accept that someone knows how to ride a bike.

Thus it appears that for all of these various types of “knowing” involved in the pre-Qin concept of “*zhi*”, we can make sense of the idea of knowing more or less well, and it seems that our epistemic position needs to reach some minimum standard for us to avoid accusations of not knowing.

Greater knowledge and lesser knowledge

If the substantive skeptical interpretation of the *Zhuangzi* is correct, then it seems that there is a tension of some sort between the two types of knowledge – the kind we can hope to attain, and the kind we should be skeptical about. If we accept that the *Zhuangzi* is committed to the position that there are some things we can know – perhaps what things are appropriate for me to take as “contingently so” in a particular circumstance, such as that monkeys live in trees – and some things we cannot – for example, what the uniquely right place to live is – then we should not be surprised if we find evidence of tension between these two types of knowledge, both of which seem to be referred to in the *Zhuangzi* as “知”. Although this tension does seem to be part of the Zhuangist position, an obvious question is how are these two types of knowledge related, and why is one kind purportedly unattainable?

In several places in the *Zhuangzi*, an explicit distinction and contrast is made between “greater knowledge (大知 *da zhi*)” and “lesser knowledge (小知 *xiao zhi*)”. Firstly, at the beginning of the *Xiaoyaoyou* chapter, a contrast is made between the morning mushroom and short-lived cicada, and the “Da-chun”, whose autumn and spring each lasted 8000 years, and long-lived Peng Zu. One claim that is made is, to give an overly literal translation, “small knowledge does not reach large knowledge; small years do not reach large years”, which I interpret as claiming that “lesser knowledge” does not reach “greater knowledge”, and “shorter lives” do not reach “longer lives”.²⁰ From the

²⁰ The Chinese text reads: “小知不及大知，小年不及大年” (1/1/10). There is a considerable degree of ambiguity and scope for differing interpretations of this sentence. From the parallelism between “小知不及大知” and “小年不及大年” as well as the examples of short-lived beings that follow, it seems clear that the “小” and “大” in both sentences should be taken as modifying “知” and “年”, rather than acting as subject (i.e. simply meaning “the small” and “the large”). This interpretation is further supported by the other instances of “小知” and “大知” outlined below, which do not exhibit this type of

context of the rest of the passage, it seems clear that part of the claim is that creatures with short life-spans cannot know of things which lie beyond their existence – a summer cicada simply cannot know autumn or winter – and so, in this sense, those with a longer life-span can come to possess knowledge inaccessible to those with shorter lives. Interestingly, there does not seem to be a claim that it is necessarily *better* to come to know more things – but it is clear that a longer life in general gives one the opportunity of knowing more things than a shorter one.

Secondly, the *Qiwulun* makes another comparison between “greater knowledge” and “lesser knowledge”;²¹ and although the precise meaning of this claim is much less clear, most interpreters take it as saying that “greater knowledge” is wide and encompassing, while “lesser knowledge” is small, narrow, or petty.²² This interpretation is supported by the *Xiaoyaoyou* passage, since knowledge gained over a greater range of experiences ought generally to be broader in some sense than knowledge gained over a smaller range.

Thirdly, in the *Waiwu* chapter, the *Zhuangzi* points out how even the superbly wise spirit-tortoise, which through its knowledge was able show itself to the ruler of Song in a dream²³ and divine 72 times without error, was nonetheless unable to avoid the fisherman’s net or its gruesome fate once caught.²⁴ This is supposed to show that “知有所困” – knowledge has its perils. We are then told to “discard the lesser knowledge, and the

grammatical ambiguity. Additionally, the Chinese text does not distinguish between the comparative “smaller” and the absolute “small”; preference for the comparative here is also supported by the interpretation outlined below.

²¹ “大知閑閑，小知閒閒”. 3/2/9.

²² E.g. Chen 1983, p. 41; Watson 1968, p.37. The early *Guangyun* dictionary gives a gloss of “great (大 *da*)” for “閑”, and “near (近 *jin*)” for “閒”, providing some support for this interpretation (*Songben Guangyun*, reprinted in Sturgeon 2011).

²³ Again here we see how the pre-Qin conception of knowledge is intimately tied to action: it is claimed that it is its *knowledge* that gives it the ability to perform this feat.

²⁴ 74/26/24-29.

greater knowledge will become clear”.²⁵ Taken together with the first two passages, this seems to suggest that greater knowledge is something preferable to lesser knowledge, and at the same time there is a sense in which the possession of lesser knowledge can prevent greater knowledge from being clear to us.

Fourthly, although it does not make an explicit contrast with lesser knowledge, the *Qiu Shui* chapter links greater knowledge to observation of and appeal to a number of contrasts: far and near, large and small, many and few, past and present. In the course of a dialogue between He Bo and Bei Hai Ruo that emphasizes the ways our thinking is limited by our experience – the frog in a well does not understand the sea, nor the summer insect ice – the focus quickly turns to questions of relativism and absolutes. When He Bo asks whether one might take heaven and earth as being exemplary of “great”, and the point of a hair as exemplary of “small”, he is answered in the negative, and then given an explanation in terms of how greater knowledge involves looking at many different perspectives.²⁶ This appears to explicitly link greater knowledge to appreciation of a form of perspectivism²⁷ – in particular, to the agent’s willingness to explore different perspectives on the matter under consideration, and also to the *range* of available perspectives, including those which might at first appear contradictory or counter-intuitive. The passage also points out that what a person knows is surely outweighed by what he does not know, and the time he is alive is outweighed by the time he is not. Again this seems to be emphasizing the importance not only of different perspectives, but of the vast number of them which exist in principle. Thinking back to the *Xiaoyaoyou* passage, presumably even for the Da-chun with its spring and autumn of 8000 years, it would still

²⁵ 74/26/30.

²⁶ 42/17/14-20.

²⁷ Perspectivism in the sense of accepting that the way things are may be contingent upon one’s perspective.

be true that the time before it was born was greater than the time it was alive. So while it is important to examine things from different perspectives, it seems unlikely that anyone, however long-lived, would be able to examine things from *all* perspectives.

To summarize the direct textual evidence, the *Zhuangzi* seems to be promoting greater knowledge as something preferable to lesser knowledge, while also claiming that lesser knowledge should be somehow rejected in order to attain greater knowledge. In what follows I will attempt to argue that the Zhuangist position is that greater knowledge is broader than lesser knowledge, because it encompasses a range of different perspectives, and this is also one way that we can come to obtain greater knowledge – by considering the possible alternative perspectives. Considering how things might appear or actually be from the points of view of others, and thinking about things while paying particular attention to various alternative aspects or dimensions of the matter at hand, can lead to increased insight, and improved, “better” knowledge.

Interpreting “greater knowledge”

“Greater knowledge” for the *Zhuangzi* cannot mean ultimate knowledge in the sense of knowledge of what is ultimately so or not-so (果是 or 果非), because this would contradict the Zhuangist skeptical position. But it nonetheless seems to be something that is endorsed by the *Zhuangzi* as being superior to, or preferable to, the lesser knowledge with which it is contrasted. Additionally, there seems to be no suggestion in the text that it is something that is only available to a sage or spirit, and in fact we are told that we ourselves can attain it if we only abandon our lesser knowledge.

On my interpretation, this is a theme that is echoed repeatedly in the *Zhuangzi*'s stories. Greater knowledge is the kind of knowledge that holds from a greater range of

perspectives; lesser knowledge is the kind that holds from a narrower range, perhaps even just the narrow-minded perspective we happen to take at a given time. For example, suppose a hedgehog has knowledge that “seeing a big juicy slug makes one feel hungry”. Such knowledge would generally be a case of *lesser* knowledge, due to its clear contingency upon perspective: there are other creatures from whose perspective the sight of a big juicy slug does not invoke hunger.²⁸ On this account, there is a sense in which greater knowledge can be *generalized* lesser knowledge, because if something holds from all the perspectives I am able to consider, then it certainly holds from any one narrow perspective I happen to be taking right now. For example, the knowledge that “seeing tasty-looking things makes one feel hungry” might be a greater form of knowledge than the previous example, as it would hold from more perspectives than simply that of the hedgehog. Greater knowledge can also be simply lesser knowledge together with an awareness of those perspectives from which the thing does actually hold, or the limitations of the knowledge involved – in other words, lesser knowledge “relativized” to the particular perspectives from which it does hold. So, “seeing a big juicy slug makes *hedgehogs* feel hungry” would again be of a greater species of knowledge than the first example, because it takes into account the contingency upon the perspective involved. On this account, when the *Zhuangzi* criticizes someone for not seeing an important alternative perspective upon his situation, this is to say that the person being criticized has committed in some sense a cognitive error. He or she has taken “lesser knowledge”

²⁸ It is important to note however that “greater” and “lesser” are relative terms, and that what in one context is “lesser” may in another context be “greater”. For example, if we suppose that hunger is only reliably invoked in hedgehogs by slugs when the slugs involved are big and juicy, then it would be the case that “seeing a slug makes one feel hungry” was lesser knowledge in comparison to the greater knowledge that “seeing a *big juicy* slug makes one feel hungry” – the former perhaps being contingent upon one’s perspective in various ways, for instance because smaller and less juicy slugs also invoke hunger in smaller hedgehogs, whereas in larger hedgehogs they do not.

and mistakenly believed it (perhaps implicitly) to be “greater knowledge” – to hold in a wider range of situations or from a wider range of perspectives than it actually does; the *Zhuangzi* points out a perspective from which it does not hold, revealing their mistake.

The focus of such Zhuangist criticism does not seem to be that, in the judgment of the Zhuangist, the agent is simply wrong and so should be opposed or condemned by others, but that the person by his or her own standards has failed to see something importantly relevant to his own thinking or action, and once shown it will himself accept its importance.²⁹ In many of the stories in the *Zhuangzi* which relate to differing perspectives, the conclusion of the story is not merely that the actor did not see all the relevant perspectives and so was wrong or narrow-minded from someone else’s perspective, but rather that because he failed to consider all the relevant perspectives, he did something which he ought *himself* to accept as being stupid or wrong once these other perspectives are pointed out to him. So there is a clear sense in which being aware of different perspectives is supposed to be of advantage to ourselves, and not just to others who may have different perspectives to our own. If we had seen these other perspectives, we would have been better off – we might not have done something that we would later come to see as foolish.

Consider the story of Huizi and the giant gourds.³⁰ Huizi is given seeds that grow into giant gourds so large that they cannot be used as containers or drinking vessels, conventional uses for gourds. Huizi therefore decides to discard them, “because of their uselessness”. Zhuangzi criticizes this as Huizi being “stupid in his use of the large”, and goes on to tell a story about a man of Song who made a salve that prevented hands from becoming chapped; his family used it for generations in the course of bleaching silk, which

²⁹ As David Wong puts it, questioning our existing knowledge commitments “moves us to look for what we might have missed” (Wong 2005, p.104).

³⁰ 2/1/35-42.

earned them a meager wage. The salve is sold to a stranger, who then becomes a general of the King of Wu, and uses the salve in a winter naval war with the state of Yue, leading to a great victory, and the stranger being generously rewarded. The function of the salve was the same in both cases, but the outcomes were very different because of how it was used. The text seems to be criticizing Huizi for close-mindedness: for being so attached to the conventional perspective on the use of gourds that he overlooked other possible uses for them. Zhuangzi suggests they might have been useful in making rafts on which one might float on rivers and lakes; the point is that, even so long as we are interested in the *utility* of gourds, as Huizi himself was, we need to remain open to the enormous variety of ways in which gourds might potentially be useful. Our commitment to the conventional perspective that gourds are useful as containers or drinking vessels may blind us to other perspectives on their utility. That “gourds are useful as containers or drinking vessels” seems to hold for ordinary gourds, but it does not hold from the perspective of “the large”, since in the case of large gourds, gourds are not in fact useful for these purposes. Attachment to our familiar perspective on gourds – their typical use as drinking vessels – should not blind us to other possible uses for them. Huizi took the utility of gourds as being their usefulness as containers or drinking vessels, and so concluded that the gourds in question being too large for this purpose had no utility; Zhuangzi pointed out that there is a perspective which Huizi had not considered – utility not as a container but as a raft – from which this is not so. Were Huizi claiming knowledge about gourds that did not fail to hold from some perspective (perhaps something like “gourds grow from seeds”), he would be immune to this type of Zhuangist criticism. Similarly, if he were to see the limits of the claims like “gourds are useful as containers” – namely, that this is a claim which may be true in many circumstances, but not in all cases – he would also avoid making the mistake of assuming that *all* gourds are useful as containers, and only containers.

Secondly, consider the example of the useless tree.³¹ Huizi compares Zhuangzi's words to a great tree that is large but has knotted branches and is unsuitable for use as timber; he declares that Zhuangzi's words, like the tree, are useless. Zhuangzi's response does not try to directly refute Huizi's claims, but instead talks about wild animals that exist without worrying about the limitations of what they can and cannot do, though they are skilled in different ways. Zhuangzi suggests that Huizi worry less about the tree's so-called "uselessness", and instead find a suitable place for it and relax in its shade, for (being useless as timber), it will surely not be cut down.

In this example, too, Huizi failed to see all the possible perspectives available. Again the text seems to be emphasizing that "utility" is not an absolute; it only makes sense to talk about utility from some particular perspective, in both senses of the word distinguished above. A thing can be useful to me, or useful to you; or can be useful as a source of timber or as a catcher of mice; but nothing is "useful" or "useless" in an absolute, perspective-independent sense. The perceived uselessness of the tree (from Huizi's or the carpenter's perspective) is actually *useful* from the perspective of the tree, for it prevents it being cut down. Equally, even if we remain committed to the perspective of utility to us, rather than bemoaning the uselessness of the tree, we could consider an alternative perspective *on* its utility to us – despite its knotted branches, it would still be useful as a source of shade beneath which to rest. Again new perspectives, both that of the tree itself, and that of an alternative mode of utility, are used to show how Huizi's "knowledge" that the tree is useless is contingent upon perspective, and so in an important sense flawed.

Thirdly, consider the examples given by Wang Ni when asked whether he knew what it is that all things agree upon.³² These examples are particularly relevant to the

³¹ 3/1/42-47.

³² 6/2/64-73.

question of lesser knowledge, greater knowledge, and the relationship between the two. Firstly, Wang Ni replies to the question with his own question: “How could I know that,” suggesting that it would be beyond his ability to know such a thing, not (as is clear from the examples he goes on to give) because he is unable to know what some things take as so or not-so, but rather because he is unable to be sure that there is any particular thing which *all* things take as so or not-so. He gives three concrete examples: the right place to sleep, the right taste, and the right idea of beauty. In each case, he gives examples of how the answer depends upon one’s perspective – humans and other animals disagree in each of the cases, so there is no one universally “right” answer.

At the end of the passage, Nie Que further asks whether, given that Wang Ni does not know such things, might not the “perfect man (至人 *zhi ren*)” know? This is interesting because it might be very tempting to say that claims which hold true from *all* perspectives constitute some sort of “universal truth” – and if so, it would make sense to say that these truths, though perhaps not knowable by ordinary men, could be known by a sage. But Wang Ni does not answer in the affirmative, and instead emphasizes the great differences between a sage and an ordinary man. A sage, he says, is like a spirit, and can “ride the clouds and the *qi*”, and “wander beyond the four seas”.³³ So different a being from ourselves would very likely have a very different perspective from our own. This raises another issue, which seems to suggest that Wang Ni might actually be answering in the negative: with a sufficiently powerful imagination, we can surely come up with *some* circumstance or perspective from which *any* individual statement will not hold. The possibility of the sage, with his vastly different perspective on the world to ours, seems to be one possible instance of this. As long as there is the possibility of a sage such as Wang

³³ A broadly similar point is made at the beginning of the *Da Zong Shi* chapter, where it is stated that “There must first be a True Man (真人) before there can be True knowledge (真知).” Only the true man, like the sage, can provide us with “True knowledge” (15/6/4).

Ni describes existing, there seems to be no way we could say for certain what it is that all things take as so or not-so, because we simply have no way of knowing what a sage would take as so or not-so from his perspective. There is always the chance that, despite everyone we know taking something as so or not-so, they are nonetheless wrong, and a sage would in fact disagree with them.

These examples together suggest two key points. Firstly, in ordinary cases 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 from a narrower range of perspectives. We will face less risk of accusations of our not knowing the thing in question if others, both from their own perspectives and other perspectives that they might consider, will accept that our claim also holds from these perspectives. Similarly, we will also be in an epistemically superior position if we recognize, at least implicitly, the limited range of perspectives from which what we claim to know holds. By qualifying our knowledge claims, we again avoid accusations of failure to know, by excluding perspectives from which we have already recognized our knowledge claim does not hold. Secondly, even if we do this, no matter how many perspectives we consider, there is still the chance that through failing to consider *all* of the perspectives, we will fail to know in an absolute sense – and this may simply be an aspect of the human condition which we should learn to live with.

Thus when we look at any one of our claims to knowledge, we can think about how it changes under substitution of perspective. If it holds up from many different perspectives, we have good reason to think of it as being “greater knowledge”; if it is highly contingent on our current perspective, it is surely “lesser knowledge”, unless we can cultivate an awareness of how it is importantly dependent upon certain relevant

perspectives. There is a clear sense in which possessing “greater knowledge” is epistemically better than possessing “lesser knowledge”, namely that it holds true in a greater range of situations. But we should not expect to be able to find “ultimate knowledge” which holds in all perspectives, if only for one simple reason: there’s no way we could even grasp all the available perspectives to begin with.

In rather the same way that science aims to find a simple and coherent explanation for myriad phenomena – a theory of mechanics, or even a theory of everything – the Zhuangist position suggests that we should concentrate less on the specifics – gourds make good water vessels, a house is the right place to live – and more on the bigger picture revealed by noticing what is common to many specific cases – big, light, and hard things can float on water, and creatures live in environments conducive to their wellbeing. Generalized knowledge is much more useful than specific knowledge, and specific knowledge can easily confuse us into making the wrong judgment or decision when we forget that it only holds from a narrow range of perspectives. Specific knowledge only really applies in a very small range of cases – as soon as we try to apply it outside the appropriate range, we commit a cognitive error and may reach invalid conclusions. We need to be aware of these limits, and of other perspectives from which our specific “knowledge” would not be so, in order to avoid making these errors.

Knowing more of what there is to know

One aspect of lesser knowledge when contrasted with greater knowledge is that it is “incomplete”: it misses, in some important way, salient aspects of whatever it is that is claimed to be known. It is not that lesser knowledge is wrong in and of itself, but rather that it somehow fails to capture a sufficiently large part of whatever is in question. What

actually *is* wrong is taking this partial, narrow view as being representative of a broader whole than it actually is.

This idea is closely related to the *Xunzi*'s warnings of how people get themselves into trouble by being blinded, "blinkered," or fixated by one corner of things and so fail to see the "greater pattern". The *Xunzi*'s descriptions of how those of "partial knowledge" look upon only one corner of the Dao (曲知之人觀於道之一隅)³⁴ seem clearly related to how the *Qiu Shui* talks of "greater knowledge", which looks upon things from far and near (大知觀於遠近).³⁵ The *Xunzi* clearly frames a very similar problem – that our knowledge can be twisted by seeing just one corner of the Dao – to which Zhuangist ideas propose the solution of examining the issue from multiple perspectives.

Interestingly, the *Xunzi* also gives a list of concrete examples of what things cause blinding: desires and dislikes, beginning and end, far and near, deep and shallow, past and present.³⁶ When combined with the further examples it goes on to give, it seems that many of the causes of blinkering can be broadly termed "perspectives" – either our perspective in the sense of our internal psychological state (desire or dislike), or in the sense of our location and situation in the world (looking at something from far away). From these it is clear that the *Xunzi*, just like the *Zhuangzi*, sees perspective as something that can cause us to reason badly by way of failing to appreciate the bigger picture. Again this reinforces the Zhuangist stance that there is no skeptical question of the existence of an external world waiting to be solved here; the question is merely whether or not we are correctly grasping it, as we may have been blinkered by our perspective. The *Xunzi*'s

³⁴ *Xunzi*: 21/103/12.

³⁵ 42/17/15-16.

³⁶ *Xunzi*: 21/102/12-13.

proposed solution to the blinkering problem is that we eliminate the biased perspectives, and approach the matter at hand with an empty, focused, and calm mind.³⁷

Although the *Xunzi's* treatment in some ways closely parallels the Zhuangist stance, it is interesting to note that the *Xunzi* is in a way much more unilateral in its condemnation of "blinkering". "Blinkering" is presented as something that is simply bad; in the *Xunzi's* presentation, the perspectives involved offer no direct positive contribution to our attaining knowledge, but are merely obstacles to attaining knowledge that must be done away with. The *Zhuangzi*, by contrast, often seems to delight in pointing out unexpected or unanticipated perspectives on the matter at hand. Unlike the *Xunzi*, for the *Zhuangzi* individual perspectives, though limiting if taken as being representative of the whole, are also crucially valuable in themselves, because each inherently biased perspective itself makes up a small part of the whole.³⁸ For the *Zhuangzi*, it would be foolish for us to *only* appreciate the world from the perspective of a cicada, just as it would be foolish to appreciate it only from that of a giant Peng bird; but at the same time, both of these perspectives are valuable because they can help give us insight into a "greater knowledge" of what the world might be like from the full range of perspectives available to us – not merely what the world is like contingent upon our own size. The *Zhuangzi*, unlike the *Xunzi*, emphasizes that it is just as foolish for us to *not* appreciate the world from some perspective as it is to *only* appreciate it from that perspective.

Knowledge and the Dao

³⁷ *Xunzi*: 21/103/25-21/104/10.

³⁸ In other words, the *Xunzi* sees biased perspectives as being blinkered and so *seeing* or *capturing* only part of the whole, whereas the *Zhuangzi* sees them as simply *being* part of the whole. Therefore *all* perspectives are important to the *Zhuangzi*, whereas for the *Xunzi* there can be one unbiased perspective which is more important than all others.

The tentative interpretation outlined so far will be plausible only if it can cohere with other key claims that the *Zhuangzi* makes about knowledge. In particular, there must be some explanation for how the seeming endorsement of “greater knowledge” squares with the seemingly negative stance much of the text takes towards knowledge in general.

“Daoists” are often associated with the slogan of “abandoning knowledge”,³⁹ and indeed this slogan appears several times in the *Zhuangzi* (though only in the outer chapters), the implication being that to follow the Dao, knowledge is not only not required, but can actually have a detrimental effect. Even in the inner chapters, knowledge is at one point described as “an instrument of conflict” and a “deadly weapon”.⁴⁰

At the same time, the *Qiwulun* also appears to be endorsing the men of old when it says of them that “their knowledge reached an extreme point”, which is described as “holding that nothing had ever existed”; closely followed by the alternative views that “things existed, but there were no boundaries between things”, and that “there were boundaries between things but not yet *shi* and *fei*”.⁴¹ It would seem that for someone holding such views, on the pre-Qin conception of knowledge, there might be relatively little that one could claim to know – certainly knowledge of everyday external objects, for example, would seem out of reach for someone committed to the non-existence of such objects. The inner chapters also point out that while our life is limited, knowledge itself has no corresponding limit – and pursuing the limitless with the limited will surely lead to trouble.⁴²

³⁹ 棄知 or 棄智; the slogan is most closely associated with the *Daodejing*, which claims that “discarding sages/sageliness and abandoning knowledge would bring a hundredfold benefit to the ordinary people”.

⁴⁰ 8/4/6-7.

⁴¹ 5/2/40-41.

⁴² 7/3/1.

However, it is worth noting that neither of these passages suggest that knowledge is necessarily a bad thing to possess in all cases – they merely make the point that it may be difficult to attain, and it may distort our way of living if we value it above all else. In the story of Cook Ding which immediately follows the discussion about pursuing limitless knowledge with a limited life, Cook Ding, whose skill in butchering oxen the *Zhuangzi* explicitly associates with Dao, pointedly notes in his explanation that during his skillful execution of the task, his *perceptual* knowledge (官知 *guan zhi*) ends. It seems clear from the context that while engaged in the task, Ding might not know such things as where he next ought to move the knife, or which joint it is that he is cutting through, but one thing the story demonstrates that he very clearly does know is how to butcher oxen.

Similarly, even in those passages focusing on skeptical doubt, many assumptions are made as to the knowability of things. If the reader were expected to be skeptical that “monkeys live in trees”, or skeptical about what “monkeys” are, or of how we might come to know such things, then the argument for doubting there being one “right place” would seem largely nonsensical.

So the focus of these less radical-sounding parts of the text seems not to be that we should abandon *all* knowledge, but rather that we should not pursue knowledge itself as if it were some kind of panacea or universal solution to all our problems.⁴³ Knowledge is not of value in itself; but at the same time, some knowledge may be useful as a means to living a good life.

More radical passages of the text go on to imply that since knowledge is not inherently valuable, and is always “provisional” in the sense that it might subsequently turn out to be merely “lesser knowledge” prejudiced by perspective, the ideal situation

⁴³ This seems to be the mistake that the *Tian Xia* chapter attributes to Hui Shi – though he “daily used his knowledge to debate with others,” from the standpoint of heaven and earth this had no more significance than the frantic buzzing of a mosquito (94/33/80-85).

would be one in which we abandon all knowledge. This is the position taken in several places by the “spirit man” or “true man”, who takes such a radical stance towards the world that he gives up all *shi-fei* distinctions, thereby seemingly also giving up agency and ceasing to live a recognizably human life – “even the knowledge of the ant he puts away; his plans are simply those of the fishes. Even the notions of the sheep he discards.”⁴⁴ Although this radical stance does not seem representative of the whole text, the observation that parts of the *Zhuangzi* appear so radically critical of knowledge in general sits uneasily with the claim that “greater knowledge” is in any way preferable to “lesser knowledge” – the “spirit man”, for one, would presumably view both as equally worthless.

In addressing this puzzle, it is worth first reiterating that it seems clear that the distinction between “lesser knowledge” and “greater knowledge” is a relative rather than an absolute distinction. What may be considered “greater knowledge” in one situation might easily be viewed as “lesser knowledge” in another. Therefore the claim that “greater knowledge” is in some way preferable to “lesser knowledge” does not imply that “greater knowledge” is somehow absolutely correct or justified in some way whereas “lesser knowledge” is not.

With this in mind, the distinction between lesser and greater knowledge can actually be seen as a link between more moderate and more radical Daoist positions. The moderate position takes it that we can know some things, at least in the sense of having the ability to draw *shi-fei* distinctions that, though not ultimately privileged or justified, are useful to us in achieving our provisional, contingent aims. Whatever knowledge we think we have, we might on reflection come to see that in fact it is merely “lesser knowledge” which we might want to give up or qualify – perhaps in favor of some other “greater knowledge”. The more radical stance does not contradict these ideas, but merely

⁴⁴ 69/24/96.

is more demanding in what constitutes “knowledge”: if we are looking not for “greater knowledge” (from some particular standpoint), but “*great* knowledge” which holds from every perspective, then it seems very likely that the result will be simply that there *is* no knowledge, and that all talk of knowledge is ultimately futile.

Clearly, the more perspectives one demands that one’s knowledge claims hold from, the fewer the things one can legitimately claim to know. This could be viewed as a process of progressive enlightenment: first seeing the highly perspective-contingent “lesser knowledge” claims to be unsatisfactory, then proceeding in the direction of increasingly “greater” knowledge which seemingly avoids the perspective-dependent fallacy; but ultimately coming to realize that *all* knowledge claims are contingent upon some range of perspectives. Viewed in this way, the radical stance is the culmination of the ideas of the less radical stance – it merely takes these ideas to what in principle at least might be seen as their natural conclusion.

Greater knowledge also seems closely connected to other Zhuangist concepts related to following Dao, particularly the two related concepts of “clarity” (明 *ming*) and the “hinge” or “pivot” of the Dao (道樞 *dao shu*). The *Qiwulun* draws a contrast between the petty, perspective-dependent drawing of *shi-fei* distinctions from one’s own perspective exemplified by the opinionated stances of the Confucians and the Mohists, who “*shi* what each other *fei* and *fei* what each other *shi*”, and clarity, which is presented as a superior stance.⁴⁵ In the course of this discussion, it becomes clear that the Dao is obscured by the drawing of these petty distinctions,⁴⁶ and a solution is proposed by

⁴⁵ 4/2/21-31.

⁴⁶ Referred to as “小成” or “lesser achievements/completion” – a term closely paralleling the use of “小知” or “lesser knowledge” to refer to knowledge commitments to such distinctions. In other passages, “completion” is explicitly tied to the drawing of *shi-fei*

means of the “pivot of the Dao”. The description of the pivot of the Dao appeals to the two general perspectives of “this” and “that”, seeing a debate between whether something is “this” or “that” as directly analogous to the *shi-fei* debates of “this” and “not-this”.⁴⁷ The text makes the point that if I argue with you about whether some thing which happens to be close to me is “this” (as I would claim from my perspective) or “that” (as you would from yours), then there surely is no fact of the matter as to whether the thing is ultimately (果 *guo*) “this” or “that”. The implication is that the same may be true in cases of *shi-fei* – people may be arguing over questions that simply have no ultimate answer, because they depend crucially upon perspective.

The pivot of the Dao is intended to bring clarity (明 *ming*) in such cases. The text defines the pivot as the place where “this” and “that” obtain their complement. Upon reaching the pivot, one stands “in the centre of a ring,” can “respond endlessly,” and “endlessly *shi* things and endlessly *fei* things”.⁴⁸ Putting aside the details of how best to interpret the metaphor of the pivot, it seems clear that reaching the pivot is somehow supposed to allow us to “get outside” the this-that or this-not-this debate in question. From the pivot, we do not simply take up a single stance of “this” or “that”, but, rather than denying that either position is correct, or taking up a third position (such as “there are no this and that,” or “this” and “that” in no way exist or make sense), the point seems to be that we should appreciate all these different perspectives from a neutral standpoint. We might want to *shi* a thing in one case, but also to *fei* it in another – standing at the

distinctions and causing injury to the Dao. See Hansen 2003, p.147 and Fraser 2009, 448-449.

⁴⁷ In classical Chinese, the same word “是 *shi*” can mean “so/take as so” and “this”, and so appears in the phrasing of both these debates – one as “彼是” one as “是非”. See Hansen 1983, p. 45-46.

⁴⁸ 4/2/30-31.

pivot, we are free to choose between these possibilities in specific cases, though we may deny that any one stance is ultimately privileged.

Thus clarity seems to promote a type of understanding that affirms the value of greater knowledge, and explains how lesser knowledge should be viewed. Clarity is not attained through some alternative means or capacity than our ordinary access to the world through individual perspectives, as “unblinkered” knowledge appears to be in the *Xunzi*, but through appreciation both of the many differing perspectives that are available, and of their limitations. Lesser knowledge is inherently flawed in that it commits us to something that is so only from a range of perspectives. Though we might go along with it in particular cases, we should not mislead ourselves into thinking it is ultimately correct. It might well be that, for a particular monkey, living in a tree is “the right place”. There is no need to deny this; the important point is just to realize that the tree is not somehow universally the right place.

This line of interpretation supports the view of “greater knowledge” as “relativized” lesser knowledge – the idea that, even though we may be committed to something which does not in fact hold from a wide range of perspectives, if we are able to *see* that it does not, and would not claim that it held from other perspectives, we again seem to be in a better position than the monkey who claims the tree ultimately is the right place, or the Confucian who insists that three years of mourning is the right funeral ritual for all.

Knowing and the Zhuangist ethical stance

The opening line of the *Yang Sheng Zhu* chapter makes the point that while our life is limited – eventually we must all die – there is no corresponding limit to knowledge, at

least in principle. The problem rather is that we, as beings inevitably limited by our finite lifespans, strive to attain this “unlimited knowledge”, foolishly believing this to be an achievable goal.

This in turn ties in with some foundations of the Zhuangist ethical stance. Although the Zhuangist expresses skepticism that one might know what it is that all things take as *shi* or *fei*, this is not the same as explicitly claiming that there *is* no such thing as *shi* or *fei*, or denying that there might at least in principle be some things which all things do, in fact, take as *shi* or *fei*, but rather indicates a skepticism about our ability to come to know that such things are in fact the case. The same emphasis on our finiteness and inability to imagine *everything* – we might be able to imagine some aspects of what it is like to be a monkey, or a fish, but can barely conceive of what it might like to be a sage – can be seen as underwriting both skepticism about our own claims to knowledge and those made by others.

Leaving aside the issue of whether, as Hansen argues, skepticism actually is the basis for the *Zhuangzi's* normative stance, or, as Fraser contends, both skepticism and normative views are grounded in a meta-ethical theory about the nature of value, there does seem to be a sense in which our fundamental inability to know things such as what is universally right at least strongly supports the Zhuangist stance of ethical pluralism. If we cannot know that our way is truly better than anyone else's, we have no justification for forcing it upon others – even if we do not deny that there might indeed be a best way.⁴⁹ Important too is the realization that the skepticism involved is not particular to what I can know, but to what anyone, short of the fantastic sage, can know. The realization that nobody can know the universally right way weighs in favor of my taking an accepting

⁴⁹ However, as Fraser points out, skepticism about our ability to know what is universally right may not be sufficient alone to motivate tolerance of others. (Fraser 2009, p.453).

stance towards others – they might be right, or I might be right, but after all neither of us *knows* that he is right.

Chad Hansen draws attention to a further issue, which he sees as being a key motivating factor of the *Zhuangzi's* ethical stance: the problem of infinite regress or circularity in giving justification for one's norms.⁵⁰ If each norm is justified by appeal to another norm, with no norms justified in any other way, we ultimately “run out” of justification, leaving us without persuasive justification for our practices except in terms of other norms that we are committed to, and, according to Hansen's interpretation, this motivates tolerance of alternative schemes. On the present interpretation, this sits uneasily with the stance of the text, because such a regress problem of justification is not limited to normative claims, but to all knowledge claims, and yet we have seen that there are knowledge claims of which the text does not appear to be skeptical. However, given the apparent interest of the text in justification and its relevance to conceptions of knowledge, considering how such a regress of norms might have been viewed by the compilers of the *Zhuangzi* may be of use in better understanding how the Zhuangist ethical stance relates to its views of knowledge.

Firstly, it is worth noting that for those such as Mohists and Confucians, paradigmatic examples of *shi-fei* debaters against whose absolutist conceptions of Dao the *Zhuangzi* is opposed, justification often ends in appeals to basic goods against which perhaps few of their contemporaries would argue – order, benevolence, righteousness, and so on. Though a Confucian would reject the suggestion that benefit can be grounds for abandoning key ritual practices, and a Mohist would balk at the suggestion that rites and ritual can be justification for anything, appeals to the fact that something “promotes

⁵⁰ Hansen 2003, p.143.

order” or “encourages filial piety” appear in principle to be viewed as acceptable justification by both.

With this in mind, the intractable nature of the Confucian-Mohist debate seems to be due less to the two having radically different ethical outlooks grounded in fundamentally opposed values, than that their systematizations of their views – their proposed normative ethical systems and the justification for them – are incompatible, despite being grounded in the affirmation of broadly similar basic goods. Thus it would have been clear to contemporary thinkers interested in the debate that basic goods, even supposing we are all be able to agree upon their importance, are ultimately insufficient to determine an entire ethical system – benevolence, righteousness, filial piety, and so on do not in themselves determine any one particular Dao. Many of the same basic goods can be (and indeed were) appealed to as justification for Confucianism as for Mohism.

The *Zhuangzi* on the other hand does appear to be suspicious of even values nominally shared by Confucian and Mohist, such as benevolence and righteousness. This raises the question of whether for the *Zhuangzi* anything is to be valued in anything more than a highly contingent sense. If the *Zhuangzi* claims that *all* Daos are equal in that they can only be contingently justified, while none is “ultimately” justified, we are quickly faced with the “Daoist Nazi problem” – the claim that a Zhuangist can produce no objection consistent with his own views to someone who wishes to follow a Dao that would ordinarily be condemned as morally objectionable, such as a “Nazi Dao”.⁵¹ We can imagine an individual who devotes his life to practices that most of us would consider abhorrent – in the following discussion I will use “killing innocent babies for fun” as an arbitrary example of such an activity practiced by the hypothetical Nazi – and also turns out to be

⁵¹ This problem is discussed in Hansen 1992, p. 289-290; I am borrowing the label “Daoist Nazi problem” from Chris Fraser.

extremely successful at achieving his aims. The worry is that by devaluing conventional morality, the *Zhuangzi* denies us the possibility of saying that either such a Dao or the actions of such a person are in any sense wrong, and thereby ends up making a “Nazi Dao” appear no less legitimate than any other.⁵²

Certainly for the *Zhuangzi*, even fundamental values and basic goods *can* be questioned, as for example when it questions whether death is truly something to be disvalued.⁵³ But so can everyday knowledge claims – the butterfly dream passage clearly makes problematic even claims such as “I know that I am Zhuang Zhou”⁵⁴ – though as we have seen, the text is not in general radically skeptical about the possibility of knowledge. The more radical strand of thought in the *Zhuangzi* highlights the regress of justification that Hansen points out – however this type of regress is not unique to normative claims, but shared by all knowledge claims. If we attempt to follow the line of thought of the less radical strands of the *Zhuangzi*, we will presumably have to accept that justification must eventually stop somewhere. This allows us to accept that we do know that monkeys live in trees and Zhuangzi to accept that he knows that he is Zhuang Zhou. But can this less radical stance also allow us to suspend our skepticism about *some* ethical knowledge?

For the *Zhuangzi*, the problem with Mohist and Confucian doctrine is less that it makes normative claims which are false, unjustified, wrong, or go against some “correct” Dao – though some of these might also be so – as that the things they are claiming to know absolutely are clear instances of “lesser knowledge”. It doesn’t matter how long the

⁵² The *Mozi* appeals to a broadly similar example in its argument against the authority of conventional morality: suppose there is a state in which it is the custom to kill and eat one’s first-born son, and that this is accepted by those in power and the common people – even so, this alone would not make such a practice *right* (*Mozi* 39/25/75-78). The related “Daoist Nazi” problem is that a Zhuangist cannot simply condemn such a practice as wrong without being drawn into the very sort of petty *shi-fei* debate he so disdains.

⁵³ 6/2/80-81.

⁵⁴ 7/2/94-96.

correct mourning period is claimed to be; the problem is with claiming that there is such a thing as a universally correct mourning period in the first place, and that we could somehow come to know it. Realizing that such a thing cannot be known, because what is “correct” in that case depends importantly upon perspective, makes us strongly suspect that there simply is no such thing as a correct mourning period or ritual, and makes us suspicious of those claiming otherwise. But at the same time, it is worth noting that there is no immediate reason to think that this must necessarily be the case for all claims involving “correctness” or normativity, since the source of doubt in the mourning period case comes from the way the subjective acceptability of the claim varies with individual perspective. This leaves open the possibility that some claims as to what is correct do indeed hold across all recognizably human perspectives. Such claims would clearly have to be very different to the petty *shi* and *fei* of the Confucians and Mohists – indeed, they would have to be claims about which people simply do not disagree.

This suggests that one potential response to the Daoist Nazi scenario might be for the Zhuangist to simply argue that the Nazi case is one in which people who otherwise may follow a variety of different Dao have such overwhelming agreement that the Nazi is in the wrong that condemnation of his actions is no less correct than our mundane and uncontroversial observation that monkeys live in trees. The claim that “killing innocent babies for fun is wrong” might be an example of a normative claim that seems so obvious to human beings that we accept it as valid in much the same way we accept the claim that monkeys live in trees – and in particular, we don’t see it as importantly dependent upon perspective, nor do ordinary people see it as requiring any particular justification.⁵⁵ Just

⁵⁵ A similar case – that of our instinctive reaction to seeing a child about to fall into a well – is famously cited in the *Mengzi* in the course of arguing for a Confucian Dao (*Mengzi* 3.6/18/4-12). Perhaps the Zhuangist issue with such claims is less that they might not truly hold for everyone, but that even supposing that they did hold, they still could not be

as the existence of a lunatic claiming that monkeys live in little yellow submarines is not normally considered a counterexample to the commonsense claim that monkeys live in trees, so the existence of a disturbed individual who sees nothing wrong with killing innocent babies for fun might also not constitute a genuine perspective from which the latter claim fails to hold.

But at the same time, it seems that particularly in view of the Zhuangist's emphasis on the range of available or possible perspectives, there is another relevant and important perspective which we must consider: the perspective of the Nazi himself. The Nazi perspective, being by hypothesis an actual perspective, is surely at least as real a perspective as that of the sage. Yet from the Nazi's own perspective, again by hypothesis, there is nothing wrong with killing innocent babies for fun, and so a wise Zhuangist,⁵⁶ looking at things from as many perspectives as he can, would have to concede that "killing innocent babies for fun is wrong" is lesser knowledge and contingent upon perspective.

Does this mean that the *Zhuangzi* is committed to such a radical relativism about value that it simply can give no response to the hypothetical Nazi? I think that here there are still ways in which the Zhuangist can respond without needing to commit himself to knowing the universal "wrongness" of the original claim.⁵⁷ Firstly, the Zhuangist would surely point out that knowledge itself is importantly limited in this way, and the question of what we can know about the Nazi case is not in itself particularly special. The vast range of perspectives that can be considered mean that we cannot attain great knowledge, in ethical and non-ethical cases alike. We might tentatively endorse the claim that "killing

used as evidence in favor of any one particular Dao, such as the Dao for which Mengzi argues, because they could equally well serve as evidence for some alternative, incompatible Dao.

⁵⁶ By "wise Zhuangist" I mean someone who endorses the views on lesser and greater knowledge as interpreted here, and additionally values "greater knowledge" over "lesser knowledge".

⁵⁷ Here I am following the approach suggested in Fraser 2009, p.455 and footnote 41.

innocent babies for fun is wrong”, since it does appear to hold from many perspectives, but this alone provides no real challenge to the hypothetical Nazi himself, since it is precisely from his perspective that it fails. But this does not mean that the *Zhuangzi* has nothing to say about the Nazi or his Dao. For one thing, it seems clear that if I myself were a Zhuangist, it would be *foolish* for me to follow a Nazi Dao. Committing myself to a Dao in which I claim to know that “killing innocent babies for fun is acceptable” for instance would appear to be an unwise thing for me to do considering that such claims fail from so many perspectives – for instance from those of the babies, their families, and virtually all of society, as well as perhaps possible past and future perspectives I myself might actually occupy. Similarly, it seems that I can also quite consistently condemn a Nazi Dao follower, not because his actions, commitments or Dao are “wrong” in any absolute sense, but rather because he is stupid in failing to see these important perspectives on his situation. Depending upon the Nazi’s other beliefs and commitments, a skilled Zhuangist might well be able to point out a perspective that the Nazi himself would find persuasive – perhaps reflecting upon the fact that he too was once an innocent baby might lead him to question his actions, or perhaps the thought of his own offspring being killed for fun by himself or others might lead him to reevaluate his beliefs. Thus it seems that there are avenues of response open to the Zhuangist that avoid his being drawn into a petty *shi-fei* debate over the universally correct Dao and its justification.

Such criticism is necessarily weaker than simply condemning the Nazi’s actions outright – this is an inevitable consequence of the *Zhuangzi*’s skepticism about our knowledge of uniquely privileged perspectives and ultimately correct *shi-fei*. Even if we conclude that he is stupid, we cannot completely eliminate the possibility that the Nazi’s way of life, though not universally right, was after all the right way *for him*, just as we cannot eliminate the possibility after death it may turn out that we have been wrong to

value life so highly. The *Zhuangzi* allows such possibilities, but at the same time offers guidance based on the perspectives available to us – and encourages us to think about and reflect on a wider range of them than we might otherwise do. As we embrace a wider range of perspectives, we may improve our epistemic position, but we should not expect any guarantees of being ultimately *right*.

Conclusion

The skepticism in the *Zhuangzi* does represent a genuine, substantive skeptical position, but at the same time the text also provides a positive methodology for improving our epistemic position, which is nonetheless consistent with its overall skeptical stance. We can't know what *everything* agrees on – but if our knowledge is such that it can be agreed upon from *more* perspectives, then it is in some sense *better* knowledge. The knowledge that creatures choose to live in environments that suit their way of life is surely better than the knowledge that a monkey lives in a tree – and in particular, it is much better than the mistaken claim that everyone should live in a tree. But it is also better than less clearly mistaken claims, such as that everyone should live in a house – by generalizing and reflecting, we can come to see *why* we are tempted to say people should live in houses, namely because creatures choose to live in environments that suit their way of life, and then see that there isn't any reason why someone *ought* to live in a house if by some chance doing so did not suit his way of life.

This may be one factor motivating Zhuangist political views. As Chad Hansen points out, the main task of political theory in the time of the *Zhuangzi* was “to identify the

wise leader who would choose to impose a single way of life on everyone”.⁵⁸ But being “wise” or “knowledgeable” for the *Zhuangzi* seems to entail precisely the opposite of this – we are wise only when our knowledge holds from a vast range of perspectives, and this will prevent us from claiming to “know” that any one way of life is the right one, so long as we can imagine *any* perspective from which it might *not* be right. Being wise means recognizing the varied perspectives that exist – and so realizing that there may well not be a single way of living which is right from all perspectives.

In conclusion, the *Zhuangzi* tells us how we *can* improve our epistemic position, but, in typically Zhuangist style, it doesn’t tell us whether we actually *should*. If we don’t follow the advice, we will surely be foolish, but being foolish might not be such a bad thing. In any case, we certainly cannot know everything, and we should try not to forget that the single-minded pursuit of knowledge could easily prevent us from living a good life.

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⁵⁸ Hansen 2003, p. 154.

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