

Skepticism and Value in the *Zhuāngzǐ*

Chris Fraser

Chinese University of Hong Kong

Abstract

The ethics of the *Zhuāngzǐ* is distinctive for its valorization of psychological qualities such as open-mindedness, adaptability, and tolerance. The paper discusses how these qualities and their consequences for morality and politics relate to the text's views on skepticism and value. Chad Hansen has argued that Zhuangist ethical views are motivated by skepticism about our ability to know a privileged scheme of action-guiding distinctions, which in turn is grounded in a form of relativism about such distinctions. Against this, I contend that the *Zhuāngzǐ*'s skepticism and its ethical stance jointly rest on a metaethical view of value as inherently plural, perspectival, heterogeneous, and contingent. This view provides grounds for moral consideration toward others and for political liberalism. It also explains how the psychological qualities valorized in the *Zhuāngzǐ* contribute to the value of our individual lives, by showing what their absence costs us.

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Chris Fraser

Chinese University of Hong Kong

The ethics of the *Zhuāngzǐ* is distinctive in the Chinese tradition for its valorization of psychological qualities such as open-mindedness, adaptability, and tolerance, along with the adaptive, creative, and considerate conduct that follows from these.¹ The implications of this normative stance cover collectively the individual good life, morality, and politics. In our personal lives, for instance, the *Zhuāngzǐ* counsels flexibility, adaptability, and resilience in our cognitive habits, evaluative attitudes, and emotional life. Morally, one key passage appears to endorse a form of reciprocal consideration of others, manifested by finding ways to interact with them harmoniously—by seeking to “walk two ways,” theirs and our own, at once, rather than imposing ours on them (2/39–40).² Politically, the Zhuangist normative stance seems to yield a form of proto-liberalism that abhors authoritarianism and coercion (7/4–6), follows along with what is natural for others, without imposing one’s own preferences on them (7/11), and allows others to find their own enjoyment (7/15). The details of these implications and the precise grounds for them in the text are of course open to debate. But it is uncontroversial, I think, that the *Zhuāngzǐ* treats open-mindedness, adaptability, and tolerance as components of the best sort of individual life and a basis for addressing moral and political issues.

¹Throughout the paper, I will refer mainly to views expressed in the first four books of the *Zhuāngzǐ*, along with the political attitudes presented in Book 7. The personal ideals of psychological harmony and identification with natural processes found in Books 5 and 6 I think cohere with the interpretations I present but are beyond the scope of my discussion here.

²Citations to the *Zhuāngzǐ* give chapter and line numbers from *Zhuāngzǐ Yǐndé (A Concordance to Zhuāngzǐ)*, Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series, Supplement no. 20 (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1956).

This article explores how this normative stance and its consequences for personal life, morality, and politics relate to Zhuangist views on skepticism and value. To help frame the discussion, I will link it to a recent controversy between two well-known interpreters of the *Zhuāngzǐ*, Chad Hansen and David Wong, concerning the nature of Zhuangist skepticism and its relation to the text's normative stance. Hansen contends that the *Zhuāngzǐ* presents a form of substantive skepticism about our ability to know a privileged scheme of action-guiding distinctions, which is grounded in relativism or perspectivism about such distinctions and their justification. As he sees it, this skepticism motivates the normative endorsement of open-mindedness, adaptability, and tolerance.³ Wong disagrees, suggesting that a substantive skeptical view leaves the *Zhuāngzǐ* unable to justify engagement in any particular way of life or to defend its own normative position.⁴ Like Hansen, I will argue that the *Zhuāngzǐ* expresses a form, or rather several interrelated forms, of substantive skepticism—primarily skepticism about whether we can recognize absolutely or “ultimately” (*guǒ*) correct or justified action-guiding distinctions. However, I contend that Hansen is mistaken in taking this skepticism to be the basis for the text's normative stance. Rather, Zhuangist skepticism and the normative views are jointly grounded in a metaethical theory about the nature of value, according to which value is inherently plural, perspectival, heterogeneous, and contingent. If correct, this interpretation has important advantages over Hansen's. One is that it provides positive, rather than only negative, grounds for moral consideration of others and for political liberalism, and thus considerably strengthens the case for Zhuangist positions in these areas. Another is that it helps to explain why, by our own

³This is the position Hansen defends in a recent reply to critics, “Guru or Skeptic? Relativistic Skepticism in the *Zhuangzi*” in *Hiding the World in the World: Uneven Discourses on the Zhuangzi*, ed. Scott Cook (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 2003), pp. 149–51.

⁴David B. Wong, “Zhuangzi and the Obsession with Being Right,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 22 (2005): 91–107.

lights, we are likely to fare better if we develop the cognitive and affective qualities valorized in the *Zhuāngzǐ*, for it shows what their absence costs us. A third is that it yields straightforward, compelling answers to Wong's concerns, particularly the question of how Zhuangist skepticism coheres with the text's normative stance. This point, I will argue, poses a genuine difficulty for Hansen's interpretation.

Objections to Substantive Skepticism

Interpreters of the *Zhuāngzǐ* generally agree that Book 2 of the anthology, the "Essay on Evening Things Out," presents a series of arguments and stories that, in tone at least, seem deeply skeptical of claims to authoritative status for any particular set of values or practices. Yet the dominant trend in the literature is to read these passages in a way that deflates or deflects their skeptical import. For various reasons, many interpreters contend that the text's fundamental position is not a brand of substantive skepticism. Some propose that Zhuangist skepticism is merely "therapeutic," aimed at curing us of cognitive or affective faults,⁵ or only a form of commonsense doubt, aimed at reminding us of our fallibility.⁶ Others suggest that it is merely a method or rhetorical device, rather than a substantive position,⁷ but one step in the development of an ultimately non-skeptical view,⁸ or only "interrogative," aimed at opening our minds to

⁵See, e.g., the Introduction to Paul Kjellberg and Philip J. Ivanhoe, eds., *Essays on Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics in the Zhuangzi* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1996), p. xix. See also Ivanhoe, "Skepticism, Skill and the Ineffable Dao," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 61 (1993): 639–54, and Bryan Van Norden, "Competing Interpretations of the Inner Chapters," *Philosophy East and West* 46 (1996): 247–68. Zhuangist arguments may indeed have a therapeutic effect on their audience, but I doubt they present a distinctive, "therapeutic" form of skepticism.

⁶Eric Schwitzgebel, "Zhuangzi's Attitude Toward Language and His Skepticism" in Kjellberg and Ivanhoe, pp. 68–96.

⁷Lisa Raphals, "Skeptical Strategies in the *Zhuangzi* and *Theaetetus*" in Kjellberg and Ivanhoe, pp. 26–49, and Ewing Chinn, "Zhuangzi and Relativistic Scepticism," *Asian Philosophy* 7 (1997): 213.

⁸Dan Lusthaus, "Aporetic Ethics in the *Zhuangzi*" in Cook, pp. 163–206.

other values without actually endorsing skeptical theses.⁹ Still others limit its scope, proposing that it concerns only language, rationality, or theoretical knowledge, and not practical knowledge, skill knowledge, or intuitive know-how.¹⁰

For textual reasons that I will present in the next section, I reject any interpretation that attempts to deflate or deflect Zhuangist skepticism about the privileged or authoritative status of values or practices. All such proposals, I contend, fail to adequately explain the content of Zhuangist skeptical arguments, to grasp how skepticism is intertwined with Zhuangist normative views, or to fully recognize the genuinely radical character of the Zhuangist position on the contingency and limitations of judgment, value, and action.¹¹ Before presenting these textual arguments, however, I want to consider the major grounds interpreters cite for resisting a substantive skeptical interpretation. Three chief lines of objection have been presented in the literature. Space prevents me from addressing these in detail, but I should indicate briefly why I think they fail.¹²

Some writers have suggested that skepticism and perspectivism—a variety of weak

⁹Wong, pp. 99–103. Wong disagrees with my characterization of his interpretation as deflationary, since his aim is to acknowledge the force of Zhuangist skepticism while rejecting the assumption that skepticism must be grounded in declarative theses, rather than an interrogative stance about claims to knowledge. I consider interrogative skepticism a deflationary interpretation for two reasons. First, I doubt that a purely interrogative stance qualifies as full-fledged skepticism. A skeptical view is one that, minimally, withholds endorsement from some body of claims. Such a view may of course be expressed in interrogative form, as Zhuangist skepticism often is. But to amount to more than empty fretting, the questions it directs at knowledge claims must be supported by reasons, which I suggest will either commit the skeptic to substantive skeptical theses or show that the questioning is not really skeptical in intent after all (perhaps it is merely an expression of epistemic prudence, for instance). Second, an “interrogative” interpretation downplays the many passages in “Evening Things Out” that do appear to endorse substantive skeptical theses. I explore some of these passages below.

¹⁰See, for example, A. C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao* (La Salle IL: Open Court, 1989), pp. 186–94; Ivanhoe, “Skepticism, Skill and the Ineffable *Dao*”; Robert Eno, “Cook Ding’s *Dao* and the Limits of Philosophy” in Kjellberg and Ivanhoe, pp. 127–51; and Harold D. Roth, “Bimodal Mystical Experience in the ‘*Qiwulun*’ Chapter of the *Zhuangzi*” in Cook, pp. 15–32.

¹¹Hansen and Wong both argue cogently against deflationary interpretations of Zhuangist skepticism.

¹²For a more detailed treatment, see Hansen, “Guru or Skeptic?,” and Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought* (New York NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992), pp. 285–92.

descriptive relativism that partly motivates Zhuangist skepticism—are inherently incoherent or self-refuting, as the skeptic supposedly claims to know that we have no knowledge and the perspectivist makes the apparently non-perspectival, universal claim that knowledge is, in important respects, relative to one’s perspective.¹³ Others have suggested that the conjunction of skepticism and perspectivism is incoherent.¹⁴ These writers’ objection, then, is that the *Zhuāngzǐ* cannot be committed to substantive skepticism—particularly in conjunction with perspectivism—because it is unlikely to advocate a manifestly self-refuting or incoherent position. Still other writers hold that skepticism and perspectivism are inconsistent with any sort of normative stance, and thus, since the *Zhuāngzǐ* does seem to make normative recommendations, it cannot be committed to skepticism or perspectivism.¹⁵ In outline, my view is that all of these objections can be sustained only against crude formulations of skepticism or perspectivism and are easily avoided by more sophisticated formulations. For instance, a skeptical doctrine can be formulated so that its scope covers only some areas of knowledge, not all,¹⁶ and specifically not the part in which the doctrine itself is stated. More important, a skeptic need not claim to know that we lack knowledge or justification, but only refrain from granting that we have them.¹⁷ A perspectivist can avoid self-refutation by formulating his general claims either as holding relative to every

¹³Raphals, p. 28, characterizes skepticism as self-refuting, a claim Kjellberg and Ivanhoe seem to endorse (p. xv). Ivanhoe defines relativism such that it is directly self-refuting (see his “Was Zhuangzi a Relativist?” in Kjellberg and Ivanhoe, pp. 196–214). Chinn defines it such that it is either self-refuting or vacuous, since it entails there can be no true beliefs (p. 211).

¹⁴Chinn, p. 211, and Van Norden, p. 249.

¹⁵Ivanhoe, “Skepticism, Skill and the Ineffable *Dao*” and “Was Zhuangzi a Relativist?”; Schwitzgebel; cf. Wong, p. 92.

¹⁶Contra Lusthaus, p. 165.

¹⁷See, e.g., Ernest Sosa’s taxonomy of varieties of skepticism in Robert Audi, ed., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995), pp. 738–41. This point also explains why we can attribute skeptical views to the *Zhuāngzǐ* on the grounds of the many passages that conclude with contrasting rhetorical questions, rather than declarative statements. The questions are a means of refraining from affirming either of the opposing implied answers.

perspective or as outside the scope of those he maintains are relative to a perspective. These might be on a different logical level than those he contends are perspectival in nature—transcendental rather than factual claims, for instance.¹⁸ Skepticism and perspectivism can be coherently combined in several ways. A thinker could be a perspectivist about justification and a skeptic about knowledge, for instance, or a perspectivist about one category of claims and a skeptic about another. Normative recommendations can be presented as ways of coping with a skeptical predicament or as useful across perspectives, and thus need not be inconsistent with a skeptical or perspectivist stance.

The second line of objection grows out of interpretations on which Zhuangist esteem for skill—or, more accurately, for *dào*, or ways that go beyond skill¹⁹—is taken to indicate a solution to or bypass around the skepticism of “Evening Things Out.” Interpreters posit a contrast between the implicit, intuitive know-how manifested in skills or *dào* performance and theoretical, linguistic, or conceptual knowledge of action-guiding distinctions, which the text calls “*shì-fēi*” (this/not-this).²⁰ The proposal, then, is that Zhuangist skepticism is actually directed only at linguistic or conceptual knowledge of *shì-fēi* distinctions, and not at skill knowledge, know-how, or tacit, spontaneous intuition.²¹ This latter form of knowledge supposedly has a privileged status that puts it beyond the scope of skepticism. Fundamentally,

¹⁸For details, see Mark Okrent, “Relativism, Context, and Truth,” *The Monist* 67 (1984): 341–58.

¹⁹“*Dào*” refers to a way of acting, comprising skills or practices, but extending beyond these to include how we go on in novel circumstances. This conception of “going beyond skill” is illustrated by the story of Cook Dīng (3/2ff.) and the contextually sensitive responses that issue from a well-trained but “fasted” and thus “empty” heart (4/26ff.)

²⁰“*Shì-fēi*” is the general term in early Chinese thought for action-guiding distinctions, which articulate values. “*Shì*” refers to something’s being “this” or right, “*fēi*” to it being “not-this” or wrong. Upon distinguishing something as *shì* or *fēi*, agents normally respond to it accordingly, such as by endorsing and performing or condemning and avoiding it.

²¹See Graham; Ivanhoe, “Skepticism, Skill and the Ineffable *Dao*”; Eno; and Kjellberg, “Sextus Empiricus, Zhuangzi, and Xunzi on ‘Why Be Skeptical?’” in Kjellberg and Ivanhoe, pp. 1–25.

then, the Zhuangist stance is not skeptical, since it affirms the authoritative status of intuitive know-how.

The quick rebuttal to this objection is that “Evening Things Out” explicitly includes skill or know-how within the scope of its skeptical critique (as well it should, since drawing *shì-fēi* distinctions is itself a skill). The text indicates that any sort of cognition or action is both “complete” in some respects and “deficient” in others (2/43). Intuitive, skilled action is no exception. “Completion” and “deficiency” are present even in skilled activities performed without conscious reference to *shì-fēi* standards, such as the performance of music (2/43).²² A further point is that Zhuangist skepticism implicitly covers the ends of any sort of activity at all, skilled or not. For example, Cook Dīng the butcher’s *dào* is said to illustrate how to live well (3/12), but “Evening Things Out” questions even the authority of valuing life over death as an action-guiding distinction (2/78–79).

Though skill and intuitive responsiveness figure in Zhuangist normative ideals, they do not resolve the skeptical predicament the text poses concerning the status of values and norms. Rather, they appear to play a pair of other roles. On the one hand, they illustrate a sagely, efficacious way of living according to whatever contingent scheme of values we happen to find ourselves with. On the other, some of them, in particular the Cook Dīng story, illustrate a form of contextual responsiveness that exemplifies the Zhuangist view of how to live well without privileged knowledge of ultimate standards of value, be this knowledge explicit or intuitive. The performance of skills or crafts thus provides a paradigm of how best to follow whatever way or ways we do follow. But this paradigm does not resolve the question of what sort of way is

²²Hansen makes a similar point (*A Daoist Theory*, pp. 285–89). Wong too offers an incisive criticism of the idea that skilled activities provide a privileged kind of knowledge (pp. 104–05).

“ultimately” (*guǒ*) correct or justified.

A third line of objection stems from a traditional interpretation of Zhuangist thought as a form of what I will call normative mystical monism. The objection is that the Zhuangist position is fundamentally not a form of skepticism, because the text’s skeptical arguments against a privileged standard of *shì-fēi* are actually indirect arguments for a different kind of knowledge, namely non-linguistic, non-conceptual, intuitive or mystical knowledge of the ineffable *Dào* (Way). On this interpretation, the text’s skeptical questioning of whether anything is ultimately *shì* or *fēi* aims to show that distinctions between things are unreal and thus *shì-fēi* distinctions are mistaken. Ultimate reality—the *Dào*—is an indivisible whole, an ineffable, dynamic unity. By transcending the cognitive distinction-drawing activity of the heart, we can achieve a kind of non-conceptual, intuitive knowledge of this *Dào*, through which it will guide our actions.²³ The *Zhuāngzǐ* supposedly is not skeptical about this kind of knowledge.

Though I cannot give this important interpretation the full attention it deserves here, let me briefly explain why I find it unsatisfactory. The interpretation makes two central claims. The first is that for the *Zhuāngzǐ*, *shì-fēi* and other distinctions between things are in some sense mistaken or unreal, the product of confused or misleading cognitive activity. In fact, ultimate reality or the *Dào* should be regarded as an undifferentiated, ineffable unity. The second is that for the *Zhuāngzǐ*, mystical or intuitive knowledge of the undifferentiated, ineffable *Dào* can guide us to act appropriately. The problem with normative mystical monism is that neither of these claims is supported by the text.

²³For interpretations along these lines, see Fung Yu-Lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, Derk Bodde, ed. (New York NY: Macmillan, 1948); Benjamin Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1985); Graham; Ivanhoe, “Skepticism, Skill and the Ineffable *Dao*”; and Roth. Hansen rebuts mystical interpretations at *A Daoist Theory*, pp. 265–72, 285–92.

As I read it, “Evening Things Out” clearly expresses the view that in itself, apart from the distinction-drawing activity of the heart, the *Dào* of nature encompasses everything and connects all things into a unity (2/55).²⁴ Given the mereological ontology taken for granted by early Chinese thinkers, there is nothing mysterious about this claim. It is akin to saying that in itself, prior to our distinguishing its different parts, a human body is a single, undifferentiated unit. Moreover, in some respects, the idea that all things form a unity indeed has a privileged place in Zhuangist thought.²⁵ A naturalistic monism about the “Great *Dào*” (*dà dào*)—a view of *Dào* as the totality of things, phenomena, processes, and patterns in nature—represents the non-human perspective of the cosmos in itself—the view from nowhere, to borrow Thomas Nagel’s phrase.²⁶ An important theme in Zhuangist thought is that our perspective is but one of many, and among the prominent others we might notice is this all-encompassing perspective that is no particular perspective at all. Some *Zhuāngzǐ* passages valorize immediate, aesthetic appreciation of this non-perspective or the experience of unselfconscious identification with it, as illustrated by Yán Huí’s experience of “sitting and forgetting” (6/92–93), Nánguō Zǐqí’s “losing himself” (2/3), and the “ultimate” knowledge of the ancients, their attitude that discrete, differentiated things had never existed (2/40–41). This appreciation or experience may amount to a form of religious identification with the all-embracing process of change. It may also have a soteriological function, insofar as it contributes to the psychological equanimity that some *Zhuāngzǐ* passages depict as central to a good life.

²⁴I thus disagree with Hansen’s proposal to interpret “*dào*” in “Evening Things Out” as implicitly plural and primarily linguistic, referring to doctrines or “prescriptive discourse.” See his “A *Tao* of *Tao* in *Chuang-tzu*” in *Experimental Essays on Chuang-tzu*, ed. Victor Mair (Honolulu HI: Univ. of Hawaii Press, 1983), p. 36.

²⁵See Brook Ziporyn, “How Many Are the Ten Thousand Things and I?” in Cook, pp. 33–63, and Scott Cook, “Harmony and Cacophony in the Panpipes of Heaven” in Cook, pp. 64–87.

²⁶*The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1986).

But what we do not find in the core parts of the *Zhuāngzǐ*—in Books 1–7 and the skill stories, for instance—is a commitment to normative monism, the view that “all is one” is the authoritatively correct account of reality, by which one should guide one’s life.²⁷ Nor do we find the claim that distinctions between things, including *shì-fēi* distinctions, are mistaken, illusory, or unreal. On the contrary, the text mocks the idea that “the myriad things and I are one” can serve as a guiding standard (2/51–55). In questioning whether things are “ultimately” *shì* or *fēi*, it argues not that nothing is, but that anything can be either, depending on our frame of reference (2/27). The text pointedly refrains from claiming that the distinction between “this” and “other” ultimately does *not* obtain (2/30), and it states that things indeed inherently are “so” or “admissible” by one standard or another (2/34).

Nor do we find in these books the idea that mystical, non-conceptual knowledge of the undifferentiated *Dào* provides a privileged guide for action. Some parts of the *Zhuāngzǐ* do advocate such a view—Book 15, “Strained Intentions,” for example, advocates emptying out the self completely in order to merge with the power of Heaven (15/10–14). But Cook Dīng does not perform his work by becoming one with a monistic *Dào* and having it directly guide him. He relies on his own sophisticated capacity, developed through years of practice, to adapt intuitively to the varying patterns in the situations he faces. Nor does the famous discussion of fasting the heart (4/26ff.) suggest that a monistic Great *Dào* will directly guide Yán Huí in his project of reforming a tyrant. Like Cook Dīng, he must do the work himself, through a kind of heightened contextual responsiveness. “Evening Things Out” depicts the sage as acting from contextually-

²⁷What we find instead is, e.g., a depiction of a sage named Wáng Tái who responds to what is conventionally seen as misfortune—the loss of his foot—by attending to the respects in which things form a unity, regarding which the notions of gain and loss have no purchase, rather than those by which he has suffered a loss (5/8). This is less an expression of normative monism than an illustration of flexibility in how the agent draws *shì-fēi* distinctions in particular circumstances. The same passage allows that things can be regarded either as different in various ways or as forming a single totality (5/7).

sensitive practical wisdom (*míng*), grounded in what is “ordinary,” “useful,” and brings about “harmony,” rather than in dogmatic norms for distinguishing *shì-fēi* (2/36–40). But this practical wisdom specifies no particular path to follow. It amounts to a way of following ways—a way of living well by whatever contingent, contextually justified values we happen to find ourselves with. The sage is able to access a neutral standpoint, the axis of *Dào* (2/30–31) or wheel of nature (2/40), which transcends particular norms for distinguishing *shì-fēi*. But this standpoint does not yield union with or direct guidance from a monistic *Dào*. What it provides is unlimited flexibility in provisionally treating things as *shì* or *fēi* while responding to particular situations.²⁸

I contend, then, that for the core *Zhuāngzǐ*, the Great *Dào* of nature provides no concrete normative guidance by which to guide action. It presents a space of conditions and possibilities for agents to navigate—a range of ways of responding to concrete situations—but no particular norms or path. It is a way that is no fixed way, a *dào* that does not *dào* (2/61). Normative mystical monism is thus unlikely to be the position of the core parts of the *Zhuāngzǐ*.

Skepticism in the “Essay on Evening Things Out”

To lay the groundwork for the main arguments of the paper, I now want to sketch the grounds for and targets of skepticism in the “Essay on Evening Things Out,” Book 2 of the *Zhuāngzǐ*. I contend that “Evening Things Out” presents considerations in support of a weak form of theoretical and practical skepticism about three areas of knowledge. The skepticism is weak, in that it does not question our everyday ability to judge and act, and thus get along in the world, but only whether we can know or justify that the norms by which we judge and act have a

²⁸One passage in “Evening Things Out” implies that knowing “unstated distinctions” and a “*dào* that does not *dào*” is a privileged sort of knowledge, which it compares to an unfillable, inexhaustible “storehouse of nature” (2/61). But this is a tenuous basis for attributing normative mystical monism to the text. The passage may be expressing the view that, without fixing any single way as authoritative, nature continually presents us with an inexhaustible plurality of ways, one or another of which we may find appropriate in any particular situation.

privileged status—that they are uniquely or ultimately (*guǒ*) correct—and whether we can obtain privileged knowledge of the ultimate causes of things. It is theoretical, in that it questions whether in fact we do have a privileged form of knowledge. It is also practical, in that the text implies that in practice, we should refrain from claiming or assuming that we possess such privileged knowledge.

The first area of knowledge the text questions is knowledge of underlying causes—what lies behind it all or what drives the activity of things, including our own psychological activity. Such causes are one potential ultimate source of value. The second is knowledge of ultimate or universal standards for drawing action-guiding *shì-fēi* distinctions that hold across the diverse range of actual or potential practices or perspectives that different agents might take up. A *shì-fēi* distinction is a way of explicitly articulating a value, reason, or norm. So skepticism about whether we can identify authoritative or privileged *shì-fēi* distinctions is at the same time skepticism about whether we can identify a uniquely or ultimately correct framework of values, reasons, or norms. Such a framework is one way of articulating a conception of *dào* (way)—one taken for granted by the Mohists and Xúnzǐ, for instance. So skepticism about *shì-fēi* distinctions extends naturally into skepticism about whether we can know and follow an authoritative or privileged *dào*. The third area of knowledge is the ultimate correctness of judgments of what is *shì* or *fēi* even within a single, continuing practice or perspective. The second and third forms of skepticism both concern the ultimate or absolute correctness of *shì-fēi* judgments, but the second concerns the relation between distinct practices or perspectives considered synchronically, the third the relation between a single temporal sequence of perspectives considered diachronically.

As Hansen has shown,²⁹ some of the arguments for the second trade on an analogy between the locative indexicals *shì* and *bǐ*, or “this” and “that,” and the action-guiding distinction between *shì* and *fěi*, or “this” and “not-this.” Just as what is “this” from one perspective may be “that” from another, what is “this/right” from one perspective may be “not-this/wrong” from another. The arguments for the third form of skepticism can be thought of as developing a similar point concerning temporal indexicality. Since our circumstances may change over time, what we “now” distinguish as *shì* or *fěi* may change.

“Evening Things Out” divides fairly naturally into three major parts, though the precise boundaries of the three are open to debate. I take the first to run from the opening passage about the pipes of heaven (2/1) through the description of the human condition ending with the question, “Could it be that only I am muddled, and there are people who are not?” The second begins with the observation that if one takes the “completed” or “preformed” heart as master, then even a fool has a master (2/21) and presents the text’s core arguments concerning the relativity and plurality of *shì-fěi* distinctions, the original wholeness of *Dào*, and the interdependence of “completion” and “deficiency.” This part also presents the text’s main normative ideals, such as “harmonizing things with *shì-fěi*” and “walking two ways.” The third part begins with the dialogue between Gaptooth and Wáng Ní (2/64) and continues through the final passage, the butterfly dream. Skeptical themes figure most prominently in the third part, but in fact all three express skeptical views.

The first part raises two main skeptical themes, both regarding potential candidates for authoritative or ultimate sources of value. The first concerns whatever is behind the piping of

²⁹Hansen, “A *Tao* of *Tao* in *Chuang-tzu*,” p. 46.

nature, the “playing” of the myriad different things that makes each what it is. The second concerns the existence of a genuine “master” or “ruler” within us—most likely, a locus of the genuine self. The text suggests an analogy between the piping of nature—the myriad things all stirred up, each acting in the way that makes it itself—and how various affective attitudes spring up before us, one after another. Without such attitudes, there is no “me,” and thus no choosing or acting; yet we know not whence they issue. In the first case, we lack knowledge of whatever incites the activity of the myriad things (2/9); in the second, we lack knowledge of whatever within us is master of the body, in whose service the affects are employed (2/15–18). The skeptical import of these passages is seldom emphasized in the literature. But consider their discursive context. Elsewhere in the *Zhuāngzǐ* and other texts, we find claims such as that “*Dào* is that which the myriad things follow” (31/49). The *Xúnzǐ* and *Guānzǐ* confidently assert that the heart is ruler of the body. The *Mencius* holds that the heart is greater than the other organs and should direct action. “Evening Things Out” is pointedly agnostic about such claims, apparently on the grounds of our epistemic limitations. All we know are the phenomena, the activity of the myriad things and the occurrence of various psychological states in us. We are unable to discover the signs of or facts about whatever causes these (2/14–18).

The second part articulates the theoretical basis for skepticism about ultimate or universal *shì-fēi* distinctions and about the possibility of a “complete” *dào*, one that fulfills or addresses all relevant values. It shows how a plurality of incompatible schemes of action-guiding distinctions can all be grounded in features of the world. The skepticism does not question our access to the world, nor our ability to act successfully to achieve contextually specified ends. Nor does it doubt that we can indeed usefully distinguish different kinds of things, in particular contexts,

applying contingent norms for drawing distinctions. The issue is whether we can know that our practices or values are ultimately or universally correct, rather than only contingently, provisionally useful.

I read this part as offering three main arguments: one from the agency-dependence or practice-dependence of *shì-fěi* distinctions, one from their indexical or perspectival nature, and one from their inherent incompleteness. Jointly, the three have the consequence that norms for distinguishing *shì* from *fěi* are inevitably contingent, plural, and heterogeneous, and thus no uniquely authoritative set of values exists—or if one did, we would lack any way to identify it. I will emphasize the third argument, which typically attracts less attention than the others, but which I contend is actually more fundamental.

The first line of argument is that *shì-fěi* distinctions are not fixed by nature or the Great *Dào* in itself, but by the distinction-drawing activity of agents. The text indicates that the *Dào* does not fix boundaries between things (2/55), nor distinctions such as genuine versus false (2/24–25). It asserts that *shì-fěi* distinctions are contingent on their “formation” or “completion” in an agent’s heart (2/22). Consequently, a plurality of norms for distinguishing *shì-fěi* is likely, since each agent has his own “completed” heart and thus his own standards of *shì-fěi*, and besides those that people knowingly choose, fools have theirs too (2/21–22). The import of these claims is not a form of idealism about value distinctions, nor an error theory. The patterns agents follow in distinguishing *shì-fěi* may be grounded in mind-independent features of things. But an action-guiding distinction is constituted as such only by agents’ taking it as a basis for action, just as a way is formed only by being followed (2/33). In this sense, *shì-fěi* and thus values are partly dependent on our judgments and practices. The *Dào* in itself does not establish any one set of

shì-fēi distinctions nor lead us to act in any specific way. Thus one possible source of privileged or “ultimate” values is ruled out, and given that agents’ hearts are likely to be “completed” in various ways, we have grounds for skepticism that there are universal norms of *shì-fēi*.

The second line of argument is that norms for distinguishing *shì-fēi* are inherently indexical or perspectival and thus plural, since perspectives are inevitably plural. Any one thing can be either “this” or “that,” depending on what we take as our reference point when contrasting different things (2/27). There is no ultimately or universally correct referent of “this” or “that.” By analogy, the text contends, *shì* and *fēi* are such only relative to some frame of reference within which we distinguish them. What is *shì* by one norm, practice, or perspective may be *fēi* by another (2/29–30). Thus there is no overarching, ultimate *shì* or *fēi*, and any one thing can be either *shì* or *fēi* by one frame of reference or another. The point is not that *shì-fēi* distinctions are mistaken or illusory—just as the indexicality of “this” and “that” does not entail that we are mistaken or deluded in calling something “this” from one perspective and “that” from another. It is that there can be a plurality of ways of distinguishing *shì-fēi*, all grounded in objective, mind-independent features of the world, but none being uniquely or absolutely justified, correct, or privileged. Things can indeed be “so” or “admissible” (2/34), but this status depends partly on our practices of deeming them such (2/33). Again, this view is not a form of idealism. The point is normative, not ontological. It is not that the existence of things is causally dependent on our practices, nor that our practices create them as the things they are. It is that our practices pick out the features that count in determining whether things are properly distinguished as belonging to one kind or another.

Discriminating things into kinds in this way is a process of “forming” or “completing” them

conceptually by dividing them out of the undifferentiated whole that is the *Dào*. The third line of argument is that such formation or completion always simultaneously involves a kind of damage or deficiency (2/35). On the one hand, in dividing things out of the *Dào*, we in some sense cause the undifferentiated totality to be impaired or damaged. On the other, discriminating things as *shì* or *fěi* involves applying a norm by which to identify a pattern of similarities and differences. Indefinitely many patterns of similarity and difference may be identifiable in any group of items. So applying one norm for discriminating *shì-fěi* inevitably means passing over possible alternative norms, and thus alternative ways of recognizing value. Any value distinction is “completed” or “formed” as such by our applying it to guide judgment and action. But at the same time it is “deficient,” in that it overlooks other potential value distinctions. So no norm for discriminating *shì-fěi* can be ultimately or universally correct, because all such norms are inherently deficient or incomplete. This is an inevitable consequence of thought and action, not a fault or weakness that could be rectified. The only way to avoid the interplay between completion and deficiency is to take no action at all (2/43).

This argument has a pair of important consequences that to my knowledge have not been noted in the literature. First, it implicitly recognizes the heterogeneity of value.³⁰ By this, I mean that it posits distinct, incommensurable norms for drawing action-guiding distinctions, by which the formation or completion of one value entails deficiency in another. It thus recognizes the possibility of there being a plurality of different kinds of value that in some contexts cannot be jointly satisfied, but must be traded off against each other. Second, the argument from completion and deficiency underwrites that from indexicality or perspectivism. To adopt any

³⁰On the heterogeneity of value, see Charles Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987), pp. 131–50, and Thomas Nagel, “The Fragmentation of Value” in his *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1979).

perspective or practice is inevitably to become “complete” in some respects and “deficient” in others. No perspective can be fully or ultimately “complete,” save only the undifferentiated, non-acting, non-perspective of the *Dào* itself. The interdependence between completion and deficiency thus explains why each perspective is but one among a plurality.

For these reasons, I propose that the fundamental basis for Zhuangist skepticism about ultimate or universal *shì-fēi* distinctions is not perspectivism, but the interdependence of completion and deficiency. This interdependence is what explains why we should doubt that any scheme of *shì-fēi* distinctions, formulated from any one perspective, could be ultimately or universally correct. For it explains why any norm for drawing action-guiding distinctions, or any perspective from which we establish such a norm, will be deficient in some way. Recognizing or acting on one value, from one perspective, entails passing over other potential values or perspectives. As the *Zhuāngzǐ* remarks, in distinguishing things one way rather than another, there is always that which we fail to see (2/57–58). This idea, I contend, is the basis for both Zhuangist skepticism about a privileged scheme of action-guiding distinctions and the normative stance I sketched at the outset of the paper.

The third part of “Evening Things Out” contains the most straightforward presentations of skeptical themes. Each of the passages in this part has a skeptical import. Several develop the theme of the perspectival nature and plurality of *shì-fēi* distinctions. Others introduce a new argument, the argument from change.

The first passage, the dialogue between Gaptooth and Wáng Ní, presents skeptical views about whether we can know universal values, distinguish which of a plurality of practices is uniquely correct, or distinguish between knowing and not-knowing, specifically with respect to

action-guiding distinctions. The grounds for this skepticism are the plurality of mutually incompatible yet apparently satisfying practices followed by different creatures.³¹ Observing these practices, Wáng Ní concludes that, from his viewpoint, the “tips” of moral goodness and rightness and the “paths” of *shì* and *fěi* are inextricably confused. In early Chinese thought, “tips” (*duān*, starting points) are the different bases for or senses of a term. So Wáng Ní’s remark implies that he sees a confusing plurality of distinct, heterogeneous grounds for applying basic moral concepts and drawing *shì-fěi* distinctions. Among these, he finds no systematic or unified criteria by which to draw action-guiding distinctions in a universally correct way, which can be endorsed by all agents (2/64). Significantly, his direction of reasoning is from the plurality of actual practices to skepticism about the grounds for concluding that there are universal or absolute norms. For this skeptical conclusion to follow, he must accept the implicit premise that the diverse practices he cites all meet some minimal standard of justification or qualify for some form of equal consideration—probably because each is obviously satisfying to those engaged in it. His skepticism is thus partly grounded in implicit acknowledgment of the justification for or value of alternative practices. I will return to this point in the next section.

The passage about whether in debate one can ever “win” reiterates the themes of the argument from perspectivism and Wáng Ní’s argument from plurality. We cannot establish that the victor in a debate has successfully identified what is “ultimately *shì*” (2/84ff.). For any judgment of what is *shì* presupposes a norm for distinguishing *shì-fěi*, and there are a plurality of such norms. Non-circular grounds for an “ultimate” judgment of *shì-fěi* are unavailable, since any such judgment must presuppose some norms and thus beg the question against others. The

³¹Notice that Wáng Ní has no doubts about whether different animals follow diverse practices. Thus, contra Wong, the text does not question “the veridicality of our most basic modes of access to the world” (p. 100). Our “access” to things is not a focus of Zhuangist skepticism.

text hints that in fact there is no such thing as what is “ultimately *shì*,” for if there were, disputes over *shì-fěi* would not arise (2/90–91), since there would be no rival norms to motivate disagreement.

The remaining passages introduce a new argument, one grounded in change or transformation. Its main point is that how we apply action-guiding distinctions—examples include delight versus dislike, social ranks such as shepherd or noble, and what I am versus what I am not—depends partly on contingent, shifting circumstances. As circumstances change, we may come to draw these distinctions differently, for we may gain more information, change how we weight different factors, or change our values. Thus we have two sorts of grounds for questioning whether our value judgments are conclusive or “ultimate”: epistemic limitations due to our circumstances and potential shifts in our attitudes as circumstances change. Consider an obvious way we are likely to apply the action-guiding distinction between delight and dislike: We delight in life and dislike death and so seek to preserve life and avoid death. The text questions whether we have adequate grounds for confidence that this is the right way to apply the distinction (2/78–79). Perhaps the radical change in our circumstances that comes with dying would lead us to delight in death instead of life, just as Lady Lì, who wept when married off to the King of Jin, later came to delight in her pleasant life with him (2/79–80). The experience of waking from dreams provides a particularly vivid example of how evaluative attitudes can change with circumstances. Feeling delighted during a pleasant dream is justified. But if we awake to find ourselves in less pleasant circumstances, our attitudes will change accordingly. The point is not that perception may be illusory or our access to reality unreliable. It is that how we discriminate and act on value distinctions is as contingent as the judgments we make in a dream.

We may feel confident about our value judgments and attitudes and then have them shift radically as circumstances change (2/81–83).³² Only a fool would insist he is now “awake” and his judgments will not change (2/82–83). Any value judgment is contingent and provisional and thus not ultimate or conclusive.

To sum up, the first part of “Evening Things Out” expresses a skeptical attitude concerning our knowledge of two potential candidates for ultimate sources of value—whatever is behind the piping of nature and the genuine master within us—based mainly on our epistemic limitations.³³ In neither case can we conclusively identify a fundamental source of value. The second part expresses skepticism about ultimate or privileged *shì-fěi* distinctions or values on grounds of their perspectival, plural, heterogeneous, and incomplete character. The third part reprises and extends these arguments from the synchronic relation between different perspectives to the diachronic case of occupying a single, changing perspective over time. Because of how judgments of *shì-fěi* are contingent on changing circumstances, we cannot be confident that the way we distinguish *shì-fěi* now is ultimately correct, for we are likely to find ourselves distinguishing them differently as circumstances evolve.

From Skepticism to Tolerance?

Let me now turn to Hansen’s account of the normative consequences of Zhuangist

³²The well-known story of Zhuāng Zhōu’s butterfly dream makes a similar point (2/94–96). While dreaming, Zhōu finds it obvious that he is a butterfly. On waking, he finds it equally obvious that he is Zhōu, not a butterfly. Noticing how a change in circumstance—awakening—affected the obviousness of whether he was a butterfly or Zhōu, he wonders whether he has now finally discriminated his identity correctly, for circumstances could change yet again. Between Zhōu and the butterfly there is surely a distinction, the text affirms. But Zhōu lacks grounds to determine conclusively which side of the distinction he is on. This, the text says, illustrates how “things change” (2/96). The point is to question whether discriminations made under some circumstances hold for all, given that things inevitably change.

³³Epistemic limitations—the limited nature of any particular perspective—are probably also the grounds for skepticism in the conversation between the penumbra and shadow (2/92–94). Like the “pipes of nature” and “genuine master” passages, this conversation questions whether we can obtain knowledge of the underlying causes of our actions.

skepticism, which I will use as a springboard to introduce my own view. Hansen's basic idea is that Zhuangist skepticism rests on a combination of a form of relativism or perspectivism about justification and descriptive pluralism about norms. The skepticism motivates ethical and political virtues such as open-mindedness, adaptability, and tolerance, which he ties to political liberalism. I want to examine the links this line of explanation assumes between perspectivism and skepticism and between skepticism and open-mindedness or tolerance. My contention is that the links themselves rest on a kind of consideration for or appreciation of the value of other ways that is conceptually independent of, and in fact motivates, skepticism and tolerance. So the direction of explanation Hansen proposes is mistaken. Perspectivism alone is not the basis for Zhuangist skepticism, and skepticism is not the fundamental basis for endorsing adaptability and tolerance.

On Hansen's reconstruction, Zhuangist skepticism is grounded in the relativity of the justification of any *shì-fēi* judgment to a further *shì-fēi* judgment and the plurality of incompatible norms for distinguishing *shì-fēi*.³⁴ The plurality of norms means that a particular *shì-fēi* distinction could be "ultimately" correct only if the norms on which it is based were more justified than all alternative norms. But the relativity of justification means that any attempt to justify one set of norms over another leads to infinite regress. To justify a *shì-fēi* judgment, we appeal to a norm by which it is correct. In doing so, we implicitly judge that the norm itself is *shì* (right). To justify this judgment in turn, we must appeal to a further norm by which the first is correct. But then to justify this further norm, we must appeal to yet another norm, which itself can be justified only by appeal to still another. Given this regress of norms, we lack grounds for

³⁴"Guru or Skeptic?" p. 143; *A Daoist Theory*, p. 293.

confidence that our *shì-fēi* judgments are privileged or ultimately correct. Equally important, we lack non-circular grounds for persuading those who apply different, conflicting norms that ours are correct and theirs mistaken. Hence we should adopt a skeptical attitude about the “ultimate” status of our values and *dào*.

Hansen sees Zhuangist skepticism as motivating two sorts of normative conclusions, one political, the other personal.³⁵ The political conclusion is that we should not support social structures that oppress others or coerce them to conform to a single, preferred way of life, because oppression or coercion could be justified only if we were confident that the favored way were ultimately correct. The personal conclusion is that we should be tolerant, flexible, and open-minded about other ways and their potential value in revising our own. For they may provide benefits not available from ours, by showing us how better to achieve our existing ends, for instance.³⁶

Hansen’s reconstruction is a credible way of developing one major line of argument in “Evening Things Out,” as presented in the passage questioning whether, in debate, we can find an authoritative standard by which to judge that something is “ultimately” *shì* (2/84–90).³⁷ I suggest, however, that the general crux of Zhuangist skeptical arguments—especially those from perspectivism and from completion and deficiency—is not that we lack a non-circular justification for our norms. It is that there are a plurality of norms or practices that are in some sense as legitimate as our own, because the grounds for them are analogous to those for our own. The attitude that other norms or practices are legitimate, defensible, or worthy of consideration is

³⁵“Guru or Skeptic?” pp. 145, 150–51.

³⁶*A Daoist Theory*, pp. 284, 297.

³⁷Hansen deemphasizes the arguments from epistemic limitations and change, though he touches on them in discussing dreams and skeptical appeals to fallibility (“Guru or Skeptic?” pp. 145, 149).

essential to deriving skeptical conclusions from the text's arguments. For the mere fact of plurality and disagreement, even coupled with awareness of the inescapable regress of justification, need not motivate skepticism. In response to disagreement with our practices or to the demand for a non-circular justification, we could, after all, point out that justification must come to an end somewhere and then insist that our way is indeed privileged—because it has been handed down from the sage-kings, say, or because our hearts tell us it is right, or because it is the way of nature. Nor, for that matter, do plurality and disagreement automatically motivate tolerance. We could very well respond to them by seeking to suppress practices other than our own, as those with political power have often tended to do throughout history.

Plurality and disagreement motivate skepticism about the privileged status of our own practices only if we perceive the grounds for disagreement as reasonable and other practices as in some respect on a par with ours. Similarly, skepticism about the status of our practices tends to motivate tolerance of other practices only if we see them as reasonable, potentially correct, or in some way deserving of consideration. The mere fact that others disagree with us, that we are unable to convince them to accept our views, or that we know our judgment could be wrong provides no compelling reason not to force them to do things our way. We may be confident that, fallible though our judgment may be, our way is more likely than theirs to be right. Or we may simply find their way distasteful. What keeps us from oppressing them, if anything does, is not doubt about the status of our way, nor our inability to convince them to adopt it. It is some form of appreciation, consideration, or respect for theirs.³⁸

Heterogeneity, Adaptability, and Tolerance

³⁸As Charles Larmore has argued, the basis for liberal neutrality is not epistemological but moral. See his *The Morals of Modernity* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996), p. 127. Whereas Larmore's view is grounded in the moral status of other agents, however, the Zhuangist view is grounded in the status of other practices or ways.

I propose that the *Zhuāngzǐ* offers positive grounds for appreciation or consideration of values and ways other than our own, which justify the virtues of open-mindedness, adaptability, and tolerance. These grounds stem mainly from the Zhuangist conception of completion and deficiency, not from the text's skepticism.

We have seen how, for the *Zhuāngzǐ*, values are “completed” or “formed” out of the undifferentiated *Dào* by the distinction-drawing attitudes of agents who apply them in carrying out practices (2/22, 2/33). Things have features by which they are indeed *shì* or *fěi*, admissible or not, in the context of our attitudes and practices. These features, which support our practices of drawing action-guiding distinctions, are actual features of the world, not artifacts of our practices. But they obtain the status of criteria for action-guiding distinctions only through our taking them as such, as part of our practices. The *Dào* or world in itself fixes no privileged scheme of action-guiding distinctions; nor does it provide concrete guidance in particular situations. Rather, it furnishes grounds for a plurality of potential distinctions of different, often heterogeneous and incommensurable kinds, any of which might be useful in some context or other.³⁹ In undertaking any action—including skilled practices—we recognize and act on value distinctions, whether explicitly articulated or implicit and intuitive. In so doing, we respond to some potential grounds for action while overlooking others that might be equally well founded in the features of things. We thus neglect, and are perhaps even blind to, features of the world that are as real and potentially useful as those we act on. So any practice we follow or values we act on are both “complete,” insofar as we have recognized and acted on them, and “deficient” or incomplete, in that they inevitably exclude other practices and values.

³⁹Notice that privileging the view that the *Dào* fixes no unique scheme of values is consistent with holding that as a guide for action, that view is just one of a plurality.

To see the grounds of value as the *Zhuāngzǐ* depicts them is thus to regard all values and practices as inherently incomplete and a range of alternative values and practices as always open to us. These alternative values and practices are grounded in the world in ways analogous to how our own are. Ours are justified by their naturalness and usefulness to us; alternatives may be similarly justified by their naturalness and usefulness to others. They cannot be dismissed by appeal to a privileged justification for our own. Instead, we must recognize them as potentially viable, with their own usefulness (and corresponding deficiencies), even if we ourselves do not follow them. They reveal aspects of the world and ways of life that our own do not.

Most of the alternative values and practices excluded by our own are probably useless to us by our present standards—which are all we have to go by in any particular context. But some could potentially be useful to us. Others might become useful as our circumstances change. Some are manifestly useful to others, whom we can observe acting on them. Given the Zhuangist understanding of value, it is only wise, by our own lights, to remain open-minded toward and flexible about adopting alternative values and practices. One reason is that we might come to regard our own as unjustified or mistaken. But even more important, we understand that our values and practices are inherently “deficient” in some respects and that, like ours, others are grounded in features of the world that make them potentially useful.⁴⁰ Tolerance of other values and practices is also justified, because we recognize them as being in certain fundamental respects on a par with our own, as “complete” in respects that ours are “deficient,” and as potentially useful or justified for us, should our circumstances someday change. We can

⁴⁰As Hansen notes, since many ways of distinguishing *shì-fēi* are possible, there is “an infinite range of possible ways to respond to life. Getting locked into one makes us unable to see the benefits (and defects) of others” (*A Daoist Theory*, p. 284). Shifting between ways “may help us to achieve purposes that are already part of [our] perspective” (p. 297). These remarks seem to point away from his position in “Guru or Skeptic?” toward the view I am recommending. Ultimately, I think, he agrees that the Zhuangist moral stance is motivated not by skepticism, but by reasons available to us within our own perspective.

recognize the value in alternative practices even in cases when, from our point of view, we have reasons not to follow or even to condemn them.⁴¹ Zhuangist thought thus provides resources for a form of political liberalism grounded primarily in appreciation of the plurality and heterogeneity of value, rather than in respect for individuals.

Engagement and Revelation

The advantages of the interpretation I propose become clear when we consider David Wong's recent challenge to Hansen's skeptical interpretation of the *Zhuāngzǐ*. Wong contends that a skeptical interpretation has difficulty explaining two points. The first is how skepticism can be reconciled with engagement in our usual way of life. The *Zhuāngzǐ* seems not to seek to undermine our ability to live an ordinary life, engaging wholeheartedly in whatever activities come naturally to us. For instance, when Wáng Ní asks who knows the uniquely correct place to live or foods to eat, given that humans and other animals follow different practices concerning dwellings and diet (2/67–68), his point is not to undercut our practices—to suggest, for example, that we should stop living in houses or eating meat. Wong questions whether an interpretation that attributes a form of substantive skepticism to the *Zhuāngzǐ* can explain this point. He suspects it leaves the Zhuangist unable to show how we can justify, even to ourselves, following our way of life rather than some other.⁴²

The second point is that numerous *Zhuāngzǐ* passages indicate that a shift in the way we draw action-guiding distinctions can open up new, previously overlooked ways of acting that we

⁴¹Acknowledging the value of diverse practices need not entail regarding them all as equally justified. Some might be more justified than others, because they realize or acknowledge more value, cohere better with other, everyday values, or prove more useful to those who follow them. Clearly, for instance, a racist *dào* is deeply “deficient” in that it excludes the value of entire other races and their practices. Also, it is likely to prove less useful, even by the racist's own lights, than a non-racist *dào*, since it will tend to evoke resistance from members of other races and thus create obstacles for its adherents.

⁴²Wong, p. 94.

may find valuable both from our new perspective and by values we endorsed from our original one. A well-known example is the story in which Zhuāngzǐ teases Huì Shī for discarding some enormous gourds, which were useless as dippers or jugs, instead of making a raft out of them to go boating (1/35–42). Presumably, Huìzǐ would have considered boating pleasant even before Zhuāngzǐ suggested it. So Zhuāngzǐ's way of using the gourds reveals value that Huìzǐ could have appreciated even from his original perspective. According to Wong, a substantive skeptical position cannot explain how new perspectives or ways of drawing distinctions can be “genuinely revelatory” of previously unnoticed value.⁴³ For skepticism about whether we can establish that any one scheme of values is ultimately correct provides no positive grounds to think alternative schemes reveal genuine value inaccessible or unavailable from ours.

The first of these issues, I suggest, is an artifact of Wong's particular way of framing the Zhuangist skeptical predicament, rather than a consequence of attributing substantive skeptical views to the text. He takes Zhuangist skepticism to be directed at the justification for following our way of life rather than some other.⁴⁴ In the text, however, the focus of skepticism is not this point, but whether our way of distinguishing *shì-fēi*, and thus our way of life, is “ultimately” correct, whether we should impose it on others, and whether we should persist with it even in the face of disagreement, frustration, or changing circumstances. Given the way Zhuangist skepticism is framed, there is no general conflict between it and engagement in our ordinary way of life, and thus no need to reconcile the two. Skepticism about whether our usual practices are “ultimately” correct becomes relevant mainly in exigent contexts, when obstacles or conflicts arise. In such cases, we may modify our action-guiding distinctions or adopt new ones. However,

⁴³Wong, p. 93.

⁴⁴Hansen makes a similar observation (“Guru or Skeptic?” p. 162, n. 76).

these changes will be motivated not by skepticism, but by the positive reasons we find in particular contexts for shifting to a new way of doing things.

In any case, the skeptical interpretation I propose leaves us able to give our way of life a contingent, contextual justification—the only kind available, for the *Zhuāngzǐ*. The Zhuangist practical response to our skeptical predicament is to cease acting on dogmatic, “deeming *shì*” (*wéi shì*) and instead act on adaptive, contextually sensitive value distinctions, or “responsive *shì*” (*yīn shì*). The text describes this as doing what is “ordinary” and “useful,” in the sense that it leads to practical success in “getting through” and “achieving” relevant ends in particular contexts (2/36–37). In dealing with others, we are to adjust our *shì-fēi* distinctions so as to seek “harmony” and a convergence between both sides’ ways (2/39–40). If, in particular situations, our ordinary way of life seems useful, achieves our ends, and yields harmony, then it is provisionally justified.⁴⁵ If, by contrast, we encounter frustration, obstacles, or conflict, then we may have good grounds for shifting to a different way. In such cases, considerations such as usefulness, practical success, harmony, and compromise with others will guide us in modifying how we draw action-guiding distinctions.

A similar response to Wong’s first point is available to Hansen, I think.⁴⁶ Wong’s second point, however, raises a genuine difficulty for Hansen’s approach. Hansen gives skepticism conceptual priority in Zhuangist thought, treating it as the basis for adaptability and tolerance. I contend that skepticism in itself provides no positive grounds for tolerating other ways or

⁴⁵On my interpretation, then, our ordinary way of life falls within the scope of Zhuangist skepticism and has no privileged or authoritative status. Yet it can be provisionally justified insofar as it is, for us, an intuitively natural, pragmatically useful response to our circumstances. (I thank David Wong for a comment that prompted this clarification.)

⁴⁶Such a response seems implicit in his remarks about combining Zhuangist flexibility with acceptance of convention and “ordinary, shared, useful programming” (*A Daoist Theory*, pp. 299–301).

expecting that they might have something to teach us. For the very same skepticism extends to other ways as well as our own; it gives us no reason to think they offer anything ours does not. But suppose that, as I have argued, a metaethical view of value as inherently plural, heterogeneous, and incomplete underwrites both Zhuangist skepticism and the normative endorsement of adaptability and tolerance. Then this metaethical view directly explains why we can expect alternative practices to reveal value that our own may overlook: because they respond to different aspects of what there is in the world, and thus are “complete” in respects that ours may be “deficient.”⁴⁷ My account thus explains how the *Zhuāngzǐ* can coherently present substantive skeptical views while making normative recommendations that turn partly on recognizing the value of ways other than our own.⁴⁸

⁴⁷Wong also suggests that substantive skepticism is inconsistent with a meta-perspective that underwrites attitudes such as adaptability and tolerance, since it leaves us without grounds for thinking this meta-perspective is superior to a narrower, inflexible perspective (p. 92). I see no basis for the charge of inconsistency, however. The grounds for the meta-perspective are that it reveals more value, and thus more of the world, than a narrower perspective and so is likely to be more useful to those who adopt it. But it is no closer to providing “ultimate” values than a narrow perspective. The additional values it reveals remain contingent and “deficient.”

⁴⁸An earlier version of this essay was presented at “*Dào*, Mind, and Language: A Conference in Honor of Chad Hansen,” the University of Hong Kong, May 30–31, 2008. The essay is dedicated to Chad Hansen in gratitude for his advice, instruction, and inspiration. I thank Hansen, Yiu-ming Fung, and Manyul Im for discussion at the conference and David Wong for comments on a later version of the paper.