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Ethics in the *Zhuangzi*: Diversity and Sagacity[1]

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ABSTRACT: Philosophers in China during the Warring States period generally saw themselves as investigators into the *Dao*—the uniquely authoritative Way to live and to flourish. Certain voices found in the *Zhuangzi*, however, offer a radical response to this project by rejecting the premise that there exists such a uniquely authoritative *Dao*. Instead, they argue that there exist myriad, diverse *dao*, none of which has absolute moral authority. Yet the very texts that undermine the idea of an authoritative *Dao* simultaneously make positive ethical suggestions regarding how to live and flourish. In this paper I explore texts in the *Zhuangzi* that discuss the diversity of *dao* and sagely flourishing, and I argue that these two themes come together to form the basis of a comprehensive ethical view that I call Zhuangist pluralism.

1. INTRODUCTION

MUCH OF EARLY CHINESE PHILOSOPHY focused on elaborating and promoting the *Dao* as the uniquely best and metaphysically justified way of organizing society and individual life. This general paradigm united schools of thought in ancient China that were radically opposed to one another, such as the Ruists and the Mohists. Their disagreements can be understood as disagreements about the content and nature of the *Dao*. But those who entered into these disagreements shared a common assumption: that there is only one *Dao* with the authority to guide human action. The Ruist conception of *Dao*, for example, has its foundations in the Zhou dynasty cultural heroes. The Mohists saw the *Dao* as having its metaphysical foundation in the will or intentions of *tian* ("Nature" or "Heaven"). Both, however, take themselves to be arguing about *the Dao*, of which there is only one.

Certain voices found in the *Zhuangzi* anthology provide a radical response to these approaches to the *Dao*.[2] They reject the premise that there exists a uniquely

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[2]Throughout this article, I will ignore the traditional privileges assigned to books 1–7 as being either representative of the thought of Zhuang Zhou or directly authored by him. I adopt this approach because I am not convinced by the various attempts to vindicate treating books 1–7 as authentic, privileged, or otherwise especially connected to Zhuangzi by scholars such as Liu Xiaogan and Harold Roth. Instead, I have been convinced primarily by the scholarship of Chris Fraser, David McCraw, and Esther Klein, who respectively argue that the accretional nature of Warring States texts in general, quantitative linguistic features of the

authoritative *Dao* by which all people ought to be guided. They argue instead that nature contains a plurality of *dao*, none of which can serve as a universally effective guide to action. There are myriad *dao*, and it is impossible to establish in a non-question-begging manner the authority of any particular one.

This approach to *dao* also has a normative component. In the very same texts that undermine the possibility of justifying an authoritative *Dao*, we find positive ethical suggestions regarding how to live and flourish. They encourage individuals to renounce the phony authority of their respective *xin* ("heart-mind") and not to take them as their teachers/masters.[3] They suggest that individuals keep their psychological lives, to the best of their abilities, "empty" (*xu*) of all their "fully-formed" (*cheng*) judgments of *shi* ("this" "right") and *fei* ("not this" or "wrong"), so that eventually people may learn not to depend upon (*dai*) other things and instead to "roam without limits" (*you wu qiong*).[4] These texts therefore offer up their own conception of flourishing in light of their skepticism about the existence of an authoritative *Dao*.

Much recent scholarship on the philosophy of the *Zhuangzi* has focused on these features of Zhuangist thought. One prominent vein of research concerns the possible tension between Zhuangist skepticism about an authoritative *Dao* and Zhuangist ethics.[5] Some scholars wonder if Zhuangist skepticism or relativism undermines its normative commitments, or perhaps the very intelligibility of the text itself. Allinson clearly expresses this worry: "if we construe Chuang Tzu (Zhuangzi) as some sort of relativist, we will have to accept that the text is either self-contradictory or ultimately unintelligible."[6] Some scholars who appreciate this tension have attempted in various ways to deflate the text's skeptical and relativist tendencies and to interpret

anthology, and the received textual and commentarial history of the *Zhuangzi* all cast serious doubt on the idea that ZZ 1–7 should be assigned special pedigree. In Chinese scholarship, Yan Beiyu and Zhang Hengshou also express well-founded doubts about the Inner Chapter privilege myth. See Liu Xiaogan, *Classifying the* Zhuangzi *Chapters*, trans. W. E. Savage (Ann Arbor MI: Center for Chinese Studies Publications, Univ. of Michigan, 1994); Harold Roth, "Colophon: An Appraisal of Angus Graham's Textual Scholarship on the *Chuang Tzu*" in *A Companion to Angus C. Graham's Chuang Tzu*, ed. Harold Roth (Honolulu HI: Univ. of Hawaii Press, 2003); Chris Fraser, "Review of Liu Xiaogan's *Classifying the* Zhuangzi *Chapters*," *Asian Philosophy* 7 (1997): 155–59; David McCraw, *Stratifying* Zhuangzi*: Rhyme and Other Quantitative Evidence* (Taipei: The Institute of Linguistics, Academia Sinica, 2010); Esther Klein, "Were there 'Inner Chapters' in the Warring States? A New Examination of Evidence about the *Zhuangzi*," *T'oung Pao* 96 (2010): 299–369; Yan Beiyu, "Ying Dui Zhuangzi Zhongxin Pingjia," *Zhexue Yanjiu* 1 (1980): 40–48; Zhang Hengshou, *Zhuangzi Xin Tan* (Wuhan: Hubei Renmin Chuban She). For a brief overview of the textual history of the *Zhuangzi*, see Livia Kohn, *Zhuangzi: Text and Context* (St. Petersburg FL: Three Pines Press, 2014), pp. 1–10.

[3]ZZ 2/17, 2/21, 4/24. For ease of access, references to the *Zhuangzi* follow the Harvard-Yenching *Zhuangzi Yinde* Book/Line number, which can be input at https://ctext.org/zhuangzi. References to critical editions and commentaries of the text will be made clear throughout the article. All translations are my own.

[4]ZZ 1/21. This general summary is based on the reconstruction by Chris Fraser as well as Kim-chong Chong. See Chris Fraser, "Psychological Emptiness in the *Zhuangzi*," *Asian Philosophy* 18 (2008): 123–47; and Kim-chong Chong, *Zhuangzi's Critique of the Confucians: Blinded by the Human* (Albany NY: State Univ. of New York Press, 2016), ch. 2.

[5]I will help myself to the term "Zhuangist" for the sake of convention. It does not imply, however, that I believe these texts to exhibit special affinity with *Zhuangzi* himself or are especially representative of the thought of the *Zhuangzi*.

[6]Robert Allinson, *Chuang-Tzu for Spiritual Transformation* (Albany NY: State Univ. of New York Press, 1989), p. 111.

them not as indicative of a substantive commitment to skepticism or relativism but as being in the service of a different purpose. Perhaps the sections that sound skeptical or relativist are intended to illuminate a method of self-improvement or a kind of philosophical therapy, or perhaps they are actually rhetorical devices.[7]

In this paper I offer an interpretation of Zhuangist ethics that accepts both a substantive skepticism about an authoritative *Dao* as well as a positive ethical vision, by combining them to form what I call Zhuangist pluralism. According to Zhuangist pluralism, the world presents us with myriad *dao* whose appropriateness in guiding us to flourishing depends upon the kind of beings we are and the situations in which we find ourselves. The irreducible diversity of things leads to an irreducible diversity of *dao*, and so an irreducible diversity of ways in which to flourish. Furthermore, appreciating this fact leads individuals to exhibit characteristics conducive to flourishing, such as flexibility, tolerance, independence, and creativity. The texts present not a single, monistic conception of the *Dao* by which we and everyone else ought to guide our lives, but rather a plurality of ways of improving our following of our own *dao*.

I develop this interpretation in three parts. First, I focus on three stories in the *Zhuangzi* that exhibit a shared tendency to move from a discussion of the natural diversity of things to a discussion of sagely flourishing. By juxtaposing the themes of diversity and sagacity, these stories show how Zhuangist skepticism about the *Dao* and Zhuangist ethics come together. Second, I discuss a number of examples from the *Zhuangzi* text that celebrate individuals who exhibit sagely virtues. Third, I compare the theoretical structure of Zhuangist pluralism to David Wong's pluralist relativism, before offering a brief conclusion.

2. DIVERSITY AND SAGACITY STORIES

In this section I discuss three stories that serve as the primary basis for my interpretation. These stories explore the existence of a diversity of *dao* by using examples in nature and sagely figures. The connection between the two themes seems to be one of enlightenment: sages understand the diversity of *dao* as a basic natural fact, and

[7]Lisa Raphals and Ewing Chinn offer a rhetorical reading of the text's skepticism. P. J. Ivanhoe, Bryan Van Norden, and Dan Lusthaus treat the *Zhuangzi*'s skepticism as substantive, but as neither the foundation nor the final step in its philosophical project, which is ultimately realist. David Wong sees Zhuangist skepticism as a means of self-improvement. See Lisa Raphals, "Skeptical Strategies in the *Zhuangzi* and *Theaetetus*" in *Essays on Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics in the* Zhuangzi, ed. Paul Kjellberg and P. J. Ivanhoe (Albany NY: State Univ. of New York Press, 1997), pp. 26–49; Ewing Chinn, "Zhuangzi and Relativistic Scepticism," *Asian Philosophy* 7 (2008): 207–20; P. J. Ivanhoe, "Zhuangzi on Skepticism, Skill, and the Ineffible Dao," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 61 (1993): 639–54; P. J. Ivanhoe, "Was Zhuangzi a Relativist?" in *Essays on Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics in the* Zhuangzi, ed. Paul Kjellberg and P. J. Ivanhoe (Albany NY: State Univ. of New York Press, 1997) pp. 196–214; Bryan Van Norden, "Competing Interpretations of the Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi*," *Philosophy East and West* 46 (1996): 247–68; Dan Lusthaus, "Aporetics Ethics in the *Zhuangzi*" in *Hiding the World in the World: Uneven Discourses on the* Zhuangzi, ed. Scott Cook (Albany NY: State Univ. of New York Press, 2003), pp. 163–206; David Wong, "Zhuangzi and the Obsession with Being Right," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 22 (2005): 91–107.

they conduct themselves in light of it. I take this to be a way of combining Zhuangist skepticism about the ultimate authority of any particular *Dao*.

The short story that opens the first book ("Wandering at Ease") offers an informative example of how these authors view the natural world as being occupied by myriad *dao*. It begins by describing a giant fish named Kun, who is then transformed into a magnificent bird named Peng, whose "wings hang down from the sky like clouds" and are lifted up by massive cyclones.[8] A dove and a cicada catch sight of the giant Peng, and laugh at it (without Peng actually noticing). They complain that Peng's way of flying is far too troublesome, and that their way of hopping along the forest ground, and tumbling around beneath the trees with their tiny wings is far superior. The text then describes examples highlighting how the abilities of things are determined by their features. A twig, for example, will float in a puddle, while a cup will not, for the same amount of water could not equally support two objects of such different sizes. Similarly, only a great wind could support Peng, while the air of forest floor could not. The text then laments the small-mindedness of the dove and cicada by exclaiming, "These two creatures—what do they know!"[9] The text then mentions the different *zhi* ("knowing" or "awareness") of different things by distinguishing between "lesser *zhi*" (*xiao zhi*) and "greater *zhi*" (*da zhi*) as well as lesser and greater lifespans (*xiao nian* and *da nian*).[10] "The morning mushroom is not

[8]ZZ 1/4.

[9]ZZ 1/10. Guo Xiang helpfully illustrates the diversity in one story in terms of *xing*. He writes: "Things each have their *xing*, and *xing* each has its limits. All things have lifespan and consciousness—how could we [individually] aspire to their utmost!" See Guo Qingfan, *Zhuangzi Jishi* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1961 [Reprint 2013]), p. 13.

[10]The word zhi is often translated as "knowledge," but I suggest that we understand *zhi* more generally here as "awareness." This is because a reading of *zhi* here as an individual's faculty of awareness more generally, rather than specific knowledge, makes it easier to motivate my reading of the distinction as a descriptive rather than a normative one. Among English-language interpreters of this passage, this more general reading of *zhi* follows Brook Ziporyn, who translates *zhi* as "consciousness" and Angus Graham who opts for "wits." See Brook Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings with Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis IN: Hackett, 2009), p. 4; and Angus Graham, *Chuang-Tzu: The Inner Chapters* (Indianapolis IN: Hackett, 1981), p. 44. Conversely, Burton Watson translates it as "understanding" and, more recently, both Tim Connolly and Donald Sturgeon interpret it as "knowledge." See Burton Watson, *Zhuangzi: Basic Writings* (New York NY: Columbia Univ. Press, 2003), p. 24; Tim Connolly, "Perspectivism as a Way of Knowing in the *Zhuangzi*," *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 10 (2011): 495–96; and Donald Sturgeon, "Zhuangzi, *Perspectives, and Greater Knowledge*," *Philosophy East and West* 65 (2015): 892–917. The commentarial tradition also diverges on this issue. Guo Xiang's explanation is largely in line with my "awareness" reading, while Lu Deming in the *Jingdian Shiwen* amends *zhi*, which more specifically refers to "knowledge." See Guo, p. 13. I reject this amendment, following Guo Xiang, and, more recently, Li Mian for a few reasons. In the first place, the precedents for amending it in this case are not compelling. Wang Shumin, for example, cites the *Lü Shi Chun Qiu* for an example of the distinction, which appears rather cryptically at the end of a discussion of "Separating kinds (*lei*)." Another example is the *Huainanzi*. Aside from disagreeing over whether small horses are really horses, these slogans are suspiciously ambiguous in their contexts. In the first case, it is tagged onto a discussion of different kinds and some problematic cases of distinguishing between them, while in the second case it occurs in a discussion of the politics of aggressive warfare. In any case, it is unlikely that such a poorly-understood and infrequently used slogan grew out of its use in a fairly well-known *Zhuangzi* story, especially when later authors in the *Zhuangzi*, those of book 17 ("Autumn Floods"), for example, develop the themes of book 1 without utilizing or developing this

aware of (*zhi*) the lunar cycle, the cicada does not know of the changing seasons."[11] They recount how, long ago, there were trees whose lifespans were thousands of years, and the sage Peng Zu also achieved extraordinary longevity. But they also claim that it would be a mistake to imitate him.

I will make two points about these stories. The first is that they appear to be, by and large, ethically neutral regarding the value of each of the characters. The large are not treated as being superior to the small, and the long-lived are not treated as being superior to the short-lived. Rather, the story is primarily intended to illustrate the irreducible differences between the myriad *dao* in nature. The second point is that the lines that do seem to offer ethical advice do so only in light of the fact that there are myriad, irreducible, and normatively equivalent *dao*. I see only two lines that do so. The first is the one that reads thus: "These two creatures—what do they know!" I interpret this as claiming that the dove and the cicada fail to recognize that there is no absolute authority among the myriad *dao*, and are foolish to take their own *dao* as best. The second follows on the heels of the description of Peng Zu: "If people all sought to match him, would it not be a tragedy!"[12] The ethical content of this line is altogether different from the previous one. It seems to be saying that we should not attempt to follow other *dao*. Rather, we should learn to be satisfied with the *dao* that our nature determines for us, lest we invite the tragedy of attempting to follow a *dao* that we cannot. So, according to my interpretation, the ethical content of this first diversity story is that we ought to be comfortable with our own *dao*, but not overconfident in it. It is just as foolish to think that one's own *dao* is best as it is to renounce one's own *dao* in pursuit of another. Though the dove and cicada might be wrong for thinking themselves superior to the Peng, they would be equally wrong for becoming so impressed by Peng's flying that they sought to imitate it.

I should briefly touch on how this interpretation differs from those that derive greater normative content from this diversity story. In a recent article Tim Connolly suggests a reading that treats the distinction between greater and lesser knowledge in this passage as a normative one. He argues that the distinction should be read in comparative rather than positive terms, viz., that *xiao* and *da* should be understood as "lesser" and "greater" respectively rather than as "small" and "large." This is an important component to Connolly's reading of the Zhuangists as offering a perspectivist theory of knowledge: although there can be no greatest perspective, there certainly can be better or worse ones depending upon their scope. For Connolly, larger and more comprehensive perspectives, exemplified by greater *zhi*, are preferable to the narrow and cramped ones described as smaller *zhi*. He focuses on the Zhuangist use of longevity to support his normative reading of the distinction. According to Connolly, Zhuangzi's commitment to the value of a longer life (discussed elsewhere in the *Zhuangzi*) suggests that he would similarly value greater

distinction. See Li Mian, *Zhuangzi Zonglun Jifen Pian Pingzhu* (Taibei Shi: Taiwan Shangwu Yin Shuguan, 1990), p. 39; and Wang Shumin, *Zhuangzi Jiao Quan* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2007), p. 13.

[11]ZZ 1/10–11.

[12]ZZ 1/12–13.

over lesser knowledge in this particular passage.[13] Furthermore, Connolly believes that one should couple with the value for longevity "an awareness that no matter how long one has lived, there is always something that has lived longer."[14] By implication, the striving for greater knowledge should always be accompanied by an awareness that no knowledge will ever be greatest. This comparative view of lesser and greater knowledge explains the Zhuangist incremental view of sagacity that sees sagacity occuring at different levels and holds that there is no greatest sagacity but only a mixture in which some are greater than others.

I have reservations about this kind of reading. In the first place, concerning the passage itself, it is unclear whether the Zhuangists can be interpreted as valuing a longer life over a shorter one. Often the value assigned to a longer life in the *Zhuangzi* is put in terms of valuing a life that exhausts its naturally allotted span rather than one that is simply longer.

In the second place, the idea that the comparative nature of greater and lesser knowledge suggests a comparative view of sagacity that goes against other important Zhuangist epistemological claims to the effect that we can possess the utmost or perfect (*zhi*) knowledge. The passage from book two discussed above, for example, claims that ancient people's knowledge was perfect, but this claim is not based on the fact that their perspectives are large rather than small. Rather, it is because they come from a time when there were no such perspectives at all. For these reasons, I adopt an ethically neutral reading of this presentation of diversity.

The story concludes with descriptions of two sagely figures: Song Rongzi and Liezi. The character Song Rongzi probably refers to the Warring States thinker Song Xing or Master Song, who appears in book eighteen of the *Xunzi*.[15] His most widely known view was that "to be insulted is not a disgrace."[16] This might be why he is in this context praised as a champion of indifference to others' opinions. After introducing him as one who would laugh at someone proud of the ability to serve a single post (*zhi xiao yi guan*), the text continues:

> Were he praised by a generation, he would not have added to his efforts, nor would it have added to his anxiety if he were condemned by one. He was settled in his division between inner and outer, distinguishing the limits of honor and disgrace, and then he stopped. . . . Nevertheless, he was not yet firmly planted.[17]

In these lines Songzi is explicitly praised for his indifference and is seen as limited to the extent that his indifference does not go far enough. Utter indifference, it would

[13]See Connolly, "Perspectivism as a Way of Knowing in the *Zhuangzi*," pp. 496–97.

[14]Ibid., p. 496.

[15]Early commentators did not make this connection, but I think it is a plausible one. Sima Biao and Li Yi took the character to be only a man from Song, while Cui Zhuan took him to be a just a random virtuous person. However, the title of Song Rongzi for Master Song appears in *Hanfeizi* book 50, "Prominent Schools of Thought," where it is clear that the name refers to the Songzi of XZ 18. See Wang, pp. 18–19.

[16]XZ 18/102.

[17]ZZ 1/18–9. Scholars interpret this closing line in a number of different ways, but the general point seems to be that it expresses a sense in which Songzi was an imperfect sage. See Wang, p. 19, Graham, *Chuang-Tzu: The Inner Chapters*, p. 44, and Ziporyn, p. 5 for alternative readings.

seem, is the appropriate response to the diversity of things. The partial sage Songzi therefore accepts the diversity of perspectives and individuals but is only able to exhibit partial indifference to them.

The text then moves to a discussion of Liezi, a Daoist figure who eventually came to have an anthology compiled in his name. He is portrayed as being further along the road to sagacity, indeed as displaying superhuman characteristics that appear in other depictions of sages such as "riding the wind to carry on."[18] He is, however, also portrayed as having "something to rely upon" (the wind), thereby revealing his limitations. Finally, the text describes those who "mount the constancy of *tian* and Earth," "ride along the distinctions of the six vital energies," and "wander in the limitless."[19] Such people do not depend upon anything, unlike all the other characters in the story. These exemplars are described as the utmost person (*zhi ren*), the spirit-like person (*shen ren*), and the sage (*sheng ren*), which, respectively, have no self, no accomplishments, and no reputation.[20]

The juxtaposition of the two themes of diversity and sagacity speaks to both the texts' metaethical foundation as well as its substantive ethical view. On the one hand, it claims that there is a naturally occurring and irreducible plurality of *dao* that populate the world. This much is shown by the vignette about the dove and cicada and its surrounding context. On the other hand, the text promotes a vision of sagacity wherein the sages discussed appear aware of this fact and can learn not to make the same kinds of mistakes as the dove and cicada or those who would seek to imitate Peng Zhu. They celebrate sages who are not prideful of their capacities and who are not dependent (*dai*) on anything else.[21] They are indifferent to conventional value judgments and occupy elevated perspectives. These sages do not value the "correctness" (*zheng*) deemed by things with a greater or wider perspective, but the correctness of *tian* and Earth itself, nor do they participate in the distinction-drawing practices of larger beings but in those of the six vital energies themselves.

Another example of a text that first showcases the irreducible diversity of perspectives and then gives way to an account of enlightened, sagely perspectives appears in a dialogue in book two. There the two characters Nie Que and Wang Ni enter into a discussion about knowing. Nie Que begins by asking Wang Ni whether or not he knows "that which all things agree in [deeming] *shi*." I interpret this as a question about whether or not there is a way of making absolute *shi-fei* distinctions.[22] Wang Ni responds incredulously: "How would I know that?" Taking this for an affirmation of ignorance, Nie Que presses Wang Ni further, asking if it is possible

[18]ZZ 1/19–20.

[19]ZZ 1/21. Sima Biao suggests the six vital energies are *yin*, *yang*, wind, rain, darkness, and brightness (Wang, p. 20). He also suggests an amendation. My reading will leave "distinctions" intact, for the parallel concept, "correctness" (*zheng*) suggests philosophical opponents. See also Ziporyn, p. 5.

[20]ZZ 1/21–22.

[21]See Ziporyn, pp. 213–14 as well as his supplementary article "Zhuangzi as a Philosopher," accessible at https://www.hackett publishing.com/zhuangziphil) for a discussion of "dependence" in Ziporyn's reading of Zhuangzi.

[22]ZZ 2/64.

for him to know what he does not know, which Wang Ni also denies.[23] Finally, Nie Que asks whether anything can know anything, to which Wang Ni responds in exactly the same way ("How would I know that?") and then explains his reluctance to answer Nie Que's questions with certainty.

Wang Ni mentions the different preferences of diverse things in order to illustrate the idea that he could not know with certainty whether there is something all things agree in deeming *shi*. He further suggests that none of the creatures holding a given preference could claim any privileged status for their preferences. He asks of monkeys, fish, deer, and birds, for example, which of them knows the correct place to live (*zhi zheng chu*), the correct flavor to prefer (*zhi zheng wei*) or the correct standards of beauty in the world (*zhi tian xia zhi zheng se*.[24] By accepting the existence of the diversity of perspectives, Wang Ni rejects the premise of Nie Que's initial question. A look at the natural diversity of the myriad things prevents Wang Ni from claiming to know of anything that all things agree in deeming *shi*.

The text then portrays Wang Ni as inferring from the irreducible plurality of preferences just discussed that "the foundations of benevolence and righteousness and the markings of *shi* and *fei* are all chaotically confused messes. How could I know to distinguish them?"[25] Though lacking a logical connection with the preceding paragraph, these claims suggest benevolence and righteousness within a context that expresses doubt about the possibility of establishing a foundation (*duan*) upon which benevolence and righteousness claims can be based, perhaps in the form of a universally agreed upon *shi*. The irreducible diversity of *dao*, each with its own *shi-fei* schema, prevents us from picking out a *shi* upon which all things agree that could then serve as the foundation for benevolence and righteousness.[26]

Most immediately, the example of Mengzi comes to mind. He claims the *duan* of benevolence, righteousness, ritual, and wisdom naturally occur in the *xin*. What all people agree in deeming *shi*, for example, might be the affective response of shock and compassion when witnessing a child crawling towards a well. In contrast to the Mengzian confidence in this affective response as the foundation for benevolence, Wang Ni refuses to claim that he knows how to identify the universal *shi* that serves as the foundation for benevolence and righteousness. He claims instead that all these

[23]The paradox of "knowing what you do not know" is mentioned in the Mohist *Canons* at B48. The Mohists argue that in being able to distinguish between what one does and does not know counts as a form of knowing. They would therefore consider Wang Ni's claim of ignorance at this second step of the exchange to be disingenuous, since he cannot both know and not know what he does not know. For the purposes of this discussion, though, we will take seriously Wang Ni's suspension of judgment. See Angus Graham, *Later Mohist Logic, Ethics, and Science: Reprint Edition with a new Introduction and Supplementary Bibliography by Christopher Fraser* (Hong Kong: The Chinese Univ. Press, 2003), p. 417.

[24]ZZ 2/69–70.

[25]ZZ 2/70. Editions of the text vary over how it should read; see Wang, p. 80 and Guo, p. 99. In the former case, the text might read the "tracing" or "footsteps" of *shi-fei*, which conveys a similar point.

[26]Although "beginnings" or even "sprouts" are common translations for *duan*, in this context "foundations" seems most appropriate, for the point of the dialogue as a whole seems to be over whether there is a universal *shi* upon which models such as benevolence and righteousness could be based. An instructive example comes from book 12 of the *Xunzi*, which reads, "*Fa* (models, standards) are the foundation (*duan*) of social order."

duan are inextricably bound up and confused. In contrast to the Mengzian picture, Wang Ni suggests that these widely shared affects might not be truly universal. I take the character of Wang Ni to be a vehicle for ethical advice largely in accordance with that offered in the opening of book one. He exemplifies an attitude that accepts the irreducible diversity of things and faults no individual point of view. He also rejects the idea of a universal *shi* to serve as the foundation for a universal *dao*.[27]

The discussion of the diversity of perspectives in the dialogue between Nie Que and Wang Ni ends much like that found in book one with a portrait of a sage as indifferent and independent with respect to them. Nie Que's response to Wang Ni's previous point is to ask "If you do not know to distinguish benefit from harm, then does the utmost person truly not know to distinguish benefit from harm?"[28] His question implies that he knows that Wang Ni would reject the Mohist standard of benefit and harm as a universal *shi*. Instead he asks Wang Ni if the utmost person, a Zhuangist sagely figure, too is indifferent to the distinction between benefit and harm, or perhaps ignorant of it. Wang Ni responds by claiming that the utmost person is "spirit-like" and has a superhuman resistance to the normal effects of extreme environments: "Death and life have no affect on him—how much less could the foundations of benefit and harm!"[29] Once again, in the context of a discussion of the natural diversity of things, we find the qualities of superhuman imperviousness, indifference, and independence as being core components of sagacity in this vein of ethics in the *Zhuangzi*.

The final story that I will discuss comes from book seventeen ("Autumn Floods"). This book begins with the River Lord delighting in the autumn floods that carry it to the North Sea. There it then becomes awestruck by the greatness of the North Sea in comparison to its own smallness. The North Sea then enlightens the River Lord about the relative abilities and limitations of the myriad things: "A frog in a well cannot discuss the sea, being limited by its space. . . . The scholars of a single crook cannot talk about *dao*, since they are shackled by their teachings."[30] Presumably, the River Lord was in a state similar to that of a frog until it leaves its confines, and only then can the North Sea speak to it about the "great patterns" (*da li*) of various

[27]Franklin Perkins has a similar discussion in a recent article. He notices this use of *duan* and connects it to the thought of the *Mengzi* on the use of benefit and harm and connects it to the Mohists. He concludes that the deeper purpose of the dialogue is "to show that human standards, particularly the ethical standards of the Confucians and the Mohists, are mere impositions on nature with no objective status and no privilege over the standards of other animals." Franklin Perkins, "Of Fish and Men: Species Difference and the Strangeness of Being Human in the *Zhuangzi*" in Zhuangzi *and the Happy Fish*, ed. R. Ames and T. Nakajima (Honolulu HI: Univ. of Hawaii Press), p. 188. I am generally in agreement with this sentiment, but would like to avoid the language of "imposition," "objectivity," and "privilege." Rather, I take the point to be that the standards of benevolence and righteousness have no foundation (*duan*) in a universally shared *shi*. Rather, they are just part of the perspectives of certain human beings. See Perkins, pp. 188–89.

[28]ZZ 2/71.

[29]ZZ 2/73.

[30]ZZ 17/5–6. I understand *qu shi* as "crook scholar" in accordance with the vocabulary of book 33, which discusses *yi qu zhi shi* ("scholars of a single corner" or "crook" of the *dao*). While their obsession over a single crook or corner of the *dao* is a kind of narrow-mindedness and a fault, it is not the same kind of fault that the modern day pejorative use of "crooked" conveys. See ZZ 33/12–13.

bodies of water. Its presentation of these great patterns and of the grand size and scope of the ocean is tempered by lines of humility. At one point it compares the four corners of the sea between *tian* and Earth to a stone or tree on a great mountain. In this way the North Sea is able to "keep sight of my own smallness—so how could I think myself great?"[31] Conversely, the North Sea diagnoses the River Lord as one who used to consider itself great (*zi duo*) while reveling in its floods. Kongzi too is treated as one who considered himself great insofar as he used his teachings to treat himself as broadly learned. Despite its relative greatness, the North Sea consistently suggests keeping sight of its own smallness.

Once again, the normative content of this lesson has to do with the attitude one takes up in response to the existence of the myriad forms that the *dao* takes. It is not a mistake to have a *dao* that just so happens to be small. The mistake is taking oneself to be great, not failing to have a great perspective. However great some perspective may be, there is always a danger of "reaching our limits but deeming it knowledge."[32] The River Lord has apparently also learned this lesson, as it exclaims upon reaching the North Sea: "Had I not arrived at your doorstep, I would be in great danger."[33] The lesson culminates in a praise of "greater knowledge" that reads: "Greater knowledge in observing the near and far causes the small to not be taken as insufficient, and the great to not be taken as plentiful."[34] The point is that from whatever *dao* we happen to be on, we must always keep in mind our own limitations, as ours is merely one among the myriad perspectives.[35]

At a one point in the dialogue the North Sea begins to describe sagely figures. It begins when the River Lord asks whether or not "the smallest thing has no shape and the largest thing cannot be encircled."[36] The North Sea responds with a discussion of how the different sizes of things are caused by different "expediencies" (*bian*), which are in turn determined by the features and limitations of human thought and

[31]ZZ 17/10.

[32]ZZ 3/1.

[33]ZZ 17/4–5.

[34]ZZ 17/15–16.

[35]I consider this use of greater knowledge to be importantly different from that of the greater zhi found in book 1. I read it as figurative rather than literal. In this way, my reading departs from that recently offered by Sturgeon. On the one hand, I am in agreement with Sturgeon that when understood figuratively, such as in the case of ZZ 17/15–6, greater knowledge could refer to a kind of enhanced perspective (see Sturgeon, p. 898). However, I do not take this figurative reading to be a reference to the use of greater *zhi* in book 1 where that seems to refer to the point of view of something that is literally big. Rather, I suggest that the use of greater knowledge in book 17 should be read as a stand-in for a general kind of sagely wisdom rather as greater knowledge in Sturgeon's sense. The only other uses of greater *zhi* that aligns with the figurative use appear in passing in the outer and miscellaneous chapters. In book 26, for example, Kongzi says, "Expel lesser knowledge, and greater knowledge becomes clear" (ZZ 26/30–3). In the other cases, it appears as a kind of folly used to illustrate the fact that even with it, much still remains unknown. This use appears in book 22, where we find Zhuangzi lamenting his inability to know *dao*. He says, "great knowledge enters into it, but still does not know its limits" (ZZ 22/50). A similar use occurs in book 25, where we find the line, "even those with great knowledge are unable to use their words to describe the self-transformation" (ZZ 25/74–7). These figurative uses seem to depart from the more literal discussions of the great or smallness of perspectives discussed in earlier texts, and so I suggest grouping the use of greater *zhi* in book 17 with these, thereby preserving my descriptive reading of diversity in Zhuangist thought.

[36]ZZ 17/20–1.

discourse.[37] According to the North Sea's discussion, the diversity of perspectives implies that all language is formed by different expediencies (*yi bian*). The great person (*da ren*) understands the myriad "expediencies," and so can act in a way that is uncommitted to any in particular. Such a person acts not to harm others, but does not think much of her benevolence or kindness. This builds upon the North Sea's claim to keep sight of its own smallness amid its awareness of its own abilities. The great person, independent of the normal valuing schema of the myriad things, "knows that *shi-fei* cannot be distinguished, and that minuscule and great cannot be limited."[38] Furthermore, similar to Songzi and the utmost person of book one, the great person "does not take insult to be a disgrace" and "has no self."[39] Again, I take this presentation of the great person to be in a similar vein to that of book one, where an understanding of the diversity of perspectives enables one to achieve independence from them.

The ideals in these portraits of sagacity follow from a commitment to the irreducible diversity and normative evenness of the myriad perspectives and *dao*. Furthermore, understanding this feature of the world is portrayed as having an enlightening effect. When we accept the normative evenness of the myriad perspectives and *dao*, we can change our attitude towards them from one in which we attempt to privilege a particular perspective, group of perspectives, or *dao* to one where we become completely independent from all of them, wandering free and at ease, not depending upon any.

However, while the texts promote these characteristics, they also appear to offer conceptions of flourishing and that go beyond what human beings are typically capable of. The exemplars of the utmost person and the sage seem to be goals unattainable by most. Perhaps attaining sagely flourishing is not supposed to be easy, but is it really as demanding as it seems to be in these examples? In the next section, I discuss passages that promote human (as opposed to superhuman) conceptions of flourishing and that arise out of an understanding of the naturally occurring myriad *dao*.

3. ZHUANGIST VIRTUES

The extreme examples of sages discussed in the previous section are not the only suggestions for flourishing found in this vein of Zhuangist thought. We also find a host of examples of flourishing in much more mundane situations. The opening lines of book three support a lesson similar to that of the opening of book one:

[37]ZZ 17/22–4. This use of *bian* is significant, as it highlights a crucial difference between Zhuangist and Mohist philosophy of language. In a fragment grouped in the "Greater Selection" of Mohist writings on the philosophy of language, the Mohists treat *bian wei* or "expedient naming" as a last resort for coming up with names for things that cannot be based on a thing's shape and characteristics (*xing* and *mao*), but are merely conventionally determined. See Wu Yujiang, *Mozi Jiao Zhu* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2006) pp. 600, 617; and Graham, *Later Mohist Logic*, p. 470.

[38]ZZ 17/27.

[39]ZZ 17/27–28.

"My life has limits, but knowing is limitless.[40] Using what has limits to follow the limitless risks reaching one's own limits (*yi*).[41] To reach these limits and yet to deem it knowing is perilous." Instead, it would be better to "follow the mean as one's regular, guiding thread,"[42] and then "one can protect oneself, keep whole one's life, nourish one's parents, and exhaust one's years."[43]

Despite the interpretive controversy surrounding these lines, they seem to offer advice related to what we inferred from the opening of book one. Building on the criticism of the dove and cicada, the text here claims that it is perilous to reach one's own limits and deem it knowing. But since knowledge is limitless, there is no other limit that we would reach in our pursuit of knowing than our own. So, as a result, the text urges modesty and claims in the final lines that we ought to pursue a course that will enable us to protect ourselves, keep our lives whole, and exhaust our years. Echoing the advice following the line about Peng Zu before, the text suggests that we should be comfortable with our *dao* and not pursue wildly different ones that may harm us. I interpret the combined advice once again as maintaining comfort without overconfidence.

Book two also contains a few less extreme examples of individuals who exhibit sagely virtues. One such text involves the characters Nanguo Ziqi and his student. It suggests how to apply the sagely ideals of indifference and independence by accepting the irreducible diversity of things and their normative evenness. In this story Nanguo Ziqi, a sagely character, is shown in a trance-like state. Upon witnessing this meditation, Ziqi's student Yanchen Ziyou exclaims in awe: "Can the body (*xing*) really be caused to resemble a withered tree? Can the *xin* really be caused to resemble dead ashes?"[44] Ziqi then offers some details about his state of mind and the understanding that led to it. Ziqi's body and heart-mind resemble something dead, presumably something without the usual commitments and dependencies that most people exhibit.

Ziyou then asks about Ziqi's method (*fang*), to which Ziqi responds with a series of analogies about the various pipings (*lai*) of things: the pipings of humans, of earth, and of *tian*. The piping of humans occurs quite literally when someone blows into a pipe or a flute in order to make music. The piping of the Earth, on the other hand, is an analogous way in which the earth uses the wind to "pipe" through myriad cavities, causing them to vibrate and sound out. The idea here is that myriads

[40]For an alternative reading, see Ziporyn, p. 21.

[41]Here, I adopt Graham's suggestion that it ought to be treated as a full verb, conforming to a similar grammatical structure found in "Evening Things Out" (ZZ 2/37). See Roth, *A Companion To Angus Graham's Chuang Tzu*, ed. Harold Roth (Honolulu HI: Univ. of Hawaii Press, 2003) p. 79. I also follow Cheng Xuanying in rejecting Guo Xiang's reading of it as "danger ceases," reading these lines with a positive connotation. See Guo, pp. 121–22.

[42]The translation here is tentative but broadly follows the consensus of early commentators regarding how to understand it. According to Lu Deming, the earlier commentators Li Yi, Guo Xiang, Cui Zhuan, and Sima Biao all read it as "obey" or "follow," as "center" or "mean," and as "constancy." Alternatively, Graham and Wang Shumin suggest there might be a connection that may refer to the seam down the center of the back of a cloak. See Wang, p. 101 and Graham, *Chuang Tzu* p. 79.

[43]ZZ 3/1–2.

[44]ZZ 2/1–2.

of things on the earth are subject to its mysterious blowing forces, over which the things that are blown have no control. Ziyou then asks about the piping of *tian*, to which Ziqi responds: "Blowing the myriad different (things) while causing them to proceed from themselves; all of them act of themselves—the one that stirs them up, who is it?"[45] Unlike what is found in the beautiful detail of the pipes of earth analogy, Ziqi here expresses a cryptic modesty and generality about the pipes of *tian*. Because of the piping of *tian*, myriad differences take shape and act, but there is no way to know anything about the piper. I take Ziqi here to be suggesting that there is a mysterious force similar to the wind working at a higher level of abstraction, one about which we can know nothing.

I interpret the relationship between these analogies and Ziqi's meditative trance as one of applied enlightenment. Ziqi understands both the irreducible diversity of things—the myriad differences (*wan bu tong*)—as well as the mysteriousness of the forces responsible for them. As a result, he is able to allow himself to be fully absorbed by them, and therefore fully inundated by the procession of those forces. He appears to be dead, having stopped participating in the earthly piping, and instead hands himself over to the piping of *tian*, acting merely as one of the myriad differences and nothing more. This is one way in which accepting a view of nature in which there exists an irreducible diversity of things, *dao* and its perspectives enable us to flourish.

Perhaps the clearest and most realistic example of sagacity enlightened by an appreciation of the diversity of things occurs the discussions of clarity or illumination (*ming*) in book two. These texts offer examples of flourishing that arise from adopting an attitude that accepts the irreducible plurality of perspectives and *dao* called clarity. The first image here is that of occupying the hinge of *dao*. When one occupies this center point, a person can "respond without limit, [deem] *shi* without limit, and [deem] *fei* without limit."[46] The person is committed to no *shi-fei* distinction drawing schema, *dao*, or perspective. For this reason, one is able to respond to whatever the situation demands.

The second image is that of the monkey-keeper. It also situates the sagely freedom afforded by occupying the hinge of *dao* within the context of a concrete situation. The monkey-keeper offers the monkeys two ways of dividing up their nuts for the day, and the monkeys express a preference for one rather than the other (the one that affords them a bigger breakfast). The monkey-keeper, not yet having a *shi-fei* judgment on either arrangement himself, goes along with the monkeys' preferences: "The names and objects were no different, but he used [the monkeys'] happiness and anger—this is also an adaptive *shi*."[47] So, although the monkey-keeper has a wholly determinate task, his sensitivity to the monkeys' preferences and his willingness to act in accordance with them affords him a way of acting in a sagely manner by settling on a provisional, adaptive *shi*. Perhaps another day the monkeys

[45]ZZ 2/8–9.
[46]ZZ 2/30–31.
[47]ZZ 2/38–39.

may prefer a different arrangement of nuts, and the monkey-keeper will be able to appropriately respond to that as well.

4. CONSTRUCTING ZHUANGIST PLURALISM

At this point we have reconstructed a vein of Zhuangist thinking that takes as its foundation the natural, irreducible diversity of the myriad *dao*. It then suggests a conception of sagacity based on appreciating this truth. The examples that appear in the same stories showcasing the diversity of things take on a supernatural tone, but we have also located a few other examples that appear to describe sagacity in more common everyday walks of life. I now would like to turn to the issue of how these themes hang together and what if any contemporary theoretical framework might be suitable as a description.

Against the backdrop of a diversity of *dao*, certain sagely figures seem to stand out. Unlike the case of the Ruist conception of a gentleman or completed person, these exemplars form a plurality. They do not suggest a single best way to live, but rather suggest how we might improve the way we already do live. This, I take it, is why those examples of sagacity in the diversity stories are so extreme. They are meant to illustrate an unattainable ideal for rhetorical purposes of an individual who has renounced a commitment to all *dao*. As a result, the individual is able to exhibit sagely qualities such as independence, flexibility, tolerance, and freedom. However, as the more mundane examples of sagacity show us, it may be impossible for us to fully shed our commitments to certain *dao*. We may be stuck with a job to which we must attend, such as keeping monkeys or butchering oxen. Additionally, we may not want to renounce all of our commitments to the various *dao* we must follow, but would like to flourish nonetheless.

What I think the *Zhuangzi* offers here is a way of attending to our various *dao* in an enlightened way. We can do them in a way informed by the truth that the myriad *dao* exhibit normative evenness that we are better off respecting, so that we may be able to react to new circumstances effectively, flexibly, without stubbornly adhering to the idea that our way is best. In so far as these texts celebrate multiple better ways of carrying on, the view is a kind of ethical pluralism.

This way of construing Zhuangist pluralism takes its inspiration from David Wong's pluralist relativism, which he defends in his 2006 book *Natural Moralities*. There Wong argues that moral relativism is the best explanation of the phenomenon of moral ambivalence, which occurs when people of different moral persuasions agree to disagree, feeling both the force of their own moral commitments while at the same time understanding the reasonableness of their interlocutors' views.[48] However, Wong's version of relativism has a number of important constraints having to do with both features of human nature as well as features of morality itself. Wong's pluralism comes from the combination of relativism with these natural constraints. In so far as there are multiple ways to realize the natural constraints on morality,

[48]See David Wong, *Natural Moralities: A Defense of Pluralistic Relativism* (New York NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006), pp. 20–28.

there can be multiple moral systems to which moral truths are relative. Hence we are left with a plurality of moral systems.[49]

I understand the ethics of this vein of Zhuangist thought in a way analogous to Wong's theory. The irreducible diversity of things implies that there is no authoritative *dao* to which all actions may be compared, no way of cultivating oneself that serves as the standard for everybody else. Rather, conduct can only be assessed on the basis of whether or not it conforms to a particular *dao*, of which there are many, and all of which are on a normative par. Among the myriad *dao*, though, is a privileged subset of sagely *dao*-followers, who exhibit awareness of the myriad *dao* and exemplify certain characteristics—tolerance, flexibility, and the like. Furthermore, there is another subset of *dao*-followers who do not quite reach sagacity but do exemplify certain sagely tendencies that enables them to follow their *dao* better than their colleagues, such as the monkey-keeper who reacted appropriately to the whims of his monkeys as opposed to the one who did not. This leaves us with a plurality of enlightened *dao*-followers, each of whom applies her understanding of the existence of the myriad *dao* to one's own *dao*-following. Understanding the natural state of affairs in this way serves as a constraint on flourishing. However, there are as many ways of satisfying this constraint as there are *dao*.

5. CONCLUSION

In this essay I have attempted to reconstruct a comprehensive account of the relationship between Zhuangist skepticism about an authoritative *Dao* and Zhuangist ethics. I call it Zhuangist pluralism. Zhuangist pluralism first critiques a conventional way of thinking about the *Dao* by offering alternative conceptions of flourishing. The view claims that flourishing is possible for followers of any *dao* so long as they understand that no *dao* is best. They further hold that appreciating this truth enables people to follow their own particular *dao* more effectively. According to this view, nature teaches us that there exists a multitude of ways of flourishing, and that it does not select a single way of carrying on as uniquely authoritative or privileged.

I take this essay to constitute the only a first step in the process of both reconstructing and developing Zhuangist pluralism. I also think there is a strong possibility for fruitful dialogue between this view of ethics and Wong's theory of morality (and those like it). It suggests a plausible, alternative way of conceptualizing pluralist relativism based on improving ways of life rather than of assessing normative systems. This is an exciting prospect for comparative philosophy.

[49]See Wong, *Natural Moralities*, pp. 41–68 for his discussion of the constraints on possible moralities.