

# Zhuangzi—The non-Post-Nietzschean Perspectivist

## I. Opening Remarks

It is not uncommon to find both Nietzsche and Zhuangzi referred to as perspectivists, or thinkers belonging to a variety of philosophical thought that supports the belief that truth is relative to perspective and perspective bound. It is my contention that the categorization of Zhuangzi as a perspectivist is problematic, mainly for the reason that perspectivism is predominantly understood to be a school of thought initiated and endorsed as a major theme in Nietzsche's authorship, and accepted by scholars as a philosophical idea stemming from roots that are considerations on the Nietzschean perspectivist theme. The result of Zhuangzi being deemed a perspectivist in philosophical orientation is that he is frequently read through Nietzschean concepts and discussed with a philosophical lexicon that is primarily derived from Nietzsche scholarship. The very notion of Zhuangzi as a "perspectivist," for example, is the most evident product of this line of thinking, and the immediate irony of classifying Zhuangzi in this way is evident if we simply take a moment to consider the implications of Zhuangzi, a pre-Nietzschean thinker, being cataloged by a post-Nietzschean concept such as perspectivism.

The result of this comparison is that scholars tend to interpret Zhuangzi as functioning with a similar worldview and addressing similar problems as Nietzsche. I contend that such interpretations of Zhuangzi have been construed on the basis of illegitimate presuppositions. In addition, interpretations have pressed Zhuangzi's claims in terms of the same standards they use to assess Nietzsche's, wrongly presupposing the need for Zhuangzi to pass the standard criticisms of perspectivism similar to those Nietzsche has faced.

## II. Introduction to the Issue of Adequate Interpretation

In *Thinking Through Confucius*, Hall and Ames argue that the best way for an individual from within an Anglo-European perspective to approach an ancient Chinese text is by taking heed to the different presupposition made on behalf of each tradition independently, both one's own and the tradition being studied (Hall/Ames 5). This entails that we must take into account the complex cultural phenomena out of which a text has risen and be perceptive as to the different sorts of sociological situations that have informed that culture's value systems and modes of philosophical thought. It follows from Hall and Ames' position that it is important as Anglo-European philosophers engaged in comparative philosophical work that we examine what we consider to be the criteria by which a text can be regarded as philosophical in the Western sense. It is only after discerning what these sorts of criterion are that we can evaluate

why we think it appropriate to call a text like the *Zhuangzi* a philosophical one in the standard sense, and why we see it fit to interpret and criticize such a text by customary philosophical standards. My argument is based on a similar premise, that Zhuangzi cannot be interpreted as a perspectivist in the normal Anglo-European sense since he is not a perspectivist as commonly understood according to the Nietzschean model.

This paper will present Zhuangzi as engaged in an enterprise of a much different sort than Nietzsche's, and will show that the Nietzschean model used thus far as the primary interpretive model in Zhuangzi scholarship is problematic. It should thus be our goal to prevent the usage of illegitimate theoretical categories and intercultural standards as tools for investigating Zhuangzi's thought wherever possible. We should not suppose Zhuangzi to be providing commentary on or navigating through the concepts and problems customarily found in Western philosophical thought unless it is indubitably the case that his project can be construed in no other way.

### **III. On a Nietzschean Account of Perspectivism**

Interpreting Zhuangzi as a perspectivist is problematic insofar as it fails to develop an independent account of his position or engage his work as having an independent agenda from Nietzsche's. What appears in this section is an overview of Nietzsche's perspectivism to be employed as a comparative tool in a discussion of Zhuangzi that will follow. The basic premise for my presentation of Nietzsche here is this: that Nietzsche's position cannot be understood without attention being paid to the development of his account of perspectivism, and that this account of perspectivism is the theoretical basis upon which Nietzsche develops an account of truth. The heart of Nietzsche's project is thus understood as the development of an account of truth, and his development and endorsement of perspectivism should be seen as secondary and necessary to facilitate this account.

The following passages will outline the development of Nietzsche's project, and divides his project into an early stage and a later stage of writing. The early stage will be generally characterized by the argument that human perspectives falsify reality, and the later stage will be devoted to a move away from this falsification thesis in an attempt to coherently articulate how perspectivism allows for an interpretation of human experience understood as objectively truth conducive. [\[1\]](#)

#### **i. Early Thought**

In *The Birth of Tragedy* we find the initial instantiation of Nietzsche's belief that human perspectives necessarily falsify reality. Known henceforth as the falsification thesis, this idea of the falsifying human perspective is largely articulated through an appearance-reality dualism appropriated by Nietzsche through a reliance on a Schopenhauerian metaphysic. Although Nietzsche annexes Schopenhauer's dualistic conception of the world as will and representation, he largely employs this metaphysic within the lexicon of the Greek pantheon and a dreaming-waking distinction. Nietzsche accordingly calls the world of will, as it exists in-itself apart from man, the primordial unity or the primordial

pain, and names experiences of this world “waking experiences” or the “Dionysian;” what is left over then, the representations of this will that exist in the apparent world of space and time, he refers to either as the “Apollinian,” or as “dreams” or “illusions” of the true primordial will. The appropriation of this metaphysic is crucial to the development of Nietzsche’s account of truth. From this point forward Nietzsche will search for ways to disassemble his reliance on the assertion that the world exists as independent from the human perspective, and that human experience offers only a falsified account of the world. In his mature position Nietzsche will argue that the proposition of this sort of aperspectival account of the world is incoherent and unintelligible, but the usage of Schopenhauer’s distinction of the world as will and representation is largely employed by Nietzsche in his early thought, and results in various problematic frameworks being employed throughout the early development of his account of truth.

Since this Schopenhauerean metaphysic is forcefully affirmed in *BOT* (*The Birth of Tragedy*, henceforth *BOT*), it is clear that at this point in his project Nietzsche has not yet concerned himself with an account of truth, instead seeking to outline an account of the nature of human perspectives. At this point, Nietzsche sees human experience as a strictly falsifying agent in the world. Perspectives are described in *BOT* as illusion, or the dream experience in which humans live whereby we are removed from possible interaction with reality or the thing-in-itself, instead functioning in a falsified dream state. Human experience is perspective based, and truth is an aperspectival reality with which human experience is prohibited from interacting.

While *BOT* was a problematic beginning for an authorship that would largely be concerned with providing a coherent account of truth, we see *The Gay Science* offer the beginnings of Nietzsche’s attempt to engage the issue of truth in a way that *BOT* did not see as necessary. While it is clear that a strong acceptance of the falsification thesis as found in *BOT* is problematic for Nietzsche’s development of truth, it is important to note that Nietzsche actually noted the possible difficulties created by this thesis in his *Attempt at a Self-Criticism*, found as the preface to the 1886 edition of *BOT*. In this short preface he noted his dissatisfaction with *BOT* and its over-zealous appropriation of Schopenhauer’s metaphysic, and claims that this appropriation sprung from a poorly conceived desire to cater *BOT* to Richard Wagner, a devoted admirer of Schopenhauer. He argues that *BOT* is an “impossible book: I consider it badly written, ponderous, embarrassing, image-mad and image-confused, sentimental, in places saccharine to the point of effeminacy, uneven in tempo...” etc. (*BOT* 19). In *The Gay Science* Nietzsche begins to restructure the images and metaphorical language employed to articulate the nature of human perspectives, and begins to move away from the problematic metaphysical dualism appropriated from Schopenhauer.

*The Gay Science* is also where Nietzsche outlines his genealogical project, presenting genealogy as the means by which individuals are able to attain truth in life via a realization of the basic state of untruth that characterizes human perspectives. This is the next major step in Nietzsche’s development of his account of truth, founded on the premise that socio-cultural circumstances engender the values by which we think and

live. All of our values arise out of a more or less innate and arbitrary human need to impregnate life with value systems, but none of these systems have any privileged access to a timeless standard of truth. We are able to realize the foundations of these culture-specific valuations when they run their course, coming to fruition on their own accord, or when they are sought out by those individuals who have an aptitude for genealogy and the proclivity to search for and uncover engendered ideologies. Genealogy can thus show our value systems to be “untrue” in the sense that our values can be shown to be merely the superficial developments of the human intellect, but not true in any deep sense through a privileged relationship to some objective standard. By uncovering the untruth of belief structures we can be said to be in a state of truth regarding the character of the world. Truth here is the product of revealing the various untrue states of affairs that have existed and currently do exist in the world. Truth is thus understood as the realization of the state of untruth that by and large characterizes changing human perspectives.

This account of truth found in *GS* (*The Gay Science*, henceforth *GS*) is only marginally successful, primarily in its ability to be articulated without a direct reliance on the problematic Schopenhauerean metaphysic that underlied the failures of *BOT* to support a theory of truth. But *GS* still employs the basic waking-dreaming, reality-illusion dualisms that were problematically employed in *BOT*, and thus still rests on the recurring premise that human perspectives somehow pervert and falsify reality. The genealogical project thus has its limits, and truth is said to be attainable only insofar as the untruth of our valuations and beliefs can be revealed. Truth is thus construed as the ability to affirm untruth, which is not unlike the situation found in *BOT* where the highest ideal is the Dionysian-Apollonian genius, or the individual who can face the horrors of a life of individuation and untruth, thinking of his or herself as a self-justified aesthetic phenomenon, a sort of art object with aesthetic validity but with no validity in an objective truth-conducive sense.

As Nietzsche argues, “All of us harbor concealed gardens and plantings...we are, all of us, growing volcanoes that approach the hour of their eruption; but how near or distant that is, nobody knows...” (*GS* 84). We all live according to the ideas innate in us as products of our historical background, and in time these concepts governing the manner in which we live will become apparent to us—probably brought to light by a fervent agent of change functioning from without the bonds of established moral and social doctrines. This agent of change engaged in the genealogical project will foster new ideas within the minds of his or her culture, and sow the seeds that will come to fruition in due course, imbedded as innate proclivities in the minds of the culture’s children and grandchildren. It is apparent from these sorts of arguments that coming to terms with a full account of truth is thus far an impossible endeavor and that even through the process of revealing the untrue foundations of a culture’s ideology, the genealogist merely reinvigorates his or her culture with a new set of falsifying ideals and values, replacing those that have just been uprooted. The account of truth tailored here in *GS* is thus largely unsatisfactory since “truth” is understood to be only the unveiling and reinvigoration of an untruth that is still the dominating factor of human perspectives.

Further, Nietzsche still falls back in reliance on the problematic waking-dreaming dichotomy found *BOT*, arguing points that still affirm the falsification of human perspectives. At one juncture he states, “I suddenly woke up in the midst of this dream, but only to the consciousness that I am dreaming and that I must go on dreaming lest I perish—as a somnambulist must go on dreaming lest he fall” (*GS* 116). Statements such as this seem to show Nietzsche’s acknowledgment that genealogy is only sufficient to partially uncover the untruth of belief, and also show a realization of genealogy’s ultimate failure to provide an account of truth that is not merely the affirmation of a more profound but still illusory state of being in untruth.

## ii. Later Thought

On one hand, *GS* can be seen as leaving us with the belief that objectivity may be impossible and that all belief falsifies. On this account we live only in apparent realities and are merely subjective creatures dreaming, living with a notion truth that is not an objective reality but still an illusion. But from another point of view *GS* serves as a significant move towards an new evaluation of truth for Nietzsche. We are charged by Nietzsche to take upon ourselves the one project that is necessary, to create ourselves in the image of greatness and in the spirit of a musical Socrates. It is from this perspective that we can look at truth in a radically new way, as the product of creating our own value systems such that one’s existence is an intentionally engage artistic endeavor involving the precise implementation of one’s own valuations. Instead of merely incorporating untruth in life, Nietzsche charges us to create ourselves entirely anew so that our lives are free from the untruths of dogmatic belief structures as much as possible. We are charged to think about truth as being the intentional product of one’s own artistic endeavor given the care and precision of the scientific discerning mind. This line of thinking is groundbreaking for Nietzsche. It leads to a new de-divinized view of nature and a new approach to truth conceived not as an uncommon metaphysical something existing in contradistinction to human perspectives, but as the product of the human perspective alone with no reliance on a greater metaphysical schemata. The world-in-itself is valueless on this account, and it is our job to create truth via the articulation and implementation of newly created values in our own lives. From this line of thinking initiated in *GS*, Nietzsche will ultimately be able to develop a non-realist theory of truth that can avoid the falsification thesis.

This new line of thinking is first hashed out in considerable detail in Nietzsche’s discussion of objectivity as transperspectivity found in *Beyond Good and Evil*. Maudmarie Clark argues that not until his mature thought is Nietzsche able to cultivate an acceptable non-falsifying account of truth via his rejection of the conventional representative or correspondence varieties of truth (100). Any conception of truth that is representational or the product of a correspondence theory of truth is problematic for Nietzsche’s perspectivism as any such theory draws on an appearance-reality distinction, showing all perspectives to removed from direct aperspectival insight. It is in *Beyond Good and Evil* and later works that Nietzsche begins to develop a notion of truth that first posits the inconceivability of an aperspectival standard for the judgment of truth or falsity, marking a move away from a position that affirms the independent

existence of the external world, a position that had also hitherto facilitated the falsification thesis.

Clark argues that in early works such as *Truth and Lie in the Extra-Moral Sense*, and *Human, All too Human*, Nietzsche's position is that we have no access to the thing-in-itself and that we therefore have no way to claim that our beliefs somehow correspond to this thing. Similarly, in *GS* Nietzsche claims that even our best theory of truth and even one that satisfies our best criteria for rationality may still be grotesquely false, and that while our truth *may* be true-in-itself, this is highly unlikely and surely impossible to demonstrate (88).

So the development of Nietzsche's account of truth up until *BGE* (*Beyond Good and Evil*, henceforth *BGE*) looks like this: *Stage 1*—Metaphysical Realism—Nietzsche believes the world to be wholly constituted independently of human perspective, and reality is thus both independent of our cognitive capacities and interests. We have no access to truth because truth has validity only apart from human perspectives, and falsification is inevitable. This is the position found in *BOT*. *Stage 2*—Moderate Realism—Truth is understood to be representational or of the correspondence sort, and to have a truth-conducive perspective is to have a representation that corresponds to reality-in-itself. It is very unlikely that human perspectives do correspond to the thing-in-itself, however, and falsification is thus probable, but not inevitable. This is the view developed in part in *GS* and earlier works such as *Truth and Lie* and *Human, All too Human*. *Stage 3*—Incoherence of the Metaphysical Correspondence Theory—At this stage Nietzsche argues that perspectivism entails that all human knowledge and experience is strictly perspective based. It follows that the idea of an aperspectival thing-in-itself is incoherent since this necessarily posits the existence of something that is non-perspectival, and this notion is itself incoherent. Since the idea of a thing-in-itself is incoherent, the idea of a correspondence theory of truth whereby a perspective succeeds or fails in corresponding to this thing is equally incoherent. This view shows that falsification is no longer a possibility because the idea of an aperspectival reality is no longer legitimate, and there is thus nothing left for human perspectives to falsify. Non-foundationalism is necessarily implied here also.

Clark argues that by the time Nietzsche has written *Beyond Good and Evil* he has arrived at Stage 3 in his account of truth, and the problematic presupposition of a possible correspondence to a thing-in-itself found in *Truth and Lie* and subsequent works such as *GS* is no longer an issue. As Nietzsche's states, "That 'immediate certainty,' as well as 'absolute knowledge' and the 'thing-in-itself,' involve a *contradictio in adjecto*, I shall repeat a hundred times..." (qtd. in Clark 100). Reality is thus perspective based. While Nietzsche can posit that things exist independently from perspective (such as physical objects, etc.), the idea that they exist in-themselves, as a reality in-themselves with qualities and essences in extramental form, is incoherent. The reality of an object is contingent upon it having an essence, and since essences and qualities can only exist within a perspective in the mind, reality is necessarily relative to a perspective. So truth, as a condition of reality, can only exist within a perspective since there is no reality to things existing apart from perspective.

### iii. Transperspectivity as Objective Truth:

In *BGE* Nietzsche continues to develop an account of truth on his new premise that reality is strictly perspectival and that truth thus cannot be coherently conceived of as existing apart from perspectives. The basic premise of Nietzsche's perspectival account of truth is, therefore, that truth must be understood as relative to perspective, and insofar as truth is perspective based we must do our best to see the world from a multiplicity of perspectives in order to facilitate an affirmation of the truest and most accurate account of the world. Transperspectivity is this ability to see the world from a multiplicity of differing perspectives and is the Nietzschean ideal of truth that allows for "objectivity." The value of having multiple vantage points is found in this multiplicity's ability to facilitate insight into different complex perspectives so the fullest account of truth, the truth seen from multiple perspectives, is possible. Insofar as an individual attains fullness or wholeness of perspective, he or she can be said to have an objective account of the world. The idea of human greatness is also provided by Nietzsche as an expression of the sort of person who functions with the transperspective ideal. This is the sort of individual who is capable of accessing a range of different perspectives and thus is able to affirm an account of the world that is more complete than a singular perspective will allow. Nietzsche states in Section 212,

Facing a world of "modern ideas" that would banish everybody into a corner and "specialty," a philosopher—if today there could be philosophers—would be compelled to find the greatness of man, the concept of "greatness," precisely in his range and multiplicity, in his wholeness in manifoldness. He would even determine value and rank in accordance with how much and how many things one could bear and take upon himself, how *far* one could extend his responsibility.

Wholeness in respect to truth is attained through manifoldness, or the ability to intentionally see the world from a variety of perspectives that are accessible in the value system of one individual life. So while truth is perspective based, the fullest account of truth is based on the manifoldness of one's perspectives and the ability to access a store of viewpoints so the world can be seen in the broadest and most complete way possible. This completeness is a characteristic of objectivity, and as an individual's account of truth becomes more complete, that account also becomes more objectively true.

This account of objectivity as transperspectivity is Nietzsche's final account of truth, and finds its fullest expression in *The Genealogy of Morals*, the book published in 1887 as a means to clarify and supplement the initial arguments made in *BGE* (*GM* 3). Objectivity as a product of transperspectivity is articulated best in Section 12:

There is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective "knowing"; and the *more* affects we allow to speak about one thing, the *more* eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our "concept" of this thing, our "objectivity," be.

Nietzsche charges that we must want to possess this sort of truth, that we must desire to see the world from a multiplicity of perspectives, with a multiplicity of eyes, and that

to see differently in this way for once, to *want* to see differently, is no small discipline and preparation of the intellect for its future “objectivity”—the latter understood not as “contemplation without interest” (which is a nonsensical absurdity), but as the ability *to control* one’s Pro and Con and to dispose of them, so that one knows how to employ a *variety* of perspectives and affective interpretations in the service of knowledge (Section 12).

As each perspective accounts for a specific interpretation of the world, we must cultivate a variety of perspectives to make our interpretation as full as it can be, allowing for the most objective and truthful account of the world available. It is crucial, however, that we also control the perspectives that we have appropriated and cultivated so we employ only the affective interpretations, and dispose of those that do not serve the pursuit of knowledge. Our goal, truth, is the most complete conception of the world as seen from a multiplicity of perspectives, and truth can be attained insofar as a properly disposed individual is directed towards the development of such a complete picture of the world.

## IV. A Discussion of Zhuangzi and the Concept of Daos

In this section, I will argue that the vocabulary and goals of Zhuangzi’s project substantially differ from Nietzsche’s, and I will rely on the concepts *ming*, *daoshu*, and “contingency” to offer the interpretation that a *dao* is a linguistic discourse whereby particular modes of thinking and acting are facilitated. Zhuangzi mostly articulates his claims about *daos* through the presentation of different models and parables that show examples of correct and incorrect employment of *daos*. In the presentation of various principles as to how one should choose a *dao*, Zhuangzi establishes that clarity of mind (*ming*) is the ideal state from which to pass judgment as to what is the appropriate way to respond to situations arising in the world. Judgments made from the *ming* perspective—a clear and well informed mode of thought—are perfectly well adjusted to accomplish whatever task is at hand in one’s life. Success is described as the result of being properly disposed in the act of deciding what sort of action is to be taken up in a given situation, and it is by making the proper distinction that one is able to respond to a situation in the right sort of way.

A *dao* should be understood as a mode of thinking that is employed to facilitate a certain sort of action, and should be understood as the conceptual product of a distinction made in the mind as to how one is going to act. A *dao* is a linguistic creation, and on this basis *daos* are usually understood in terms of being “perspectives,” or linguistic schemata in the mind that orient how one’s thoughts structure one’s actions. When I use the phrase “*ming* perspective” then, it should be understood as synonymous with “*ming dao*,” a mode of thinking that is characterized by “*ming*,” or illuminating clarity. Chad Hansen articulates this idea well, arguing that it is Zhuangzi’s position that we never see things as they are in themselves, but always “through some conceptual scheme [a *dao*] provided by language” (Ivanhoe 197) [\[21\]](#).

The assessment of a *dao* as a linguistic discourse comes from Zhuangzi's most rigorously analytic chapter, "The Sorting Which Evens Things Out,"

and a look at this chapter is crucial to a clear understanding of his project and the issues with which he was concerned. One of the most intriguing and difficult passages in the Zhuangzi appears here and presents the basis for our interpretation of a *dao* as a linguistic creation:

Everything is 'that' in relation to other things and 'this' in relation to itself. We may not be able to see things from the standpoint of 'that,' but we can understand them from the standpoint of 'this.' Therefore, it may be said that 'that' derives from 'this' and that 'this' is dependent upon 'that.' Such is the notion of the cogenesis of 'this' and 'that.' Nonetheless, from the moment of birth death begins simultaneously, and from the moment of death birth begins simultaneously. Every affirmation is a denial of something else, and every denial is an affirmation of something else. 'This' and 'that' are mutually dependent; right and wrong are also mutually dependent. For this reason, the sage does not subscribe to [the view of absolute opposites] but sees things in the light of nature, accepting 'this' for what it is (Mair 15).

This passage is Zhuangzi's primary refutation of the Mohist and Confucian practices of logic and reason, and A.C. Graham offers us a historical perspective on this passage in a prefatory remark to his translation. Graham explains this passage as a challenge to the Mohist "theory of naming," a strictly nominalistic theory found in the Mohist's "disputation" manual called the *Canons*, dating from around 300 BC or slightly later (Graham 10). The theory of naming is essentially an identification process where "a common sense name such as 'horse' is given to a particular object and extended to all similar to it." If I were to ask you what an object was that had appeared in front of me, for example, according to this naming process I would basically be asking you to tell me the name that is commonly given to that object, not what the object is in and of itself apart from its name (10). As Graham further explains, "What is 'it' (*shi*) for me and what is 'other' (*fei*) than it depends on my choice of standpoint, and when I say 'That's it' (*shi*) I am merely announcing that the thing in question is the thing to which I have chosen to give the name" (10). "Disputation" is a process by which an object is presented to two parties along with a question similar to, "Is it a horse or not?", the only two acceptable replies being either, "That's it" (*shi*) or "That's not" (*fei*). This process of disputation is applied in the *Canons* to over seventy-five logical, ethical and geometrical terms, and is a process by which *absolute* knowledge is sought through a process of ascertaining things' opposites (10).

What Zhuangzi is addressing in this passage is the practice of using fixed perspectives to judge absolute "rightness" and "wrongness," or by employing the "That's it!" which *deems* opposed to the "That's it!" that *goes by circumstance*. While making *shi/fei* distinctions is a necessary process of the mental faculty that facilitates making distinctions as to how one should act in the world, Zhuangzi argues that these sorts of decisions should be "contingent" upon the immediate circumstances presented in a situation, not predetermined by a strict practice of asserting noncontextual truths.

Zhuangzi's summer cicada parable offers an example of the sort of individual who wrongly attempts to judge what is ultimately right and wrong from within one fixed and limited perspective. It is Zhuangzi's belief that the Mohists and Confucians share in the cicada's fallacy of *deeming* from a limited perspective. He states,

Little understanding cannot come up to great understanding; the short-lived cannot come up to the long-lived. How do I know this is so? The morning mushroom knows nothing of twilight and dawn; the summer cicada knows nothing of spring and autumn. (Watson 24)

This passage is concerned with how attachment to narrow perspectives and conceptual frameworks hinders human judgment and activity. The argument here is that the cicada, a summer creature, necessarily has an account of the world that is limited to what experiences he is able to have during the summer months, implying an obvious lack in experience of spring, autumn and winter. Acknowledging the cicada's limited knowledge, Zhuangzi asks us if we would not all consider the cicada an arrogant and ignorant little fellow if he were to approach us in poetic verse claiming, "The trees are always green, the sky is always blue, the world is great and grand, but never changes hue." And we must all respond that a claim such as this wrongly presupposes that summer is all that exists, and that the cicada isn't justified in making this statement simply because he isn't able to access an experience of spring, autumn, or winter. So while the cicada may be a cheerful critter in the summer time, feeling as though his account of the world has adequately understood all that there is to be understood, he has no ground on which to stand while making *absolute* claims. The cicada, like all of us, has a limited perspective by which he understands the world in which he lives. He doesn't know that the green leaves on the trees turn to bare branches in the winter, and he does not know of the rainy springtime that makes the sky clouded and gray.

The cicada parable outlines Zhuangzi's concern for the human tendency to make absolute claims based on narrow perspectives that are taken to understand the big picture, and it is this tendency that he sees in the disputation method of the Mohists and Confucians. He criticizes not the act of passing judgment all together, but the act of *deeming* what is absolutely so in an objective way.

Graham offers commentary on this issue arguing that Zhuangzi "thinks of Confucians and Mohists who stick rigidly to their affirmations and denials as lighting up little areas of life and leaving the rest in darkness (53). While the cicada may be able to shed light on things pertaining to his own life via his own conception of the world, he does not have the capacity to speak of an *ultimate* state of affairs because he is conceptually limited to his own world order and the various *daos* that are available to him there. Neither the cicada nor the Mohist logician has seen the flaw that he does not have the capacity to shed light on the *whole picture* from one single perceptual framework, and therefore both fail to notice that they cannot justify making claims to absolute states of affairs from singular perspectives. Zhuangzi wishes to illuminate that our human conceptual framework is no greater than that of the cicada, at least as far as the judgments of *absolutes* are concerned.

Also, Zhuangzi's conception of a *dao* as a linguistic discourse does not accommodate or espouse the idea of a cosmological *Dao*, a *dao* that exists as a meta-discourse, or an extra-mental or extra-linguistic reality. The idea of this sort of "*Dao*" is incoherent on Zhuangzi's account of *daos* as immanent modes of thinking employed to facilitate certain actions. As the product of a linguistic distinction made in the mind alone, a *dao* has no relationship to an extra-mental state of affairs. As Zhuangzi remarks,

Affirmation lies in our affirming; denial lies in our denying. A way comes into being through our walking upon it; a thing is so because people say that it is. Why are things so? They are so because we declare them to be so. Why are things not so? They are not so because we declare them to be not so. (Mair 16)

Passages such as this stating that a *dao* exists by us "walking upon it" offer an immediate divergence from the view that a *dao* is a cosmological or transcendent force serving as a criterion for judgment. And it follows from this that actions cannot be interpreted as either good or bad in terms of having a relationship to a cosmological or transcendent "*Dao*." This conception of a "*Dao*" is incoherent.

It is important moreover to be clear regarding the sort of criteria that Zhuangzi *does* outline as to what sorts of *daos* can be regarded as acceptable, and how an individual should be situated such that the correct distinctions can be made to facilitate the perfectly "contingent" *dao*. Many have offered uncharitable interpretations of Zhuangzi on this issue of how one's distinction, *shi* or *fei*, in a given situation can be said to be correct or incorrect. It is evident that claims such as a *dao* exists in virtue of it being chosen (*shi*) implies that no external aperspectival standard for the judgment of a distinction can be found. But not all *daos*, or distinctions made in a given situation regarding what is the appropriate way to proceed, are equally correct.

We have already discussed the issue of the Mohists and Confucians, and Zhuangzi's criticism of their process of disputation by which a *dao* is selected to represent a given conceptual distinction regarding a state of affairs in the world. Zhuangzi argues that their process is one of *deeming*, or authorizing that a distinction made in the mind can be mandated to signify an *ultimate* distinction that is in all circumstances the best distinction to be made. Zhuangzi argues against establishing valuations for various term distinctions that are absolute. This does not entail that evaluation is not possible, and to argue that Zhuangzi has not discussed the issue of better and worse *daos* is to have missed one of the texts most significant discussions. William A. Callahan argues that the criteria for judging excellence in an action is precisely an action's ability to effectively and unobtrusively find success in a situation at hand, what he calls "*contingency*" in action. The most useful passage from the *Zhuangzi* to consider here is the *daoshu* (hinge-of-*dao*) passage. It states,

A state in which "this" (*shi*) and "that" (*fei*) no longer find their opposites is called the hinge of Way (*daoshu*). When the hinge is fitted into the socket, it can respond endlessly. Its right then is a single endlessness and its wrong too is a single endlessness. So I say, the best thing to use is clarity (*ming*). (Watson 35)

Callahan focuses on the term *ming* here as I have earlier in this section, usually translated as “clarity,” “brightness,” or “to illuminate,” and has taken it to be a mindful ability to make distinctions and act according to them so all actions are “contingent” upon the immediate needs of a situation (Callahan 183). This discussion again summons to memory our previous discussion of Zhuangzi’s criticism of the Confucians and Mohists who sought to create immutable principles of action that could generically find success in all situations, a project that Zhuangzi felt was seriously misguided. So we are not unfamiliar with this sort of discussion where Zhuangzi argues that if successful action is to be accommodated, distinctions need to be context-specific and mindful of the changing nature of the world in which we live. By assenting to *ultimate* principles that are imposed upon the world in an arbitrary undiscerning manner, Zhuangzi believes that what is necessary for successful action is overlooked for the sake of a pre-determined imperative.

So Zhuangzi charges us to do away with these sorts of imperatives and assume a reflective mode of action predominated by clarity of mind, or *ming*. This state of mind is characterized by the hinge-of-*dao* (*daoshu*) image, the ability to cultivate one’s decision making process such that one’s mind is empty of strictly adhered to and arbitrary notions of what “always is” and “always isn’t” appropriate for certain types of situations. Being in a state of *ming* clarity is likened to being at the hinge of *dao*, essentially a state of being uncommitted though perfectly well suited to swing one’s distinctions in the manner that is most fitting to bring about the best result in an immanent situation. Once a distinction is made in the mind, we can then act on that distinction and the situation at hand will be successfully resolved almost as if it had resolved itself. Just as a properly maintained door can swing effortlessly on its hinge, so can we make term distinctions in novel contexts so our endeavors and those decisions that bring them about are harmonious and unproblematic.

As Callahan notes, “The *Zhuangzi*...reminds us of the contextuality of language and the world. Thus we can only use conventional language and ‘usual’ distinctions as a ‘temporary lodging place;’ a system that we are not closely attached to, and are able to change when it is no longer appropriate” (Callahan 182-3). The hinge-of-*dao* image again speaks of this sort of ability to effortlessly respond to situations in the world as a door can seemingly swing back and forth on its hinge, not being committed to one *ultimate* position that would restrict its freedom to be opened or closed depending upon what a given situation in the world required. As Callahan argues,

The main characteristic of the axis of *daos* (*daoshu*) is the prelinguistic lack of distinctions (that is, no “it/other”). This lack of distinctions and opposites leads to two corollary characteristics: First, that the axis is at a state of rest, for there can be no action without distinctions. And second, since the axis lacks opposites and distinctions, it then lacks *shis* and *feis*. This means that it actually contains the composite wholes of all *shis* and *feis* before they are divided.... (Callahan 188)

So the virtue that Zhuangzi asks us to cultivate is an emptiness at the center, like a hinge, where we are not committed to pre-determined modes of conduct whereby we are not

able to access *ming*, the state from which all *shi/feis* are possible. If our actions are to be fully correct, justifiable, and effective, it is crucial that we have a full store of options from which to work when acting in the world. As Zhuangzi states,

Saying is not blowing breath, saying says something; the only trouble is that what it says in never fixed. Do we really say something? Or have we never said anything?...By what is the Way hidden, that there should be a genuine or a false? By what is saying darkened, that sometimes 'That's it' (*shi*) and sometimes 'That's not' (*fei*)? Wherever we walk how can the Way be absent? Whatever the standpoint how can saying be unallowable? The Way is hidden by formation of the lesser, saying is darkened by its foliage and flowers. And so we have the 'That's it, that's not' of the Confucians and Mohists, by which what is *it* (*shi*) for one of them for the other is not, what is *not* (*fei*) for one of them for the other is. If you wish to affirm what they deny and deny what they affirm, the best means is Illumination (*ming*). (Graham 52)

Clarity of mind is a crucial quality for correct distinctions to be made, allowing for the ability for an action to be fully "contingent" upon the task at hand. The arbitrary principles of the Mohists and Confucians prevent *ming* by hiding the correct *dao* behind a predetermined agenda, and these agendas prevent the possibility of correct action because they fail to spontaneously arise from the "contingent" circumstances in the world. As Graham argues in *Disputers of the Tao*, they commit the fallacy of *deeming*, or going by the "That's it!" which deems—*wei shih*, and prevent *ming* (*Disputers* 190).

Further, it is not possible for several equally valid *daos* to be affirmed from the perspective of *ming* at the same time. "contingency" in action should be understood as allowing for only *one* fully-adjusted action in any one particular situation. In this scenario insight into what that singular distinction and response may be is a privilege of the *ming*-perspective alone. Graham likens this to an immediate responsive quality of the properly situated mind where each response is a reflection of what is necessary in a given situation, not unlike how an echo is the immediate response of a sound, or a shadow of a shape. Graham states that in responding to situations in the world the individual with *ming* "hits in any particular situation on that course which is uniquely appropriate yet fits no rules" (*Disputers* 188). He also argues that "the Way is not that which the sage desires, but the course on which he inevitably finds himself in his illuminated state," thus strengthening the claim that "contingent" actions are not a choice that is relative to a variety of possible illuminated (*ming*) perspectives, but are unique responses to unique situations in the world. The *dao* that goes by circumstance then is the intuited product of *ming*, and compulsory for the perfectly disposed individual to follow. Under the auspices of this perfect clarity of mind the perfectly well-adjusted individual is able to immediately identify the appropriate distinction and respond to the one fully "contingent" response that is acceptable to find success.

## V. A Comparison of Nietzsche and Zhuangzi's Positions

Thus far we have been working with the notion that Nietzsche is first and foremost a perspectivist, and that his perspectivism facilitates his account of objective truth. In addition, it is a basic premise of this paper that the use of this categorization as a means of understanding Zhuangzi is incredibly problematic. What makes this issue more complex is that we have been considering Zhuangzi's articulation of the concept of *daos* while simultaneously using the idea of "*dao*" to be mostly synonymous with the idea of "perspective." It is here that the first and most significant distinction between Nietzsche and Zhuangzi's agenda's must be drawn and where the first apparent similarities between their positions must be shown to be largely superficial. The putative similarity is this: that Nietzsche and Zhuangzi are both perspectivists, a claim based on Nietzsche's direct employment of this sort of terminology and our usage of the term "perspective" to be somewhat synonymous with "*dao*." This situation is rooted in having Zhuangzi's position translated and interpreted through the Nietzschean model that has been available to the Anglo-European philosophical community. This sort of comparative technique is the natural and necessary means by which common concepts are utilized to weave a filter through which an understanding of a newly encountered philosophical framework can be facilitated. It is via familiar conceptual mechanisms that one culture is able to first offer and then continually develop interpretations of foreign texts, and it is a consequent effect of this sort of translation method that unfamiliar concepts are articulated through familiar ones via a familiar philosophical lexicon. We have thus found it useful to think of the idea of *daos* in common terms such as "perspectives."

Consider a model of this common translation issue: Imagine the method by which a carpenter would have nails fashioned to accommodate the shape of the tool used to push nails through wood. Now imagine a carpenter existing in a primitive culture that has an entirely different approach to carpentry—that is, different structures are being built to accommodate different environmental conditions, different natural materials and technologies are at the culture's disposal with which to construct building tools, etc. This sort of scenario would make it possible that the nails and hammers used in an ancient culture, made with unique culture-specific materials and used for unique purposes, are of an entirely different nature from how tools are made and employed in a modern culture. Now imagine a scenario where the more modern culture digs up a well preserved house-like structure from an area where the first culture had once prospered. The nails utilized in building that house would still exist, but the hammer-like tool used in the creation process would not. Further, finding this ancient house is of great interest because the modern culture is just so inclined to seek out anthropological and cultural patterns, and is thus curious as to how various tools have been employed in the past in the service of structure building. So we would have a situation then where our modern carpenter would scout around in search of the various pounding mechanisms at his disposal that he could conceive of as useful in the act of pounding nails of the shape he has found. This would be an attempt to discern how the original hammer-like tool used to pound these unique nails must have looked and functioned. It is evident that this individual would have to perform his search by a process of trial and error, locating a modern tool that looked adequate to facilitate an ancient activity, then testing this possible model to see if he had found a match. And if at first he were content with his match but then later displeased with his findings, he would have to develop a more plausible alternative model, and

would move on to develop new comparisons and new theories. Through this process he would essentially be searching to re-create a model of the original scenario using only the tools at his disposal, and it would be quite possible in this sort of state of affairs that an exact re-creation of the ancient scenario may never be possible.

Translation method is the same sort of game, and it is for this reason that every translation is also an act with a creative interpretive element. Implicit in this game is that so long as the conceptual tools utilized by one culture to interpret the texts of another don't find their fit, the predominant interpretation must be subjected to re-development. This is a necessary condition for providing the most accurate interpretation possible. On the issue of the comparative project that is the concern of this paper, Zhuangzi has been interpreted through and understood according to a Nietzschean model and thus via Nietzschean concepts and terminology. As we have said, calling Zhuangzi a "perspectivist" is the most evident and problematic signifier of this sort of interpretation. But it is important to consider to what extent a significant relationship obtains between a convenient interpretive language and the ideas actually being interpreted through such models. For example, while it may be convenient to articulate the idea of a "*dao*" with the more familiar word "perspective," care should be taken so that it is not wrongly assumed that this signifies that Zhuangzi is somehow a "perspectivist," and that he should thus be interpreted as such. The signifier "perspective" being used as a model replacement for the idea "*dao*" is not sufficient to think of "perspectivism" and a "*daoism*" as the same inquiry. These signifiers represent manifestly different agendas.

It is important for us to be clear that the heart of Nietzsche's project is the development of an account of truth, and that his final position posits that we must affirm the truest account of the world by cultivating the ideal of transperspectivity. Through harnessing a multiplicity of functional perspectives objectivity in truth can be attained. Zhuangzi has a different project. He is concerned with practice, or ways of doing things. He is offering a discussion of how various *daos* can be chosen to facilitate practices that are successful, not truth conducive. Insofar as "perspectivism" is acknowledged as Nietzschean in origin, and so long as Nietzsche's development of this perspectivism is a means to facilitate an adequate account of truth, Zhuangzi cannot rightly be called a perspectivist unless he too can be shown to be engaged in developing an account of truth. This is not the case. Zhuangzi never engages a discussion of truth because he is engaged in the different project of presenting anecdotes describing situations in which individuals have successfully or unsuccessfully acted to accomplish tasks. He presents models as teaching mechanisms. He asks us to learn how to interact with the world in a harmonious way by cultivating a deep sensibility regarding how we live in relation to the world. By contemplating his models we do not cultivate a picture of truth, we cultivate a sensibility regarding successful practice.

While it may be convenient to think of a *dao* as a "perspective," *daos* have not been presented by Zhuangzi in terms of objective truth relations, and no accurate interpretation of Zhuangzi can interpret a *dao* or even a multiplicity of *daos* as involved in providing a perspective holder with this sort of account. A *dao* must be thought of as a mode of thinking that is employed to facilitate action, understood as the conceptual

product of a distinction made in the mind regarding how one is going to act in a given situation. Zhuangzi's project, not concerned with truth, is a sort of meditation. He asks us to contemplate his teachings so a sensibility about decision and action is gained, and so that we cultivate the ability to function harmoniously. It is through the presentation of anecdotal models of employed *daos* that we are able to learn how to center our mind like a hinge and how best to integrate our actions successfully in worldly interactions.

Whereas Nietzsche wishes to develop an account of truth, Zhuangzi is only concerned with how successful and unsuccessful actions are facilitated by modes of thought (*daos*) that either successfully or unsuccessfully find their appropriate and "contingent" fit within the context of the situations to which they respond.

Essentially, a *dao* is not a condition of truth and has no relation to truth whatsoever. Insofar as Zhuangzi is a *daoist* he should therefore not be understood to be developing an account of truth, but as developing an account of how various *daos* can be seen as successful or unsuccessful. Nietzsche is different. Nietzsche outlines the idea of perspectives in terms of truth relations, and insofar as he is a perspectivist, he should be understood to be articulating a position concerned with how truth is relative to perspective. Zhuangzi wishes to inform us as to how it is best to avoid conflict and strife in our daily actions and how to cultivate a more harmonious state of being through the development of the powers (*de*) in us. By using these powers to cultivate clarity of mind, we gain insight into events. He guards against the act of *deeming* and mandating what sorts of distinctions are absolutely appropriate from a non-contextualized objective standpoint and helps us to carve the path that harmonizes with prevailing worldly circumstances. Harmony and the *daos* that facilitate harmonizing are not truth-dependent, if for no other reason that simply because Zhuangzi does not discuss *daos* in truth terms. Further, as few and far between as they may be, any passage that could be feasibly abstracted from the text and interpreted as an account of truth could be interpreted more clearly, directly, and charitably according to the interpretation I have offered here, that Zhuangzi is presenting models of how actions are best facilitated, not how they are truth-conducive.

## **VI. Responding to an Inadequate Interpretation of Zhuangzi**

Now that Nietzsche and Zhuangzi's positions have been shown to be sufficiently dissimilar, we are in a position to inquire as to why they have been predominantly construed to be more similar than they really are. This will require taking a look at where the similarities between their positions lie. I contend that the clearest similarity between Nietzsche and Zhuangzi's frameworks shows up in the argument that both seem to make regarding the detrimental nature of *narrowness*. For Nietzsche, narrowness in perspective means lack of manifoldness, or that an individual does not have a multiplicity of perspectives with which to control his or her pros and cons, and thus lacks an objective account of truth. Affirming the most complex and transperspectival account of the world is the necessary condition for objective truth for Nietzsche, and insofar as thought is allowed to proceed in novel contexts in a way that an individual is never confined to a

stagnant and non-developing account of the world, narrowness can be avoided. Narrowness and transperspectivity are opposites, and insofar as we are charged to affirm the truest account of the world, we can interpret Nietzsche to also being arguing that narrowness in one's perspectives should be actively avoided.

If we look at Clark's discussion of Nietzsche, we find a discussion of how narrowness can be avoided in the pursuit of a more adequate account of the world. As Clark states, "we think of one perspective as superior to another if it gives the occupants of both perspectives more of what they want from a theory—would better satisfy their standards of rational acceptability—than does the other perspective" (141). Clark's interpretation here allows Nietzsche a theory of truth that accounts for the possibility of two conflicting perspectives to seek counsel via a third neutral perspective in a way that a decision regarding which perspective is best can be made. This grants that a third party perspective can always be adopted so a standard of rational acceptability is always available to determine if the current perspective one is holding is too narrow. By being involved in this sort of community where one's own conception of the world is subject to criticism and revision, an individual would be able to access other third party perspectives so that their own view on the world could be continually strengthened and developed. In this scenario, narrowness can be avoided and a better account of truth sought since an individual's perspective would regularly be changed to accommodate a more truthful account of the world.

Narrowness for Zhuangzi is articulated in a somewhat different way, but is nonetheless discouraged continuously and vehemently throughout his work. Narrowness is criticized most clearly by Zhuangzi in his account of the Mohist and Confucian disputation method. Zhuangzi views this method as precisely the sort of tool that breeds narrowness and prevents both *ming* and "contingent" action. We should think of this criticism in terms of Zhuangzi's arguments against using fixed perspectives to judge absolute "rightness" and "wrongness" of decisions, or by employing the "That's it!" which *deems* (*wei shih*) opposed to the "That's it!" that *goes by circumstance* (*yin shih*). Zhuangzi's ideal person cultivates a state of mind likened to *daoshu*, or the hinge of *dao*, where any possible distinctions can be made by the uncommitted mind, and any possible corresponding action can still be accessed so that they are adequate to succeed in accomplishing a given task. Recalling the image of the hinge, the clarity of mind of the ideal person allows for a broad array of possible options as responses to situations arising in the world. By making distinctions that are "contingent" upon the circumstances present in an immediate situation, success is achieved. The summer cicada's perspective is narrow, and it is when rigid distinctions like the cicada's and those created by the disputation method are used that we are misled into thinking that a distinction should permanently be called what was only temporarily convenient to name it. As Graham states, this is how narrow-mindedness is cultivated and is how "thinking goes wrong" (*Disputers* 190). Alan Fox argues for a similar point about narrowness pointing out that Zhuangzi offers an account of the properly disposed individual who approaches the world with *ming*, which again is translated as clarity, brightness, or to illuminate. The "privileged state of mind" is capable of "matching attitude to circumstances," not circumstances to attitude in the spirit of Confucianism and Mohism (Fox 65,61). By

using clarity and letting thought proceed on immanent situations in the world narrowness can be avoided and harmonious interactions in worldly situations attained.

Taking both Nietzsche and Zhuangzi to be sponsoring arguments that guard against narrowness, we must still see that narrowness for Nietzsche and Zhuangzi are of different sorts. Nietzsche guards against the narrow perspective because it prohibits an objective account of truth, Zhuangzi because it prevents what we might call the “flow experience,” or harmonizing our actions with *yin shih*, the “That’s it!” that goes by circumstance. Zhuangzi is still not a perspectivist in the Nietzschean sense, and is not guarding against narrowness because it prevents truth. In addition, using the word “perspective” in relation to Zhuangzi is only a convenient model replacement for “*dao*,” but does not signify that Zhuangzi is engaged in a discussion of truth. What we can say about Zhuangzi and perspectives, or *daos*, is that experience is understood by Zhuangzi to be *dao*-based, or that experience of the world only occurs from within a mind-dependent conceptual scheme (*dao*) that facilitates worldly interactions and through which the world is viewed. Nietzsche and Zhuangzi can both be seen as non-realists for this reason. Just as Nietzsche shows the incoherence of the “thing-in-itself,” Zhuangzi rejects the idea of an extra-mental or meta-*Dao*. This does not mean, however, that Zhuangzi argues for a truth that is somehow perspective-based or dependent on *daos*. As argued in my interpretation of Zhuangzi, the best account of the text does not see Zhuangzi as engaged in a discussion of truth at all, and does not see the idea of truth being addressed in the text. And since Zhuangzi does not discuss *daos* in relation to truth, the idea of truth should not be seen as the product of Zhuangzi’s conceptual lexicon. On the contrary, the concept of truth is a conceptual mechanism of the Anglo-European mind interpreting the text, not of Zhuangzi’s writing the text. It should thus be left out entirely.

### **i. A Defense of My Interpretation**

Chad Hansen holds the most typical criticism of Zhuangzi, and a sizeable portion of Zhuangzi scholarship has been dedicated to expounding on and qualifying Hansen’s premises. I contend that Hansen’s argument is based on an illegitimate reading of the text that construes Zhuangzi as a perspectivist of the Nietzschean variety. For this reason, Hansen’s interpretation of Zhuangzi is not as defensible as the one I have provided. On my reading, criticisms such as Hansen’s are not problematic because they are based on an interpretation of the text that takes little care to distinguish Zhuangzi’s position from a Nietzschean truth-oriented position. I contend that my interpretation makes an adequate distinction between Nietzsche and Zhuangzi’s agendas and is thus not problematic like Hansen’s can be shown to be.

Hansen argues that Zhuangzi is a thoroughgoing relativist, the product of a skepticism that necessarily produces an unavoidable quandary as to whether or not what is understood from one perspectival point of view can be said to be true in some objective sense. Hansen argues that both Zhuangzi’s skepticism and consequent relativism stem from his position on truth and judgments, governed by a rather normal breed of perspectivism. Hansen’s understanding is that Zhuangzi is committed to a relativistic

perspectivism in which all judgments and experiences about the world are made from a particular viewpoint, and that each and every perspective is just as permissible and valid as every other. Philip J. Ivanhoe states that Hansen's understanding of Zhuangzi's perspectivism is that we never see things as they are in themselves, but "through some conceptual scheme—what Hansen calls a *dao*—provided by language. This view can be understood as a form of 'relativism' in the sense that it holds that knowledge is always relative to some frame of reference" (Ivanhoe 197). Hence, Hansen's basic premises already show that a Nietzschean interpretation is being employed by integrating a discussion of knowledge and thus truth into Zhuangzi's position. As we have already seen, it is possible to use terms such as "perspective" in relation to Zhuangzi as a model replacement for "*dao*," but only insofar as this is not understood to imply a significant relationship between Zhuangzi's *daoist* position and Nietzsche's perspectivist position. Hansen fails to make this distinction. While he has correctly interpreted the concept of *dao* as a linguistically conceived conceptual scheme through which we see the world—not unlike Nietzsche's discussion of how experience is perspective-bound—he fails to mark the distinction that Zhuangzi's *daos* are not couched in terms of truth such as Nietzsche's perspectives.

Ivanhoe notes that Hansen's position in *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought* "seems to be that Zhuangzi is skeptical about the possibility of language ever providing us with a true account of how things are because of the conventional nature of language" (Ivanhoe 199). Further, in his essay "A Tao of Tao in Chuang-tzu," Hansen states that Zhuangzi is bound to "a skepticism based on a view of the conventionality and function of *yan*/language to which all judgment, all *shih* and *fei*, is relative" (Hansen 50). This is an argument claiming Zhuangzi to be a strong relativist, that while language is the primary guiding discourse of a perspective, it is more or less arbitrary. Such arbitrariness does not allow for any insight into whether or not a specific perspectival *dao* offers any real insight into its own objective truth or validity. Hansen argues "that the basis of Zhuangzi's skepticism is the multiplicity of perspectives and the way those different perspectives project term distinctions in novel contexts." He then goes on to ask the question "Does the multiplicity of perspectives enable us to know that we do not know? Obviously not. It does not follow from there being other ways of life that ours is wrong" (*A Daoist Theory* 293).

Hansen does not give Zhuangzi the strongest reading possible, and hence his account of Zhuangzi's position has many problems that do not arise on my interpretation. One problem is Hansen's attempt to marry Zhuangzi to both relativism and skepticism. The problem here is that a claim to skepticism necessarily entails a claim to the possibility of there being some ultimate aperspectival reality to which beliefs and judgments do or do not correspond. Skepticism entails realism, and Hansen has already taken Zhuangzi's position, as have I, to be one of a non-realist. To call Zhuangzi a skeptical perspectivist is to call him both a realist and non-realist at the same time, and it is clear that Hansen is not entitled to have it both ways. So Hansen's interpretation is inconsistent.

In addition, it is inconceivable to make a claim to Zhuangzi's relativism based on the argument that he does not provide an account of the criteria necessary to judge a

*dao* acceptable or unacceptable. This is Hansen's claim, that all *daos* are conventional and arbitrary. It is apparent on my interpretation, however, that Zhuangzi devotes a significant part of his work to show just the opposite, a major theme being "contingency" in action and choosing the "That's it!" that goes by circumstance instead of the "That's it!" that deems. So to argue that Zhuangzi is a relativist in the way that Hansen does is to miss his discussion of the Mohists and Confucian disputation method and the hinge of *dao* (*daoshu*) entirely. Hansen's interpretation also neglects the fact that Zhuangzi is not concerned with truth, but with practical decision making and how to best get on in the world harmoniously. On my account, Zhuangzi is shown to have a strong stance against relativism, an argument based on the premise that we must choose the "That's it!" that goes by circumstance. This is not relativistic in the sense that Hansen has taken it to be. As Callahan has expressed, the correct distinction for Zhuangzi is one that is "contingent," or fully dependent on the prevailing circumstances in the world. The correct distinction is "contingent" in the sense that the "That's it!" that goes by circumstance depends strictly on the needs of a situation on hand. Successful action thus depends on a distinction being harmonized with the situation in the world to which the corresponding action responds. On Hansen's account, Zhuangzi's position is that there is no criteria whatsoever that can serve to guide or justify one's actions. This is a form of strong relativism, seeing all distinctions as arbitrary. What I have shown is much different, that Zhuangzi is not a relativist and that correct distinctions are not arbitrary at all. Zhuangzi argues that making the correct decision requires careful insight into the situation at hand, and that all possible distinctions should be left available until the correct one makes itself apparent. A *shi/fei* distinction is only relative for Zhuangzi in the sense that its correctness is relative to the situation with which it interacts. As Zhuangzi has warned, it is unsuccessful to *deem*, success being found instead by going according to the circumstances. So while it may be plausible to say that Zhuangzi is a relativist in the sense that what is correct is relative to what is necessary for harmonizing, he is not at all the relativist that Hansen has taken him to be. Hansen argues that all *shi/fei* are equally correct, and any distinction is *prima facie* acceptable without recourse to *any* criterion. This is not the case. Circumstances in the world provide the criteria for success, but since this criteria changes along with the situation, what is successful can never be achieved with a fixed approach. Hansen's argument offers an inadequate and inconsistent interpretation of Zhuangzi on many levels. He does not account for Zhuangzi's discussion of disputation, *deeming* or *daoshu*, and seems to entirely miss the heart of Zhuangzi's argument regarding the cultivation of successful practice.

The most significant problem with Hansen's interpretation is that it supposes Zhuangzi to be a perspectivist, and thus presupposes Zhuangzi to be involved in a discussion of truth and not some other project. Hansen's attempt to criticize Zhuangzi's account of truth and knowledge as related to *daos* must fail as a result, since Zhuangzi does not address truth and knowledge in the way that Hansen takes him to. Zhuangzi's position is that distinctions, *shi* or *fei*, are not true or false, they are just chosen or not chosen. If we take the traditional account of knowledge to be a justified true belief, it is evident that since Zhuangzi has no account of truth he cannot have an account of knowledge as Hansen takes him to. Zhuangzi's argument about *daos* is clear, that some are better and some are worse in facilitating activities and successfully responding to

situations in the world. Zhuangzi is concerned with practice, not truth. If we consider Zhuangzi's Cook Ding parable, it is evident that a sensibility regarding correct practice is what Zhuangzi hopes to bring about in his audience, not a notion of truth. Ding is a model for how we can nurture life in the right sort of way by harmonizing our distinctions with the circumstances to which our worldly interactions are directed. Ding, a butcher and cook, has found his knack for carving oxen, the ability to effortlessly choose the appropriate distinctions when carving. A bone is never encountered by Ding, a ligament never hastily torn, and the meat is always cut with clean, fresh lines, as if it has fallen straight off the bone without ever being sliced. Ding has used his blade for nineteen years, yet it is as fresh as if it came straight from the grindstone. He has perfected his practice. What interpretations such as Hansen's ask is, "Is the distinction Ding has made to cut in at the shoulder and work down the spine, true?" My response is no, Zhuangzi has not defined *daos* in truth terms. To cut in at the shoulder and work down the spine is not true and is not false, it is merely a distinction that is chosen opposed to not chosen. Once chosen, however, the distinction can be determined correct or incorrect based on its "contingency," its ability to harmonize and find success with the prevailing circumstances at hand. Truth and falsity are not the issue when it comes to practice. It is for this reason that interpretations such as Hansen's that nudge Zhuangzi into the parameters of a familiar conceptual model like perspectivism miss the spirit and intent of his writing.

My claim is that Zhuangzi is not concerned with truth and thus cannot be approached with the same standards and expectations as a thinker like Nietzsche can be. A powerful criticism of my interpretation, however, is this, that Zhuangzi's lack of concern for truth does not necessarily mean that he is not developing self-referential truth claims. If we take a standard approach to the text, looking for an account of truth, we see Zhuangzi make the claim that *deeming* prevents *ming*. The problem here is that Zhuangzi is seemingly making a truth claim, namely that it is true that *deeming* prevents *ming*. If this is a claim to an ultimate truth, which it seems to be, then Zhuangzi is doing precisely what he is arguing against, *deeming*, and his argument collapses. Zhuangzi is not entitled to say that *deeming* prevents *ming* because this is the sort of move a Mohist would make, and a move Zhuangzi ridicules.

A response here is that Zhuangzi's position can remain a consistent and coherent one despite the apparent self-referential paradox. As I have argued, Zhuangzi is not concerned with truth claims, doesn't see himself making them, and would not see a paradox in his thinking to be detrimental. As a result, the criticism that Zhuangzi has presented an incoherent argument against *deeming* must be largely seen as an uncharitable one, or at least a misinterpretation of his project. It is inappropriate to take Zhuangzi's position to be of the argumentative variety found in the standard Anglo-European tradition, if for no other reason than because presenting a coherent argument is clearly not what Zhuangzi is attempting to do. Strict coherence is not Zhuangzi's goal, so an argument that shows Zhuangzi to have failed to be completely coherent does not show his work to be unsuccessful on his own account. Zhuangzi is presenting parables, lessons in the form of meditations, and stories that help to restructure how individuals think about and interact with the world. Callahan brings up the point that we should approach

Zhuangzi not as a strictly philosophical text, interested in providing concrete answers and truths, but in part as a literary work, “content to provide suggestions and examples” (177). In the same way that a short story or parable would be accepted as legitimate even while being paradoxical or completely nonsensical, Zhuangzi’s approach to philosophy must be seen as legitimate even though his concerns are not the coherence and rational acceptability of the sort that Nietzsche has looked for. Just as a perfectly ridiculous fable, parable or even a fairy tale can present a moral lesson to restructure the way a child thinks about generosity and interhuman relations, the *Zhuangzi* creates a network of images that restructure our sensibility about how to least abrasively get along in the world. Creating a work that aids in cultivating this sort of mindfulness is Zhuangzi’s task, to reorganize our thinking by presenting examples of how thinking can go wrong and what sort of outlook one must have to prevent narrow-mindedness.

## ii. Concluding Thoughts

Zhuangzi must not be approached as if his intent and purpose were somehow similar to a standard Western philosopher. This would leave his project as undefensible and incoherent as interpretations like Hansen’s have done. Zhuangzi is not a perspectivist of the Nietzschean sort, and if the strongest reading of the text is to be given we must not assume Zhuangzi to be offering an account of how *daos* facilitate a truthful understanding of the world. Zhuangzi’s project is much different, he is concerned with practice and finding success and harmony in action. For Zhuangzi, harmoniously fitting one’s distinctions into the context of worldly situations does not require a sound argument or being in a state of truth, but instead requires the clarity of mind to think about things successfully, to let thought proceed in novel contexts and to respond endlessly to the circumstances of the world as the world brings those circumstances to mind.

### Works Cited:

Callahan, William A. *Cook Ding: Life on the Whetstone. Wandering at Ease in the Zhuangzi*. Ames, Roger T. (editor). State University of New York Press: 1998.

Clark, Maudmarie. *Nietzsche: On Truth and Philosophy*. Cambridge University Press: 1990.

Fox, Alan. *Reflex and Reflectivity: Wuwei in the Zhuangzi*. Asian Philosophy, Vol. 6, No. 1, 1996.

Graham, A.C. (translator). *Chuang-Tzu: The Inner Chapters*. Hackett Publishing Company: 1989.

Graham, A.C. *Disputers of the Tao*. Open Court: 1989.

Hansen, Chad. *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought*. Oxford University Press: 1992.

Hansen, Chad. "A Tao of Tao in Chuang-tzu". Mair, Victor H. (editor). *Experimental Essays on Chuang-tzu*. University of Hawaii Press: 1983.

Ivanhoe, Philip, J. and Paul Kjellberg (editors). *Essays on Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics in the Zhuangzi*. State University of New York Press: 1996.

Mair, Victor A. (translator). *Wandering on the Way: Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu*. University of Hawaii Press: 1994.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil* (Kaufmann trans.). Vintage Books New York: 1989.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy* (Kaufmann trans.). Wintage Books New York: 1967.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Gay Science* (Kaufmann trans.). Vintage Books New York: 1974.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morals* (Kaufmann trans.). Vintage Books New York: 1989.

Watson, Burton (translator). *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings*. Columbia University Press: 1996.

## Works Consulted

Chinn, Ewing Y. *Zhuangzi and Rerlativistic Scepticism*. Asian Philosophy, Nov. 1997.

Lakoff, George. *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*. The University of Chicago Press: 1987.

MacIntyre, Alasdair. *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry*. University of Notre Dame Press: 1990.

Soles, Deborah E. *Fish Traps and Rabbit Snares: Zhuangzi on Judgment, Truth, and Knowledge*. Asian Philosophy, Nov. 1998.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations* (Anscombe trans.) The Macmillan Company, New York: 1957.

---

[1] While I intend to offer a synopsis of the developmental process of Nietzsche's account of truth, I do not necessarily intend to argue for this account's validity since my project is not to defend Nietzsche but to discuss the problematic nature by which Zhuangzi is commonly interpreted through Nietzschean concepts and categories.

[2] The concept "things as they are in themselves" as used here is problematic for Hansen's interpretation of Zhuangzi because it employs the illegitimate usage of Nietzschean concepts to articulate a non-Nietzschean position. But this problem does not detract from Hansen's clear articulation of how a dao should be understood at this point.