

8 Goblet Words and Moral Knack

Non-Cognitivist Moral Realism in the *Zhuangzi*?

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As Whitehead once intimated, philosophers tend to speak in half-truths, though very few do us the courtesy of admitting it (cf. Whitehead 1956, 14). Fortunately for us, the Daoist thinker known as Zhuangzi is one of those few. As I hope to show, his philosophy could be a boon to Western ethics because it challenges two long-standing metaethical assumptions. The first is the supposed link between moral realism and moral cognitivism, i.e., the idea that “the cognitivism/non-cognitivism and realism/anti-realism distinctions in metaethics are really just two different ways of marking one and the same distinction” (Adams 2014, 39). But what if someone deems moral notions unevaluable in terms of propositional, justified true belief *and yet* sees them as nonetheless beholden to reality? What if there are mind-independent norms that can be felt/intuited? Is such a non-cognitivist moral realism plausible?¹ I will suggest it is, if one is willing to adopt a non-propositional account of moral beliefs like the one found in the text associated with Zhuangzi and his followers.²

The alleged link between cognitivism and realism seems to underwrite a second assumption about moral skill – i.e., if there could be something like true moral expertise, it must require “*articulacy in explanation*, the ability to convey why what is done is done” (Annas 2011, 20).³ Since Socrates, virtue has often been thought to imply the ability to build justified true beliefs about the rational principles that motivate action. And so, articulate ‘skill’ gets contrasted with dumb ‘knack’; if one has the (*technē*) of an expert, one must be able to give an account (*logos*) of what one is doing. And so, as the story goes, no account, no expertise.⁴ But what if one believes the *absence* of rational thought is a defining characteristic of expertise?⁵ Once more, the *Zhuangzi* may be of service, as it presents inarticulate ‘knack’ as precisely what qualifies someone as a sage who has discovered ‘the secret of nourishing life’. It is *full* of stories about various sorts of skillful artisans, which, following Joseph Needham (1954), have come to be known as the ‘knack passages’ and suggest “that wonderful skills cannot be taught or transferred, but are attainable by minute concentration on the Tao running through natural objects of all kinds” (Ibid., 121). I will suggest the constellation of virtues these passages illustrate

offers us a unique theory of moral expertise built on a notion of emergent normativity in mutual co-adjustment with an ever-changing world.

The *Zhuangzi*, however, is notoriously difficult to pin down, and its obscurity has been well documented in recent literature. I will build on key passages from the text as well as recent scholarship focusing on Daoist praxeology in order to show that the *Zhuangzi* offers something of a moral philosophy built on the seemingly paradoxical notions of *ineffable moral truths* and *non-transferable moral knack*.⁶ While such entities may not be accessible as objects of knowledge, the text nonetheless demonstrates that they *are* practicable and that much can be communicated *about* them. What is interesting about the *Zhuangzi*, in this regard, is how it undermines the assumed distinction between an agent and the world by placing the explanatory grounds for action as much in the world as in the agent. So if the *Zhuangzi's* presentation of knack is coherently prescriptive, perhaps something like moral expertise, understood in terms of a “multi-stranded, domain limited” field of experts, is plausible (Jones and Schroeter 2012).

The interpretation I am attempting here is somewhat unorthodox, as most Anglophone scholars tend to view Zhuangzi as some sort of mystic, relativist, or skeptic. Suffice it to say, I do not *entirely* disagree with such readings, which is to say I do not *exactly* agree. First, if Zhuangzi really *was* a mystic, he appears to have been of the holistic variety that sees an immanent continuity in the totality of nature. But this is a position that looks compatible with realism. Second, if the text promotes a brand of relativism, it is *not likely* the kind that would make Hitler and Gandhi moral equivalents (cf. Allinson 2015) but instead a pluralistic acknowledgment of the efficacy of different perspectives (cf. Wong 2006). Such perspectivalism leads to the insight that some values might be multiply realizable, not “that all values exist on the same axiological plane” (Allinson 2015, 272). Third, if something like skepticism can be found in his writings, his doubts appear aimed mainly at the philosophical methods of his contemporaries. Simply put, there is reason to believe Zhuangzi was neither a transcendental mystic, a jejune subjectivist, nor a *moral* skeptic.

For three decades now, Western commentaries on the *Zhuangzi* have largely been focused on epistemological issues.⁷ The central interpretive question seems to boil down to accounting for the ineffability that it advances. Yet the traditional mystical, subjectivist, and skeptical readings do not square with what the text has to say about goblet words or the other *sānyán*. This may be due to the fact that the *sānyán* are never explicitly referenced in the inner chapters of the text and almost undoubtedly were named much later by authors from either the ‘School of Zhuang’ or ‘Huang-Lao’ sects.⁸ Nonetheless, there are numerous examples of the *sānyán* rhetorical styles in the inner chapters and even the passages of the *Zhuangzi* that have figured *most* prominently in recent scholarship offer insight into a goblet word strategy.

Before turning my attention to the goblet words themselves, some preliminary remarks may be necessary about the notion of truth as it appears in the *Zhuangzi*. One of the more salient features of a Zhuangzian non-cognitive moral realism would have to be a conception of truth largely unfamiliar to the Western philosophical tradition insofar as it is non-propositional. In fact, many comparativists agree that pre-Qin thought (before 221 BCE) either operated without the true/false distinction or at least held it to be philosophically unimportant (e.g., Munro 1969; Hansen 1985). But this should not imply that works like the *Zhuangzi* operate completely detached from the real world, only that the way such texts present their doctrines looks very different from that with which we are accustomed. In the case of the *Zhuangzi*, I should like to introduce the phrase ‘tipping toward truth’ to characterize its distinctively metaphorical moral discourse.

One character frequently appearing in English translations as ‘truth’ is 真 (*zhēn*). It has come to mean ‘real’ or ‘authentic’ in modern usage, but its usage in the *Zhuangzi* is more multifarious. Interestingly, the character appears only three times in the *Laozi* and not at all in Confucius or Mencius, which may indicate it was a Daoist neologism employed as a foil to Confucian concepts (Moeller and D’Ambrosio 2017).⁹ For instance, in the 31st chapter there is a story about a fisherman who questions Confucius and his students about their philosophy. After hearing Confucius’s prized benevolence and ritual propriety over all else, the fisherman laughs and says,

仁則仁矣，恐不免其身，苦心勞形以危其真。嗚乎，遠哉其分於道也。

Benevolence schmenevolence! I fear he won’t get out of this alive. All this effort and trouble just to endanger truth [*zhēn*]. Phew! He’s far away and totally cut off from the *Dào*!

[*Zhuangzi*, Ch. 31]¹⁰

After a lengthy discussion, an exasperated Confucius finally asks what the old man means by ‘truth’. In his response, the fisherman explains that *zhēn* consists in sincerity, but it is a sincerity toward one’s own inner nature, out of which filiality, kindness, appropriateness, loyalty, and honesty all grow. The fisherman goes on to explain that,

禮者，世俗之所為也；真者，所以受於天也，自然不可易也。故聖人法天貴真，不拘於俗。

Those rites [that Confucius prized] were made up by the vulgar; truth is what is received from nature [*tīan*]. Its spontaneity can’t be changed. That’s why the sage prizes the patterns of nature [*fǎ tīan*] as truth, and isn’t cramped by convention.

[*Zhuangzi*, Ch. 31]

The concept of *zhēn* looks like a direct challenge to the Confucian ethical system. The author(s) of the *Zhuangzi* viewed the Confucian emphasis on

ritual propriety and benevolence as officious and too easily corruptible. The ‘truth’ they sought to recover was not a propositional truth of sentences but rather “the natural state of a thing and what it is natural to do, or, simply, what is natural” (Chong 2011, 324). This is best illustrated in the way *zhēn* is contrasted with the artifice of *wéi* (‘human effort/action’) in the *Qíwùlùn* chapter.¹¹ As those familiar with Daoist thought will recognize, one of that chapter’s central ideas is the importance of *wúwéi*, often translated as nonaction. Thus the kind of truth toward which Zhuangzi’s goblet words tip is meant to be something fluid, dynamic, and ever-changing – something realized only through an effortless, spontaneous *praxis*.

1. Goblet Words: Tipping Toward Truth

Translators have long noted the unique challenges of rendering Zhuangzi’s deeply poetic and metaphorical style into English.¹² He employed the language of his day in ways that had never been seen and was thus able to create “semantic paradoxes, infinite regresses, irony, wordplay, and fables” that made it possible to “hint at certain things . . . without being forced (logically) to assert or to adhere to anything” (Chong 2006, 382). This is noteworthy because if one is to locate in his view anything like a cognitively inaccessible moral ‘real’, i.e., a mind-independent norm, it obviously *could not be stated directly*.

One major theme in the text is the limitation of language in capturing reality. Several of its chapters are devoted to the subject – the most prominent among them being the second of the ‘inner’ chapters, the *Qíwùlùn*. But it is in the 27th chapter, entitled *Yùyán* (often translated simply as ‘Metaphorical Words’), that the text offers an explicit account of the language it employs. It refers to its language as *yùyán* [寓言], *zhòngyán* [重言], and *zhīyán* [卮言], which might be translated, respectively, as ‘attributed words’, ‘endorsed words’, and ‘goblet words’.¹³ The *yùyán* are ‘attributed’ in two senses. On one hand, they mock the Confucian rhetorical strategy of citing well-known texts to support an idea. On the other hand, they reference the way a metaphor can often point to the *attributes* of something else not obviously related. Similarly, the *zhòngyán* can be seen as a parody of the flowery language of the elders that the Confucians often endorsed in their rhetoric. The *Zhuangzi* frequently puts its *zhòngyán* in the mouths of the bizarre and/or repugnant to great effect. In fact, both the *yùyán* and the *zhòngyán* are sometimes treated as subspecies of the *zhīyán*, or goblet words, since the text makes a point to say how often each appears:

寓言十九，重言十七，卮言日出，和以天倪。寓言十九，藉外論之 . . .
重言十七，所以已言也，是為耆艾 . . . 卮言日出，和以天倪，因以
曼衍，所以窮年。

Yùyán are nine of ten. *Zhòngyán* are seven of ten. *Zhīyán* circulate daily and harmonize nature’s cycles. The *yùyán* that comprise nine of ten pay

tribute to the sayings of others. . . . The *zhòngyán* that comprise seven of ten are intended to end disputes, for these are the words of revered elders. . . . The *zhīyán* that circulate daily and harmonize nature's cycles effuse through the region and thoroughly extend the years.

[*Zhuangzi*, Ch. 27]

This tripartite discourse, called the *sānyán* [三言] by later thinkers, developed as a comedic cure for an era that had become “blinkered by the darkness of [Confucian and Mohist] ‘chop logic’” (Lee 2000, 530). The *Zhuangzi*'s advice in such a time was to follow the *dào*, which

all things unerringly follow . . . except that inveterate analyser and wordmonger man, who misses it by sticking rigidly to the verbally formulated codes which [those] other philosophical schools present as ‘the Way of the sage’ or the ‘Way of the former kings’.

(Graham 2001, 7)

In this vein, the *Zhuangzi*'s *sānyán* are at once satirical *and* instructive.

The most detailed description of the goblet words can be found in the final chapter of the text. It reads:

以天下為沈濁，不可與莊語；以卮言為曼衍 . . . 其書雖瑰瑋而連犴無傷也，其辭雖參差而諛詭可觀。彼其充實不可以已。

Since the whole world acts as if mired in a bog, Zhuangzi could not speak directly. So he used ‘goblet words’ [*zhīyán*] to effuse meaning . . . Though his writings seem fantastically gaudy and howlishly entertaining, no harm comes from them. Even though they seem mere folly they are worth observing, for through them he *brings forth ever-cascading truths*.

[*Zhuangzi*, Ch. 33]¹⁴

The *zhīyán* name is a reference to an ancient irrigation vessel known as the *qīqí* [欹器], which tipped and spilled its contents once it reached capacity (Fried 2007). Like that ancient practical joke known as the Pythagorean cup, Zhuangzi's goblet words are drained of their content once their usefulness has been exceeded. As the text states elsewhere:

荃者所以在魚，得魚而忘荃；蹄者所以在兔，得兔而忘蹄；言者所以在意，得意而忘言。吾安得忘言之人而與之言哉？

Traps are for fish; once the fish is caught, the trap can be forgotten. Snares are for rabbits; once the rabbit is caught, the snare can be forgotten. Words are for meaning; once the meaning is caught, the words can be forgotten. Where can I find someone who has forgotten words so I may have a word with him?

[*Zhuangzi*, Ch. 26]

Thus, the *Zhuangzi* admits to employing words as tools, bound to be dismissed as soon as one has captured their meaning. Those (like the Confucians and Mohists) who become enamored with words are rather like a traveler who cannot disembark from the ship. What the *Zhuangzi* seems to suggest is that it is better to allow for semantic properties to shift so one can ‘forget’ the vessel and focus on the journey. Simply put, his goblet words are intentionally open-ended.¹⁵

So, what should be made of the text’s numerous metaphors? What does it mean to say they ‘tip toward truth’? Interpreters have a few options available to them. Some have chosen to see Zhuangzi’s style as the musings of a metaphysical mystic committed to a quasi-religious ineffability (Chan 1963; Watson 1968; Creel 1970; Roth 2000). Others tend to view his writings through the lens of classical Western skepticism and relativism (Wong 1984; Hansen 1992; Eno 1996; Kjellberg and Ivanhoe 1996). However, most mystical interpretations invoke a notion of ineffability wherein some anointed class of people gain access to esoteric, transcendent truths through some *special aptitude*. On the other hand, skeptical readings usually depend, rather conversely, on a universal *ineptitude* to do so (Kukla 2004). Both readings are problematic. As shall become clearer later, it is more likely that Zhuangzi saw sagehood and the moral lessons it provided as multiply realizable and quite commonplace, i.e., as ‘nothing special’.

Recent literature has treated Zhuangzi’s use of metaphor along different lines – focusing more on existential and normative concerns. One camp tends to see Zhuangzi’s main goal as one of intellectual liberation. For instance, Robert Allinson has called it “transcendent freedom” – in a more Kantian than religious sense – and Kim-chong Chong refers to it as freedom from epistemic “boundedness” (Chong 2006; Allinson 2015). Both reject the Davidsonian take on metaphor and agree there is at least some cognitive content that is lost in paraphrase, though each is decidedly murky on the details.¹⁶

Alternatively, as Youru Wang has noted, “the philosophical notion of metaphor implied in the *Zhuangzi* is quite different from the philosophical conception of metaphor in Western metaphysics . . . there is no fixed meaning behind a metaphor”, no “notion of the proper meaning of words and [no] separation between the sensible and the intelligible” (Y. Wang 2004, 203). On his view, the author(s) of the text employed a strategy of “indirect communication”, which “considers meaning to be open-ended and indeterminate” (Ibid., 195). In this way, the *Zhuangzi*’s use of metaphor seems to dissolve the distinction between cognitive and non-cognitive content on which most Western commentaries have been built. And this links up nicely with Edward’s Slingerland’s research (2014) on the Daoist notion of spontaneity, or *zìrán*, which he connects to neuro-scientific theories like Damasio’s somatic marker hypothesis:

There is now general agreement that human thought is characterized by two distinct systems that have very different characteristics. The first and most important of these (tacit, hot cognition, or “System 1”) is fast, automatic, effortless, and mostly unconscious, corresponding roughly to what we think of as “the body” and what Zhuangzi calls the “Heavenly mechanism.” The second (explicit, cold cognition, or “System 2”) is slow, deliberate, effortful, and conscious, corresponding roughly to our “mind” – that is, our conscious, verbal selves.

(Ibid., 27)

Perhaps access to what Zhuangzi deemed “true” requires calming the reflective mind in order to employ the reflexivity of the body. In this way, Zhuangzi’s goblet words, much like a Zen koan, ‘tip toward truth’ while remaining empty of any set content. Their meaning must be *felt* and whatever one finds there swells from what one has already brought with them. But, what does it mean to call such truths ‘ever-cascading’ [*chōng shí* 充實]²¹⁷ In order to flesh that out, something must be said about the comingling of cosmology and morality in pre-Qin China.

2. Ever-Cascading Truths and Transformation

Many scholars have made reference to the continuity between humanity and nature found within the pages of the Chinese classics. Tu Wei-ming summed it up best when he described the Chinese vision as “all modalities of being organically connected . . . integral parts of a continuous process of cosmic transformation” (Tu 1989, 75). As he put it, to understand this point is to realize that “we are consanguineous with nature. But as humans, we must make ourselves worthy of such a relationship”, through our own transformations and attunement with the processes of nature (Ibid., 78).

Attunement with nature is another major theme in the *Zhuangzi*. While it may be tempting to see this as a mystical and spiritually charged moral notion, there is good reason to see it more naturalistically. J.H. Lee calls it a “poetics of normativity”, which emphasizes the use of metaphorical language in the text and “rests on the Daoist understanding of the Way (*Dào*) as the ultimate source of normativity” (Lee 2014, 43). On this view, the language of the *Zhuangzi* is implicitly normative precisely because it *is* poetic, as in the original sense of the Greek *poiesis* – or ‘bringing forth’ – which produces in the sage both a heightened awareness (*míng*) and responsiveness (*yíng*) described as mirroring “the workings of the Way itself in Nature” (Ibid.). This is an aspect of Zhuangzi’s thought that often strikes Western philosophers as very strange. But Zhuangzi inherited an alternate view of human action that did not rely on a Platonic psychology, wherein the mind is a set of representations, truth is measured according to correspondence, and knowledge acquisition is considered a

passive affair. In this ‘intellectualist’ psychology, there is a sharp contrast between inner and outer (agent and world) and the causal arrows of experience tend to be drawn from the external world of ‘objects’ toward an internal, knowing ‘subject’. Intelligent action, then, is thought to originate in the mind and to be oriented toward the external world. By contrast, Zhuangzi’s ‘poetics of normativity’ imply that thoughtful human actions can shape nature just as much as nature shapes human action and thought. In other words, for someone like Zhuangzi, what we might call ‘thinking’ is not physically delimited by our brains or even our bodies, but instead is found in a dynamic interplay and continuity between humanity and nature, or, as Lee puts it elsewhere (borrowing the words of Henry James) it is to be “finely aware and richly responsible” (Lee 2000, 2014).

These lines of thought help explain why the *Qíwùlùn* chapter – which features the lengthiest discussion of language in the text – might begin with a dialogue regarding attunement between the pipes of humanity, earth, and nature [人; 地; 天] and end with an allegory in which Zhuangzi dreamt he was a butterfly and learned a lesson about the ever-changing cosmos. The concluding lines of this chapter read: “Between Zhou and a butterfly there is certainly some difference. This is called transformation of things [*wùhuà*]”. This is important as it suggests the point of the butterfly story is not to advance some skeptical thesis – à la the Cartesian dream argument – but rather to illustrate the dynamic holism of the *dào*. From a broader perspective, the fleeting distinctions between small things like people and butterflies should indicate *fluidity* in the transformation of nature.

For Zhuangzi, human beings, like the other myriad things of the world, are points of focus (*dé* 德), which are inextricably linked to the *field* of nature. This field is both functionally constitutive of its foci and the sum total of such functioning. *Dào*, then, might be understood as a sort of tapestry, rewoven constantly, *of which* the pattern is not some pre-ordained *telos* but rather an emergent property, and *in which* the various threads are *relations* among the pattern’s constituents.¹⁸ This is the *Zhuangzi*’s chosen metaphor for describing those elders who the Confucians and Mohists revered and that he lampooned in his *zhòngyán* style of goblet words:

Grown old! And never went through the *warp* and *woof* from root to tip as befitting an “elder,” has neither progressed nor is an advanced elder nor a person of *dao*, and thus is a stale obsolete oldster.

(tr. Morrow 2016, 184, emphasis added)

The prescription, then, is one of self-growth, or transformation, not some *ab extra* enlightenment. Both may be a kind of transcendence but only the former stays connected to the transformation of the natural realm.

The butterfly passage calls for a more fluid kind of discourse than the Confucian and Mohist disputers of the day could offer – one that might be more suitable in conveying truths that constantly spill over and cannot be stated directly. In this vein, one might view the *Qíwùlùn* chapter itself as an extended account of ‘goblet word’ strategy. Angus Graham perhaps anticipated such a connection between the *Qíwùlùn*, goblet words, and the knack passages:

For [Zhuangzi] the fundamental error [of his contemporaries] is to suppose that life presents itself with issues which must be formulated in words so that we can envision alternatives and find reasons for preferring one to the other . . . People who really know what they are doing, such as a cook carving an ox, or a carpenter or an angler, do not precede each movement by weighing the argument . . . “the tongue cannot put it into words”.

(Graham 2001, 6)

3. Conveying What Cannot Be Said and Thick Moral Concepts

Is there a concept in Western philosophy that is open-ended and dynamic enough to apply to Zhuangzi’s goblet words? Perhaps moral thickness can answer the brief. Some proponents of morally thick concepts see in them a propositionally ineffable content that tends to run through one’s fingers and cannot quite be grasped. Taking aesthetic metaphors as his leaping off point, Nick Zangwill has argued that the fact-value-bridging thick concepts that many theorists have in mind are more easily found in colloquial metaphorical language – i.e., in “evaluative animal descriptions, swearwords, and gestures” (Zangwill 2013, 201). For example, calling someone a ‘chicken’, ‘rat’, or ‘lion’ in English has clear moral content, and although other languages have idioms involving these creatures, the metaphorical meanings there are radically different. More importantly, while a foreign speaker may learn the proper usage of a particular culture’s animal descriptions or swearwords, the attending praise or disgust is often felt only faintly. Neuroscientists call this phenomenon *reduced emotional resonance* of language and it is one reason why most people feel differently about using profanity in their second language – either they find it far easier or avoid it altogether because they cannot judge the intensity of what they are saying (Ivaz et al. 2018). The content such metaphors and idioms express resists propositional unpacking and paraphrasing such content likewise strips it of its evaluative import. So, contra Davidson, it appears *certain* metaphors are not empty, that they convey something that cannot otherwise be said.¹⁹ In other words, there appears to be some propositionally ineffable, evaluative content in such metaphors and, contra Allinson and Chong, this

content looks to be *non-cognitive*, or in the very least accessible only through the faculties of ‘hot-cognition’.

The *Zhuangzi* is chock full of animal descriptions and shocking profanity that could serve as stellar examples of Zangwill’s point about morally thick metaphors. Some examples: the text begins with a story about an incredibly large fish that transforms into a phoenix-like bird, moving from abundant yin to the utmost yang and back again. Zhuangzi himself is referred to as a turtle happily dragging its tail in the mud. A friend and philosophical rival, Huizi, is likened to a greedy owl protecting a meal of rotten rat from an uninterested phoenix. A criminal who is agitated by Confucius’s yammering is called an untamable tiger. And, in the 22nd chapter, when a Mohist scholar asks Zhuangzi where *dào* exists, he replies, “There is nowhere that it doesn’t exist . . . It is in the tiles and shards . . . It is in the *piss and shit*” [*zài shǐ nì* 在屎溺] (tr. Watson 1968, 241). Another example that has been largely glossed over by translation is that of Butcher Ding in the third chapter. His occupation is filthy and disgusting, yet he performs his task with such elegance and grace that the lord of the estate claims to have learned from him *yāng shēng zhǔ* – i.e., “the secret of nourishing life”.²⁰ In this brief parable, Zhuangzi employs the *zhòngyán* form of his goblet words and puts the wisdom in the mouth and the hands of someone his Confucian and Mohist counterparts would have deemed profane.

In Kuang-ming Wu’s pioneering essay on Zhuangzi’s goblet words we already find a description that anticipates moral thickness:

We use a word adverbially when we ourselves move, shifting our perspective into the mode of that word. A noun describes a thing. *An adverb describes, or even prescribes, a way of life . . . Chuang Tzu’s goblet words are words requesting us to change, to be judged and transformed*, so that we become as nothing, absolutely nimble and – flexing with things.

(Wu 1988, 2; emphasis added)

This emphasis on change, transformation, and personal growth in the goblet words is echoed in Daniel Fried’s analysis of the temporality imbedded in the way the *Zhuangzi* describes them:

The *zhiyan* is thus being figured as a mode which is ineffably ancient, yet fit for commonplace, everyday usage. It is something which is unstable, certainly, which owes its essence to a constant tipping and consequent overflow – but which is unstable in cycles, and which has a rhythmic, eternal quality tied to the cycles of heaven and earth. Day in and day out, from the heavenly beginnings to the end of years, *properly unstable speech carries the power to irrigate the seeds of the ten thousand things*, to cooperate with nature in the metamorphoses of forms.

(Fried 2007, 168; emphasis added)

The thick moral dimension of Zhuangzi's words, then, should not be seen as directly answering 'What is the right way to act?' but rather as indirectly guiding us toward the best sort of life. Where the former seeks a static, universal rule, the latter seeks dynamic transformation.

4. Moral Knack: Listening Without Words

If Zhuangzi's moral 'reals' cannot be stated directly, the question remains how they could ever guide ethical action. The answer to that question might be the second most distinctive feature of a Zhuangzian non-cognitive moral realism. The foregoing points regarding ineffability, attunement, and transformation are important for those who discern a kind of ethical prescription from the text's various moral exemplars – particularly those skilled artisans who possess uncanny knack in their trade equated with 'the secret of nourishing life'. This suggests the author(s) viewed such values as both real *and* attainable, albeit *neither* through formal discourse *nor* lengthy tutelage. These 'knack passages', then, may be seen to invoke a unique notion of moral *expertise*. More importantly, when asked about the Way of their technique, these knacky artisans can offer demonstration, and some can even talk *about* what they do, but they are quite at a loss for words when it comes to giving an account of the knack itself.

As we have seen, the *Zhuangzi's* advice for self-cultivation was set up in opposition to the rigid practices of the Confucians and Mohists. As such, the attunement the Daoist sage sought is considered formless and ever-changing. In this vein, Zhuangzi's goblet words appear intimately connected to the Daoist *wu-forms*²¹ (or 'non' forms), particularly the practice of *wú míng* [無名], or 'referring without affixing a name'. Again, returning to the *Qíwùlún*, we find this discussion initiated not by advice about *speaking* properly but rather by *listening* to the pipes of heaven, earth, and humanity. Zhuangzi saw transformation as "the coordinating of the patterns (*li* 理) of continuity that emerge and persist in the natural, social, and cultural flux in which we are radically and resolutely embedded" (Ames 1998, 226). In other words, human beings can contribute to the formation of the contexts they inhabit through interaction with other contributing factors. If there is anything like our conception of knowledge to be distilled from this, it will not be straightforwardly cognitive because it involves non-propositional and situational elements due to its concomitance with emerging patterns in the world. According to Zhuangzi, this kind of transformation can either accord with *dào* or work against it; it can be either harmonious or cacophonous (cf. Cook 2003). The individual who could achieve a harmonious transformation is Zhuangzi's 'person of the dao', and would be called the *zhēnrén* [真人], or 'genuine person'.

Interestingly, the characters presented in the knack passages who possess a skill supremely attuned to the *dào* pay deep attention to the body,

not merely to cognition. With regard to the expertise of ‘the craftsman’, Richard Sennett has stated, “all skills, even the most abstract, begin as bodily practices”, which find *both* thinking *and* feeling in the process of *making* (Sennett 2008, 10).²² Sennett makes reference to the ancient art of the Chinese cleaver chef, who

worked out a different way to use the combined forearm, hand, and cleaver in order to cut food finely. . . . The idea of minimum force as the base line of self-control is expressed in the apocryphal if perfectly logical advice given in ancient Chinese cooking: the good cook must learn first to cleave a grain of boiled rice.

(Sennett 2008, 167)

Sennett connects this sort of embodiment to the expert’s virtue of situational awareness through the Butcher Ding story.

“Cleave a grain of rice” thus stands for two bodily rules intimately connected: establish a base line of minimum necessary power, and learn to let go . . . The Chuang-tzu advises, do not behave like a warrior in the kitchen, from which Taoism derives a broader ethics for *Homo faber*: [viz.] *an aggressive, adversarial address to natural materials is counterproductive.*

(Sennett 2008, 168; emphasis added)

So, the knack craftsmen all appear to be chasing the same thing, i.e., a way to attune with “a universe of emergent *situations* rather than a universe of entities located in time, space, and vector motion”, or, in a word, *dào* (Eno 1996, 139; emphasis added). As Butcher Ding puts it, this goes a ‘step beyond skill’ [進乎技矣] or merely using one’s hands effectively. The word Butcher Ding uses is *jì* [技], which can also be translated as ‘craft, talent, or ability’, and has a meaning similar to *shù* [術], which can be translated as ‘artistic avenue/strategy’. In the 19th (*Dáshēng*) chapter, Carver Qing claims not to have any ‘artistic avenue’ (*shù*) beyond focusing only on the task at hand. Each craftsman *follows dào* but does not possess it in such a way that can be put into words.²³ The kinds of practices that attune to *dào* are extremely diverse, yet each shares a stake in some larger notion of efficacy.

If not yet rising to the level of a full-fledged ethics, the embodied responsiveness [*yīng*] and situational awareness [*míng*] of these knacky artisans could all be said to offer, in the very least, something of a philosophy of action. But this is one reason the concept *zìrán* [自然] is so central to getting a handle on the text’s normative themes. As Livia Kohn has put it, “Skillful spontaneity, then, means the integration of two abilities: first, to correctly read – intuit and interpret – the dynamics of any given situation; and second, to act in precise response to it” (Kohn 2014, 218).

Reaching such heightened acuity requires a kind of intellectual modesty that allows for adaptability to changing circumstances and therefore fosters growth. In this way, the text holds up an ethics of *απορία*, in which “one acts on the basis of what one *does not know*, what one cannot control, what one cannot contain, rather than fixed rules, determinate principles, or clear imperatives” (Lusthaus 2003, 164). This sort of intellectual modesty links up with psychological studies on expertise and metacognition. Those who possess expertise in a given field are more likely to have a knack for metacognition – the ability to recognize one’s own limitations through careful deliberation: “Good singers know when they’ve hit a sour note; good directors know when a scene in a play isn’t working” (Nichols 2017, 45). Or, as Butcher Ding puts it, “whenever I come to something intricate, I see where it will be hard to handle and cautiously prepare myself, my gaze settles on it, action slows down for it, you scarcely see the flick of the chopper” (Graham 2001, 64). Such practical wisdom is “based on softness, emptiness, nonaction, and spontaneity” and falls under a general heading: *dàoshù*, or “*dào* strategy” (R. Wang 2012, 127). Thus, the path to moral excellence espoused in the *Zhuangzi* appears to be a kind of “situational ethics” that “means matching attitudes and actions to situations” (Kohn 2014, 237).

Experts in various fields also often possess a willingness to bend or break rules in service of a higher value. For example, in his 2010 work on *Practical Wisdom*, Barry Schwartz lauded the efforts of wise public schoolteachers to act as “creative saboteurs” in the face of “lockstep curricula” (Schwartz and Sharpe 2010, 171). Standardization was robbing them of the freedom to pursue this higher value and by choosing to not simply go along with the rules these ‘canny outlaws’, as Schwartz calls them, modeled for their students the virtue of ethical subversion. Like expert jazz musicians, canny outlaws recognize when to ignore the rules. Similarly, throughout the *Zhuangzi* there are stories of physically deformed figures, particularly disfigured people and crooked trees, who bring forth the virtues of the sage precisely because they rest at ease within their own unconventional natures – e.g., Huizi’s tree in Chapter One, the Holy-tree and Sage-tree in Chapter Four, the ‘madman’ Jie Yu and the numerous instances of criminal amputees in Chapter Five. According to the *Zhuangzi* it is better to have a crippled form than to have one’s vitality crippled by convention.

Unfortunately, the models of expertise with which philosophers are most familiar tend to run along two problematic lines: intellectualist and phronetic (Jones and Schroeter 2012). The former places emphasis on professional ethical training while the latter is typically presented within a framework of Aristotelean virtue ethics, in which practical wisdom (*phronesis*) is paramount. But, recent research indicates that professional training in moral philosophy does not reliably make one less prone to errors or inconsistencies (Schwitzgebel and Cushman 2012). In

fact, in certain scenarios, professional training in ethical theory made philosophers *more* susceptible to post-hoc rationalizations of their choices. As the research team concluded: “even professional philosophers’ judgments about familiar types of cases in their own field can be strongly and covertly influenced by psychological factors . . . and [these] can in turn strongly influence the general principles which these philosophers endorse” (Schwitzgebel and Cushman 2012, 150). So it would seem the intellectualist model of moral expertise has some significant shortcomings. Likewise, traditional phronetic models of moral expertise typically require some teleological account of the ‘unity of the virtues’ – the Aristotelian belief that one cannot have some virtues and not others – a longstanding theoretical difficulty among contemporary virtue theorists (Jones and Schroeter 2012, 218).

Zhuangzi’s notion of moral knack seems to avoid these pitfalls because it does not “share the assumption that expertise is primarily about the capacity reliably to deliver action-guiding verdicts that will settle [once and for all] what we are to do in particular circumstances” (Jones and Schroeter 2012, 219). Instead it takes moral judgment as situational, tentative, and inherently incomplete, the resulting action-guiding principles as emergent, and the moral progress an agent makes in her life as non-linear. As such, his conception of moral knack is neither foundationalist nor relativistic and the expertise the knacky artisans display is ‘domain-limited’.

Given that the world of value is complex and the capacities needed to navigate in it many and various, it is more realistic to expect that such human moral expertise as exists would take patchwork form rather than the idealized form hypothesized in the simple statement of the [intellectualist and phronetic] models.

(Jones and Schroeter 2012, 223)

Perhaps this could be another way to make sense of the multiplicity of efficacious exemplars presented in the text. Since

a plausible response to the problem of how to identify who has expertise abandons the thought that expertise is shown only or primarily in all-in judgments about rightness and instead looks for more piece-meal context dependent expertise with particular thick moral concepts.

(Jones and Schroeter 2012, 219)

As I have proposed elsewhere (Kirby 2017), passages like the ones involving Butcher Ding, Wheelwright Bian, and Carver Qing seem to suggest that each has found a unique way to tap into the same sort of expertise – i.e., ‘the secret of nourishing life’, or *yǎng shēng zhǐ* – though none can

be said to have taken final possession of that expertise. In other words, it appears knack is *dào-tracking* insofar as it is domain-limited, and the strategies it offers must remain indirect and incomplete. In this way, the paradox and denegation of Zhuangzi's goblet words can be tied directly to the *wu*-forms of Daoist practice.

5. In Lieu of a Conclusion

In summary, I have tried to show the plausibility of reading the *Zhuangzi* in terms of non-cognitive moral realism. Key passages in the text suggest Zhuangzi believed moral reals (i.e., attitude-independent norms) exist, but they are propositionally ineffable because they emerge in a dynamic world. Because of this, Zhuangzi employed goblet words as signposts pointing to the moral lessons he sought to convey – despite the factual inaccuracies of the words themselves. These ‘truths’, which Zhuangzi's goblet words ‘tip toward’, might be accessed non-cognitively through attuning with the natural world, listening to one's body, and refining technical skill. The goal of these practices is the transformation of the self in harmony with the constant changes of nature – an emergent ‘bringing forth’ of normativity that cannot be put into words.

Yet the author(s) of the *Zhuangzi* could not write a book without words. The goblet words of the text, therefore, convey what cannot be stated directly by relying on metaphor, allegory, paradox, and denegation. Metaphors, *especially* the sort Zhuangzi employed, are powerful examples of moral thickness because they resist reduction to morally thin concepts.

Since they are non-propositional, situational, and open-ended, what is grasped through Zhuangzi's goblet words (and the practices of the knacky artisans) appear to correspond with what might be called non-truth-apt moral beliefs. But it would be inaccurate to say the *Zhuangzi* employed metaphor, paradox, and allusion as a ladder to be ‘kicked away’ once the desired insights are achieved, since such a ladder would need to extend endlessly in order to keep up with a continuously evolving destination. In this way, the agent who transforms herself into a sage can be said to have ‘listened without words’. For Zhuangzi, this kind of knack is *not* a matter of epistemic ‘knowing that’ but one of noetic ‘knowing how’. In other words, the goal of Daoist *wu*-form strategy, which includes the *wú míng* of Zhuangzi's goblet words and the *wú wéi* of the knack passages is not enlightenment but edification – not clarity but growth. Those whose growth never ceases may gain expertise in their chosen field and, *ipso facto*, a glimpse of something larger – *viz.* the *dào*.

However, there are still some difficulties in this realist reading. One involves the fact that Zhuangzi does not seem to believe there will be any convergence among experts. Moral disagreement is often seen as a strike against moral realism. One way of side-stepping the convergence issue

might involve highlighting the value pluralism of the *Zhuangzi*, which holds up numerous forms of life that might be considered equally viable candidates for strategically coping with a delusional society. David Wong (1984, 2006) uses such a strategy in connection to what he calls pluralistic relativism:

The idea is that once we are able to suspend looking at people through our evaluative categories, we will be able to accept them for what they are, see them as beings like ourselves, and care for them as we care for ourselves.

(1984, 208)

But perhaps there is a non-relativistic alternative here. A synopsis of the *Zhuangzi*'s first two chapters, taken together, might read:

Chapter 1: There's all manner of perspectives both large and small, so don't be a tool for someone else. Transform oneself through the *wu*-forms to discover attunement with the world.

Chapter 2: While most people can hear things only in their own terms, a sage can listen to something on *its own terms*. How much better would it be to listen without *any* terms? If one could attain such fine awareness [明 *míng*] and rich responsiveness [應 *yìng*], it would be like continuously waking from a dream.

In this regard, the kind of clarity of vision and effortless action demonstrated in the *dàoshù* (*dào*-strategies) of the knack artisans seems indicative of an external moral reality, albeit one so complex that different experts are attuned to different aspects which explains their non-convergence. As the opening passage of the final chapter – itself composed of the *zhòngyán* style of goblet words – states:

天下之治方術者多矣，皆以其有為不可加矣。古之所謂道術者，果惡乎在？曰：無乎不在。

Many are the *shù* of those trying to regulate the whole world, and each claims to be something that cannot be improved upon. But, what the ancients called *dàoshù*, where has it gone?! We say: “It is everywhere”.

(*Zhuangzi*, Ch. 33)

Notes

1. I am indebted to Colin Marshall's “Schopenhauer and Non-Cognitivist Moral Realism” (2017) for framing the issue in these terms.
2. I maintain conventions in referring to Zhuang Zhou, the man, as *Zhuangzi* and the text associated with him as the *Zhuangzi*. The received version of the text is a recension from the Jin dynasty that grouped 33 chapters into ‘inner’ (1–7), ‘outer’ (8–22), and ‘miscellaneous’ (23–33). Zhuang Zhou has been

- traditionally viewed as the author of the inner chapters, while later chapters are held to contain the ideas of various sects of his followers.
3. Annas later writes, “The learner in virtue, like the learner in a practical skill, needs to understand what she is doing . . . This comes about when the virtue is conveyed by the giving and receiving of reasons, in contrast with the non-rational picking up of a ‘knack’” (Ibid.)
 4. It is important to note that empirical studies regarding expertise do not bear this out. On the contrary, it seems deliberation occurs early on in the development of a skill but falls away at the highest levels of achievement (cf. H. Dreyfus 2014).
 5. Normally an expert does not calculate. He or she does not solve problems. He or she does not even think” (S. Dreyfus 2004, 180).
 6. The sort of ineffability to which I refer has been called ‘unrepresentability’ by Kukla (2004). In the body of the essay, I will use ‘propositionally ineffable’ when referring to the sorts of moral truths Zhuangzi sought to convey.
 7. Alternatively, there are a handful of authors seeking to coalesce the mystical and perspectival elements of the text (cf. Yearley 1982; Roth 2000; Ziporyn 2003).
 8. For more detail on chapter groupings, see Steve Coutinho’s *An Introduction to Daoist Philosophies* (2013).
 9. Moeller and D’Ambrosio write, “It is noteworthy that one of the three occurrences in the Daodejing associates it with fluidity or differentiation . . . and it is quite conceivable that a correspondingly paradoxical meaning of zhen, which takes change and transformation as the basis for genuineness or realness, has informed the terminological creation of zhenren in the Zhuangzi” (2017, 127–8).
 10. The first four characters intend something like a mockery by contrasting benevolence with itself (*rén zé rén yǐ*).
 11. “道惡乎隱而有真偽?” “How has the *dào* become obscured such that there is *zhēn* and *wéi*?”
 12. As one put it, “No other text of early times . . . so fully exploits the beauties of ancient Chinese – its vigor, its economy, its richness and symmetry” (Watson 1968, xxiv).
 13. These are variously translated as ‘imputed/lodged/dwelling words’, ‘repeated/weighty/opalescent words’, and ‘goblet/spillover words’ respectively (cf. Wu 1988; Lin 2016; Morrow 2016).
 14. The first reference to such words appears in what scholars call a ‘school of Zhuangzi’ chapter (27). As such, it was likely written shortly after the second chapter (*Qíwùlùn*) of the ‘inner chapters’ attributed directly to Zhuangzi (cf. Lin 2016, 248). Chapter 33 is considered a ‘Syncretist’ chapter and was probably written some time later.
 15. According to André Kukla’s work on ineffability, such open-endedness of languages should be apparent since, “One can . . . introduce new expressive devices into English without its ceasing to be English. Moreover there is no definite, sharply marked degree or type of novelty beyond which a linguistic *innovation* results in our speaking a different language” (2004, 14; emphasis added).
 16. Allinson calls it ‘preconceptual cognitive content’ and Chong refers to it as ‘non-propositional content’. Interestingly, most commentators in the comparative literature seem to reject the Davidsonian theories of metaphor and translatability.
 17. In modern Mandarin 充實 is a combination that indicates ‘rich, full, or substantial’, but in keeping with the metaphor of the tipping goblet, I have translated them in their individual meanings, using ‘ever-cascading’ as a metaphorical replacement of *chōng*, ‘to fill; full; to substitute; replace’, and using ‘truth’ to stand for the ‘real, honest, true’ meaning of *shí*.

18. Much of the argument for understanding Zhuangzi in these terms draws upon a reading of Daoism which could be called the focus-field model established by Ames and Hall in their translation of the writings of Laozi titled *Dao De Jing: Making This Life Significant* (2003).
19. Zhuangzi may have agreed with Davidson that “Words are the wrong currency to exchange for a picture” (1978, 46–7). But Zhuangzi would have seen this as a problem for words, not pictures. As Kukla rightly points out, “Davidson thinks that the notion of an inexpressible feature of the world is empty. But that is what he’s supposed to be proving as a consequence of the translatability thesis. My point is that the argument begs the question” (Kukla 2004, 35; emphasis added).
20. As Edward Slingerland points out, “Zhuangzi was hanging out in woodshops and kitchens . . . [and] [t]his world revealed to him artisans and butchers, ferryman and draftsman, whose effortless ease and responsiveness to the world could serve as a model for his disaffected fellow intellectuals” (Slingerland 2014, 143).
21. As Roger Ames and David Hall have noted, “In Confucianism, self is determined by sustained effort in deferential transactions guided by ritually structured roles and relations that project one’s person outward into society and into culture. . . . Daoism, on the other hand, expresses its deferential activity through what [are called] the wu-forms. The three most familiar articulations of this pervasive sensibility are: *wuwei*, *wuzhi*, and *wuyu*. These are, respectively, non-coercive actions in accordance with the de of things; a sort of knowing without resort to rules or principles; and a desiring which does not seek to control its ‘object’” (2003, 38).
22. Among the numerous studies and examples Sennett offers to support his thesis is research on attention deficit disorder and expertise. Contra prevailing presuppositions about leading students to attention through emotional investment and entertainment, research indicates the inverse to be true – viz. that emotional investment and enjoyment actually follow from the acquisition and refinement of the skill in question (cf. Sennett 2008, 172).
23. Compare this with other stories from the *Dáshēng* – the cicada catcher and the old swimmer – to see further diversity in explanations. One claims to have a *dào* [yǒu dào 有道], the other says he has none [wú dào 無道].

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