Is Zhuangzi a Fictionalist?

Julianne Nicole Chung

University of Louisville

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<www.philosophersimprint.org/018022/>

Introduction

The Zhuangzi is regarded as one of two foundational Daoist texts (alongside the Daodejing or Laozi), and among the most influential works of world philosophy in general. It is widely considered to have been composed (at least in large part) by a Chinese philosopher of the same name in the late fourth century BCE. Interpreters of Zhuangzi are faced with puzzles similar to those that confront interpreters of, e.g., Nietzsche and Wittgenstein. For while the works of these philosophers appear to contain strong prima facie arguments, interesting...
categorizations, and pregnant examples, they are not written in a standard expository style, and include suggestions that may subject them to fatal self-referential paradoxes. Some interpreters attempt to reconstruct systematic philosophical positions based on their writings, often supplying an explanation for why they write as they do. Other interpreters, however, take seriously the possibility that the philosopher in question rejects conventional philosophical exposition because he also rejects conventional philosophical system building.\(^2\)

Related to this, one important problem that interpreters of the Zhuangzi face concerns the role that skeptical arguments play in the work: On the one hand, while the Zhuangzi explicitly articulates and appears to advocate a variety of skeptical positions (of varying generality), on the other, it also explicitly articulates and appears to advocate a variety of positive claims that are seemingly inconsistent with them. Commentators have sought in different ways to resolve these tensions by claiming, e.g., that Zhuangzi’s skepticism is to some degree narrower in scope, or more limited, than many have been inclined to think (cf. Graham 1983, Eno 1996, Fraser 2009, and Sturgeon 2015); that Zhuangzi is, e.g., a relativist, pluralist, or perspectivist rather than a skeptic (cf. Hansen 1983, Wong 1984, Mou 2008 and 2015a, and Connolly 2011); that Zhuangzi’s skepticism is better construed as, e.g., a recommendation, method, or therapy rather than a thesis (cf. Kjelleberg 1996, Ivanhoe 1996, Raphals 1996, Van Norden 1996, and Wong 2005); and that Zhuangzi does not sincerely advocate radically skeptical positions, despite appearances to the contrary (cf. Schützgebel 1996).\(^3\)

2. Many thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting that I open the paper with a paragraph along these lines.

3. These divisions are not meant to be mutually exclusive; rather, they are meant to exemplify different ways of framing a response to the challenge posed by the relevant tensions in the text. For instance, as will be discussed below, interpreting Zhuangzi as a fictionalist can be combined with interpreting his skepticism as, e.g., a recommendation, method, or therapy rather than as a thesis.

However, there are many other potentially fruitful interpretive strategies that have not yet been pursued. One such approach concerns the possibility that Zhuangzi is best interpreted as some sort of fictionalist: in other words, that he endorses a view to the effect that some types of linguistic expressions need not be understood as being used literally, but rather might be regarded otherwise, perhaps as involving a kind of pretense.\(^4\) In many respects this is similar to Eric Schützgebel’s interpretation, in that it also would have it that Zhuangzi does not always mean what he says. But while Schützgebel attempts to resolve the apparent inconsistencies at hand by arguing that Zhuangzi does not sincerely endorse radically skeptical positions, a defender of the approach on offer might have it that the situation is the opposite: that perhaps Zhuangzi does sincerely endorse radically skeptical positions — at least in a sense — and does not sincerely endorse positions that are incompatible with them.

This paper argues that this alternative possibility is well worth investigating. It proceeds in four parts. Part one discusses two distinct and very general types of fictionalism — force and content — that might prove useful for an interpreter of the Zhuangzi. The former type of view would have it that the expressions in question — that is, the expressions that Zhuangzi is held to advocate using and interpreting non-literally — are not best seen as used in a way that aims at, e.g., truth, whereas the latter type of view would have it that the expressions in question are best seen as used in a way that aims at truth, if in a non-literal fashion (cf. Eklund 2015).\(^5\) Part two surveys evidence in favor of

4. Cf. Eklund 2015. This characterization may strike some as insufficiently precise as well as controversial; because of this, it will be unpacked and defended below. Also, insofar as one finds it helpful to identify a pretense when explicating a fictionalist view, the relevant pretense in this case is plausibly that of assertion, or commitment to truth.

5. Admittedly, fictionalism is arguably in some sense something of a Western invention based on certain views of, e.g., language and truth, parts of which may not map onto early Chinese views very neatly. Mere samplings of possible difficulties concern the nature of truth, (semantic) content, assertion, and linguistic expressions. Nonetheless, the basic insight underlying fictionalism — that a way of talking need not aim at, e.g., (literal) truth in order to...
the claim that Zhuangzi can be interpreted in terms of one or the other of these two types of fictionalism and argues that he is better characterized as endorsing a version of the former. Part three explains how interpreting Zhuangzi as a fictionalist can help to resolve the tensions in the text outlined above and briefly explores a few additional merits of this reading of the *Zhuangzi*: namely, that it can give us a clearer idea of what Zhuangzi’s positive project is, unify seemingly disparate scholarly interpretations of it, and reconcile objectivist and non-objectivist strands in his work. Finally, part four concludes by gesturing toward how the interpretation proposed here might bring the *Zhuangzi* into productive dialogue with two longstanding philosophical questions: specifically, the question of how we should respond to skeptical (and similar) arguments, and the question of how aesthetic features of works of art—and, in particular, literature—might be related to their cognitive or epistemic value (insofar as they have cognitive or epistemic value of an interesting sort).

1. What Is Fictionalism?

Fictionalist views about a region of discourse $D$ can be provisionally characterized as accounts according to which utterances—particularly those involving declarative expressions—made within $D$ are (typically) not best seen as aiming at, e.g., literal truth but rather are better interpreted as non-literal speech of some kind. However, this characterization is not especially precise. There are many different ways that ostensibly assertive speech might not aim at literal truth (think of the differences between, e.g., actors who perform scripted lines, writers who use poetic language, and politicians who engage in exaggeration) and many different kinds of non-literal speech (think of the differences between, e.g., fictional narrative, metaphor, and hyperbole). In order to address the question of whether Zhuangzi might be profitably interpreted as a fictionalist, we will require something a bit more detailed.

That said—especially given the variety of philosophical views that have been called “fictionalist”—it is to some degree difficult to give both a more specific and yet a still fully general account of what fictionalism is and what its distinctive commitments are. Many interpretations rely heavily on a distinction between *acceptance* and *belief*, in addition to analogies with fictional discourse, along these lines. Compare James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, which famously opens with the line “Stately, plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed,” with Caesar’s *Gallic War*, which begins with “Gaul as a whole consists of three separate parts….” While Caesar wants the reader to believe the literal truth of his description of Gaul, Joyce certainly does not intend the reader to believe that anyone named “Buck Mulligan” actually did precisely what he describes. Rather, the reader is meant to accept the aforementioned sentence in some other way, and for some other purpose. Likewise, fictionalists often claim of some region of discourse $D$ that acceptance of expressions (e.g., declarative sentences) within $D$ is (typically) not (literally) truth-directed and does not involve belief in the content of the accepted expressions. For instance, some moral fictionalists hold that we should accept expressions about morality not because we take them to express truths, strictly speaking, but rather because it is somehow useful or expedient for us to do so. Thus, sentences like “Stealing
is wrong’ should be accepted not because we take them to be literally true, but rather because they facilitate prudential action, even if their
semantic contents are literally false (cf. Joyce 2005). As Matti Eklund
describes it, the basic idea is that, for practical reasons — such as the
fear of punishment, the desire for ongoing beneficial relationships,
the motivation to maintain a good reputation, the simple fact that one
on the whole likes one’s fellows, and so on — one normally ought to
act in accordance with alleged moral requirements even if they do
not express truths. For these requirements make it easier not only to
act quickly (because they, perhaps among other things, silence time-
consuming deliberations), but also to act effectively (because they,
say, prevent us from being tempted by short-term gains that might be
realized by acting in ways that appear incompatible with them). (Cf.
Eklund 2015.) This sort of stance is likened to fiction because, as illus-
trated above, whatever point there is to writing — or otherwise creat-
ing — fictional works, it is not to directly report the truth of some facts
about the world. The utterances made in such works do not purport
to aim at truth (at least not in any straightforward way). In works of
fiction, an utterance of an expression is not, e.g., an assertion of its
semantic content, and the acceptance of an expression is not — and does
not indicate — a belief in that content (cf. Kalderon 2005, p. 3). The
acceptance and pragmatics of expressions within a fictionalist region
of discourse thus parallels, at least to this extent, the acceptance and
pragmatics of expressions within works of fiction (cf. Kalderon 2005,
p. 3).

On this picture, then, fictionalism about a region of discourse D
can be understood as the view that expressions within D — as well as,
e.g., the propositions7 that they express — are (typically) better inter-
preted as accepted, rather than believed, and that, as a result, utter-
ances of such expressions need not commit speakers to their semantic

7. Or similar. This caveat is added primarily because not all relevant linguistic
expressions take the form of, e.g., declarative sentences that express proposi-
tions. However, while it is the case that, for simplicity, I largely speak of declar-
ations and propositions here, this restriction would have to be removed in
a final analysis.

8. For the purposes of this paper, I use ‘semantic content’ and ‘literal content’
more or less interchangeably, for ease of explication. It is worth noting that
some might take issue with this, e.g., on the grounds that it may be possible
for non-literal content to be semantic content, at least in certain cases (see
Camp 2006 for a discussion of relevant examples). As far as I can see, how-
ever, accommodating this worry would affect only the letter, but not the spirit,
of the view advanced here, as it could easily be restated so as to alleviate this
concern.

9. I use ‘they’ as a singular, generic, gender-neutral pronoun.

And what makes the ‘fictionalism’ moniker apt is that this is arguably just what happens in uncontentious cases of
fictional speech as well. Surely none of us believes that the events
detailed in what we take to be works of fiction really happened. Still,
it seems as if there is a crucial sense in which we treat expressions
within fictional works as true just the same, and that we are right to do
so. Our attitude toward (typical) uses of them is very similar to our at-
titude toward expressions uttered by actors on a stage — the (primary)
point of using expressions within D is not to, e.g., convey truths, but to
do something else altogether. Let us call this kind of fictionalism force
fictionalism, as this approach would have it that expressions within the
relevant region of discourse D are not generally best seen as used to
assert (or otherwise illocute) any propositional content; rather, some
other (perhaps perlocutionary) speech act is performed.

Force fictionalism can be contrasted with what we might call con-
tent fictionalism, which would have it that expressions within the rel-
levant region of discourse D are generally best seen as used to assert
(or otherwise illocute) some propositional content distinct from (and
instead of) their semantic contents (cf. Eklund 2015). To bring out the
contrast a bit more clearly, a content (but not merely force) fictional-
ist about moral discourse could hold, e.g., that when a speaker utters
the sentence ‘Stealing is wrong’, what they8 (typically) assert instead
is something along the lines of the proposition that, according to the
fiction of morality, stealing is wrong. Thus, for a content fictionalist,
moral discourse might aim at truth at the level of what is pragmati-
cally, rather than semantically, conveyed — or, if one prefers, what is
non-literally, rather than literally, conveyed.\textsuperscript{10} This, however, is not the approach of a (purely) force fictionalist, who holds that no alternative propositional content gets asserted or otherwise put forth (at least not in the right kind of way) — and hence that the relevant region of discourse D cannot aim at truth.\textsuperscript{11}

2. Evidence for Fictionalism in the \textit{Zhuangzi}

Fictionalism, then, can be more precisely characterized as a constellation of views according to which some regions of discourse are not best seen as aiming at truth (at least not directly) — either because they are not best seen as truth-directed at all, though the semantic contents of their (declarative) expressions are (or at least purport to be) truth-apt (force fictionalism), or because, while they are best seen as truth-directed, expressions within them are not (typically) used literally (content fictionalism). Fictionalists grant standard realist semantic interpretations of expressions within the disputed regions of discourse but maintain that the point of accepting them is not to commit ourselves to their, e.g., truth, as they, unlike realists, do not hold that they are true (cf. Szabó 2011).\textsuperscript{12} Now, since proponents of both force and content fictionalism maintain that some region of discourse is better interpreted as (either largely or completely) non-literal, evidence for a particular theorist's endorsing a position along those very broad lines will motivate each hermeneutical approach equally. Therefore, in order to move from the claim that some form of fictionalism — force or content — is well-supported as an interpretive strategy to the claim that force fictionalism is well-supported in particular, more is needed. This section will thus first motivate the claim that \textit{Zhuangzi} can be interpreted as some form of fictionalist, before going on to argue that \textit{Zhuangzi} is preferably characterized as a force fictionalist more specifically.

\textit{i) Fictional Narrative in the \textit{Zhuangzi}}

It is perhaps significant that the \textit{Zhuangzi} begins with what is most reasonably interpreted as a fictional story, involving a giant fish named “Kun” (ironically, ‘kun’ can be translated as both ‘fish egg’ or ‘baby fish’ [cf. Van Norden 1996, Watson 2003, and Ziporyn 2009]) that transforms into a magnificent bird named “Peng” (a name which also presents something of a paradox, as it can be translated as ‘Peer Phoenix’ [Ziporyn 2009, p. 3]).\textsuperscript{13} Peng then embarks upon an incredible journey, only to be criticized by a talking cicada, dove, and quail (each of whom seems to have far more limited abilities than Peng has). What is more, this fanciful tale is attributed to what appears to be an equally fictional ancient classic, whose title is variously translated as, e.g., \textit{The Tall Stories of Chi’i} (Graham 2003, p. 43), \textit{The Universal Harmony} (Watson 2003, p. 43), or, variously, \textit{The Universal Harmony of Kung-Feng} (Graham 2003, p. 43), meaning ‘phoenix,’ a mythical bird of enormous proportions. The phonetic of the form used by \textit{Zhuangzi} here is the character peng, meaning ‘friend’ or ‘classmate,’ ‘comrade’ or ‘peer.’ If we wish to render the visual pun, we might translate the name as ‘Peer Phoenix.’ Again, the paradox is of some importance. Peng is vast, and his superiority to other birds seems to be stressed in what follows, but his name also includes a reference to parity and companionship” (Ziporyn 2009, p. 3, fn. 1 and fn. 3).

\textsuperscript{10} This caveat is added in part because of the complication elucidated in fn. 8.

\textsuperscript{11} Note, however, that force and content fictionalism can plausibly be combined, as a fictionalist can hold both that, in a typical utterance of a sentence of some region of discourse D, the literal content of the sentence is conveyed but not asserted, and that some content other than the literal content is asserted. Indeed, one might think that this is even a rather natural view: namely, that in a typical utterance of a sentence of D, the speaker pretends-true the literal content of the sentence, and in so doing asserts something other than the literal content (Eklund 2015). In this case, one is a force fictionalist regarding the region of discourse literally interpreted, and a content fictionalist regarding the region of discourse non-literally interpreted.

\textsuperscript{12} Fictionalism is thus differentiated from certain other forms of anti-realism (e.g., expressivism) as well as from various nearby views such as pragmatism or contextualism. Further, this leaves it open as to whether a region of discourse D could be — in addition — non-literally truth-directed or, in other words, that a discourse might be “truth-directed.”

\textsuperscript{13} In his translation, Brook Ziporyn notes: “The name Kun ... literally means ‘fish egg.’ The character consists of a ‘fish’ radical beside a phonetic element that literally means ‘elder brother.’ If we were to take this as a kind of visual pun, the name might be rendered ‘Big Brother Roe.’ The paradoxes implicit in this name are not irrelevant. The largest fish is thus also the smallest speck of pre-fish, the tiny fish egg. The youngest newborn here, the not-yet-fish, is also the elder brother.” Further, he also says: “The name Peng ... is cognate with Peng ... meaning ‘phoenix,’ a mythical bird of enormous proportions. The phonetic of the form used by \textit{Zhuangzi} here is the character peng, meaning ‘friend’ or ‘classmate,’ ‘comrade’ or ‘peer.’ If we wish to render the visual pun, we might translate the name as ‘Peer Phoenix.’ Again, the paradox is of some importance. Peng is vast, and his superiority to other birds seems to be stressed in what follows, but his name also includes a reference to parity and companionship” (Ziporyn 2009, p. 3, fn. 1 and fn. 3).
p. 23), The Equalizing Harmony, or even The Equalizing Jokebook (Ziporyn 2009, p. 3):

In the North Ocean there is a fish, its name is the K’un; the K’un’s girth measures who knows how many thousand miles. It changes into a bird, its name is the P’eng; the P’eng’s back measures who knows how many thousand miles. When it puffs out its chest and flies off, its wings are like clouds hanging from the sky. This bird when the seas are heaving has a mind to travel to the South Ocean. (The South Ocean is the Lake of Heaven.) In the words of the Tall stories, ‘When the P’eng travels to the South Ocean, the wake it thrashes on the water is three thousand miles long, it mounts spiralling on the whirlwind ninety thousand miles high, and is gone six months before it is out of breath.’ (The Tall stories of Ch’i is a record of marvels.) ... A cicada and a turtle-dove laughed at it, saying, “We keep flying till we’re bursting, stop when we get to an elm or sandalwood, and sometimes are dragged back to the ground before we’re there. What’s all this about being ninety thousand miles up when he travels south?” ... A quail laughed at it, saying “Where does he think he’s going? I do a hop and a skip and up I go, and before I’ve gone more than a few dozen yards come fluttering down among the bushes. That is the highest one can fly, where does he think he’s going?” (Graham 2001, pp. 43–44)

Consequently, one might think that from the very beginning Zhuangzi sets us up to read what he says as fiction, and does so in a way that appears to poke fun at the pretensions of, e.g., Confucians and Mohists (who are later targeted more explicitly) to give literally true, accurate, or legitimate accounts of the world, based on literally true, accurate, or legitimate classical works (cf. Graham 2001, Watson 2003, Ziporyn 2009).14 (Indeed, this is perhaps even metaphorically suggested by the title of the first chapter itself, which can be rendered as, e.g., “Going Rambling Without a Destination” [Graham 2001].) That said, despite its being naturally read as fictional, as well as highly fantastical and in many ways containing paradoxical elements,15 this story is transparently supposed to serve some purpose or another (despite the fact that it is probably not meant to be taken literally), although it is admittedly far from clear as to what that purpose is meant to be, exactly. And there are many other passages in the Zhuangzi that are similarly not likely intended to be interpreted at face value. (As Burton Watson notes, “deliberate fantasy … characterizes the book as a whole” [Watson 2003, p. 1].) Just a few of the most memorable include:

- “The Mountain Man” (a story involving a man who “does not eat the five grains but sucks in the wind and drinks the dew” and “rides the vapour of the clouds, yokes flying dragons to his chariot, and roams beyond the four seas”)16 (Graham 2001, p. 46)

- “Three Every Morning, Four Every Evening” (a story involving monkeys who are furious about being given three nuts in the morning and four in the evening, but are satisfied when offered four in the morning and three in the evening) (Graham 2001, p. 54)

- “The Useless Tree” (a story involving a talking tree that appears in a carpenter’s dream to

14. Many thanks to Bryan Van Norden for suggesting this way of framing the text.
15. Including, as we have seen, the gargantuan fish named either “Roe” or “Minnow”, and the spectacular, otherworldly bird named “Peer Phoenix”.
16. It is perhaps worth noting that this story is explicitly presented as being hard to believe but nonetheless worth considering for other reasons.
lecture him about the usefulness of uselessness) (Graham 2001, p. 73)

Others involve (among other things) what appear to be:

- Fictional characters (often with unusual names, like “Gaptooth” and “Uglyface T'o”) (cf. Graham 2001)

- Fictional situations (perhaps especially those involving Confucius)

- People with abilities too mystifying or deformities too horrifying to be real (such as a character whom A.C. Graham calls “Cripple Shu” and describes as follows: “[H]is chin is buried down in his navel, his shoulders are higher than his crown, the knobbly bone at the base of his neck points at the sky, the five pipes to the spine are right up on top, his two thighbones make another pair of ribs.”) (Graham 2001, p. 74)

- Talking plants and animals (including, as mentioned above, insects, birds, and trees)

Reflections such as these suggest that any astute reader will have to admit that something like a fictionalist view — in other words, a non-literalist interpretation — is an appropriate account of Zhuangzi’s use and interpretation of language in some passages of the text. The tougher question, of course, concerns just how far to extend this account, and whether it might be fruitful to characterize Zhuangzi as a force or a content fictionalist about an entire region of discourse (such as moral discourse or knowledge discourse, just for starters).

\[\text{ii) Stylistic Considerations}\]

In what follows, I motivate the claim that Zhuangzi is preferably characterized as a force fictionalist about all regions of discourse; he does not mean anything that he says, and he does not think that language is ever best seen as conveying truths about the world. That is, my suggestion is that Zhuangzi is not inclined to think that linguistic practice is ever best interpreted as literally truth-directed, or anything like that. To put it another way: he is a global force fictionalist.

One way to assess whether this is plausible is to look first for evidence that suggests that Zhuangzi often seems to assert or argue for claims that he does not believe. After all, if Zhuangzi is frequently willing to (at least appear as if to) assert or argue for claims without intending to commit himself to their literal interpretations, it is reasonable to infer that some underlying view or attitude might motivate this practice for him. A fictionalist view — either force or content — or attitude could be such a thing: for, as we have seen above, fictionalists generally maintain that literal falsity is not a defect and that literal truth is not a virtue (cf. Rosen 2005).

As it turns out, the possibility that Zhuangzi regularly speaks without intending to commit to the literal truth of what he says has been motivated elsewhere. As Eric Schwitzgebel argues (although it should be stressed that he uses his arguments for much different purposes), it is plausible that Zhuangzi frequently does not “mean what he says” in that he indeed often seems to assert or argue for claims that he does not believe, even in cases where he might naturally be understood as offering serious recommendations. As Schwitzgebel points out — and as others have noticed as well — the inner chapters of the Zhuangzi are replete with passages seemingly designed to undermine any inclination to take anything in them at face value (cf. Schwitzgebel 1996, p. 71). In addition to the inclusion of a plethora of either obviously fictional or at minimum extremely improbable stories, there is a wide array of other devices that can be used to reduce a reader’s stock and credence (as Schwitzgebel puts it) in the literal content of a work to be found in the Zhuangzi. Taken together, they have the collective effect
of putting us in the position of having to spend a lot of time working out what — if anything — Zhuangzi might mean, rather than simply attempting to read it off the words themselves. They include:

- **Literary devices and tropes (including dialogues, fables, allegories, and metaphors)**
  
  (cf. Kjellberg and Ivanhoe 1996, p. xii)

- **Extensive use of quotations** (particularly those involving some who were likely perceived as rivals, such as Confucius)

- **Appeals to unlikely as well as intuitively un-trustworthy or disreputable sources**

- **Frequent changes of subject and non-sequiturs**
  
  (cf. Watson 2003, p. 5)

- **Rhetorical questions**
  
  (Schwitzgebel 1996, p. 72)

17. Consider, e.g., the numerous apparently fictional stories referenced above.

18. Indeed, according to Schwitzgebel, more than half of the inner chapters are in quotation (Schwitzgebel 1996, p. 72).

19. Including apparently fictional works, such as, e.g., the Tall Stories of Ch’i noted above, as well as those of so-called “beggars” and “madmen” (cf. Schwitzgebel 1996, p. 72).

20. Among the standouts is this remark, which directly follows the passage, cited below, that references the “Benetnash Star”: “Therefore formerly Yao asked Shun ‘I wish to smite [Zong], [Kuai], and [Xiao]. Why is it that I am not at ease on the south-facing throne?’ ‘Why be uneasy’, said Shun, ‘if these three still survive among the weeds? Formerly ten sun rose side by side and the myriad things were all illumined, and how much more by a man in whom the Power is brighter than the sun!’” Here, A.C. Graham comments: “This story seems out of place. Perhaps it was intended as an illustration of ‘This is why the sage does not take this course but opens things up to the light of Heaven’” (Graham 2001, p. 58).

21. Sometimes these are even posed in rapid-fire succession, e.g.: “The penumbra asked the shadow: ‘Just when you were walking, now you stop; just when you were sitting, now you stand. Why don’t you make up your mind to do one thing or the other? Is it that there is something on which I depend to be so? And does what I depend on too depend on something else to be so? Would it be that I depend on snake’s scales, cicada’s wings? How would I recognize why it is so, how would I recognize why it is not so?’” (Graham 2001, p. 61)

22. Here I follow Eric Schwitzgebel in saying, “[B]y reversal, I mean Zhuangzi’s tendency to make statements that are the reverse of seeming truisms or ordinary judgments. To the extent that Zhuangzi may succeed in casting a truism in doubt, he succeeds to some extent in undermining the credibility of any statement that seems less certain than the truism initially did” (Schwitzgebel 1996, p. 72). Just a few good examples of this include passages that extol the usefulness of uselessness (such as “The Useless Tree” cited above) and the surprising abilities of various disabled characters.

23. Some of the more memorable paradoxes from the inner chapters are presented in this passage: “Nothing in the world is bigger than the tip of an autumn hair, and Mount Tai is small; no one lives longer than a doomed child, and [Pen-qiu, who had a reputation for long life] died young; heaven and earth were born together with me, and the myriad things and I are one” (Graham 2001, p. 56).

24. The character of Huizi, who typically appears to be an intellectual foil for Zhuangzi, is often a target of Zhuangzi’s mockery; e.g., when Zhuangzi berates him as follows: “…if you had five-bushel calabashes, why didn’t it occur to you to make them into those big bottles swimmers tie to their waists, and go floating away over the Yangtse and the Lakes? If you worried because they sagged and wouldn’t hold anything, isn’t it that you still have a heart where the shoots grow up tangled?” (Graham 2001, p. 47).
JULIANNE NICOLE CHUNG

Is Zhuangzi a Fictionalist?

Paul Kjellberg has also observed that Zhuangzi frequently uses the rhetorical device of rhyming duplicatives, and has claimed that some studies suggest it to be a trans-linguistic phenomenon that such phrases, like ‘ooga-booga’, convey a mixture of confusion and mystery (Kjellberg 2005, p. 215).

As Bryan Van Norden has noted, such textual features have made the Zhuangzi function much like a Rorschach test in that it elicits many different interpretations from different readers, depending on, e.g., their presuppositions and preferences (Van Norden 1996, p. 247). Of course, it is likely impossible to say for sure whether Zhuangzi can be credited with intending to bring about such an effect or not. However, even if such an effect was not intended, it at least suggests an author who cares more about provoking reactions than conveying a concrete message. Moreover, perhaps even the fact that the work reads as both literary and philosophical suggests that Zhuangzi does not consider the boundary between fictional discourse and non-fictional discourse to be all that sharp—if indeed he considers it to exist at all. All this lends support to the claim that he can be interpreted as holding a view to the effect that a region of discourse need not aim at truth (even if it purports to) in order to be worth participating in, and that he often at least appears—and perhaps even pretends—to assert or argue for claims that he does not believe (a practice that a fictionalist stance could both explain and motivate).

Kjellberg and Philip J. Ivanhoe motivate a similar idea as follows:

One of the greatest challenges facing any interpreter of the Zhuangzi is that its protean nature and literary subtlety are inseparable from its philosophical message: one cannot understand its content without careful attention to its multifarious and moving form. The very difficulty of the text is one of the ways the Zhuangzi uses literary style to make its philosophical point. On the level of individual characters, technical terms like ... ming ‘clarity’ and ... dao ‘way’ are obviously of central importance though they are never precisely defined. On the level of whole stories, even when the sequence of events is more or less straightforward, the overarching moral often remains unclear. Is the hermit Xu You, for instance, a hero or a fool? Are we supposed to reject the cicada or reconcile ourselves to being one? The Zhuangzi presents us with interpretive challenges at every turn. It does not seem possible to read the text without relying on a host of assumptions; and yet there is no way to verify those assumptions except on the basis of some reading, all of which leaves

variety of ends (cf. Graham 2001, p. 4, and Watson 2003, p. 6)25

- Seeming disdain for (or perhaps merely skepticism about the value of) convention (cf. Graham 2001, p. 4, and Watson 2003)26

- Lack of clarity as to what is sincerely proposed and what is merely entertained, cultivated in all manner of ways, especially in the form of statements made and then questioned, without any clear resolution (this is related to the “rhetorical questions” point above) (Schwitzgebel 1996, p. 72)27

25. This contempt is perhaps most palpable when Zhuangzi presents some of his most famous skeptical arguments, designed to call into question whether words can get things right, or even say anything at all, in the Qi Wu Lun (the second of the inner chapters). Please see pp. 21–27 below for a discussion of several of the better-known examples.

26. See, e.g., the stories involving the “Mountain Man”, monkeys, and, once again, “Useless Tree” referenced above, just for starters.

27. Schwitzgebel 1996 provides a particularly nice example of this, though there are many: “The lighting up of ‘That’s it, that’s not’ is the reason why the Way is flawed. The reason why the Way is flawed is the reason why love becomes complete. Is anything really complete or flawed? Or is nothing really complete or flawed?” (Graham 2001, p. 54).
Saying is not blowing breath, saying says something; the only trouble is that what it says is never fixed. Do we really say something? Or have we never said anything? If you think it different from the twitter of fledgelings, is there proof of the distinction? Or isn’t there any proof? By what is the Way hidden, that there should be a genuine or false? By what is saying darkened, that sometimes ‘That’s it’ and sometimes ‘That’s not? 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 Confucians and Mohists, by which what is it for one of them for the other is not, what is not 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. No thing is not ‘other’, no thing is not ‘it’. If you treat yourself too as ‘other’ they do not appear, if you know of yourself you know of them. Hence it is said:

“‘Other’ comes out from ‘it’, ‘it’ likewise goes by ‘other’”, the opinion that ‘it’ and ‘other’ are born simultaneously. However, ‘Simultaneously with being alive one dies’, and simultaneously with dying one is alive, simultaneously with being allowable something becomes unallowable and simultaneously with being unallowable it becomes allowable. If going by circumstance that’s it then going by circumstance that’s not, if going by circumstance that’s not then going by circumstance that’s it. This is why the sage does not take this course, but opens things up to the light of Heaven; his too is a ‘That’s it’ which goes by circumstance.

What is It is also Other, what is Other is also It. There they say ‘That’s it, that’s not’ from one point of view, here

28. Please see Chung 2018 for elaboration. The basic idea, roughly stated, is that the Zhuangzi’s fictional style relates to its fictionalist content.
we say ‘That’s it, that’s not’ from another point of view. Are there really It and Other? Or really no It and Other? Where neither It nor Other finds its opposite is called the axis of the Way. When once the axis is found at the centre of the circle there is no limit to what is It, on the other no limit to what is not. Therefore I say: ‘The best means is Illumination.’ (Graham 2001, pp. 52–53)

It would obviously be an understatement to say that there is a lot going on in this passage. For our purposes, it is worth noticing that here, Zhuangzi countenances the possibility that words do not have accurate, or even any, meanings, and provides reasons to think that might be so—as well as a suggestion as to what one might consider doing in light of these considerations. One plausible way of reading the central argument of this passage proceeds roughly as follows: Genuinely distinguishing one thing from another plausibly aims at “carving reality at its joints”, as it were; however, equally plausibly, there are no such joints to carve (or, at least, we are not sufficiently reliable at using language, e.g., to do so). Rather, our distinctions only appear to be accurate or legitimate against a backdrop of contextual factors that have more to do with perception than they do with reality. Moreover, as A.C. Graham notes in his commentary, here Zhuangzi also appears to aim to discredit the activity of disputation by suggesting that under certain circumstances—namely, at the moment one shifts from “It” to “Other”—both alternatives will be admissible, and that what disputation shows is that we could be entitled to affirm or deny anything of anything in a given situation. In other words, there is nothing that is really It (and not Other), or really Other (and not It). According to Graham, one lesson to take away from this is that those—e.g., Confucians and Mohists—who stick rigidly to their affirmations and denials

29. I use the term “accurate” loosely here to pick out anything that “hits the mark”—whatever that is taken to involve.
30. Kjellberg 1996, e.g., seems to opt for the latter option, whereas Loy 1996, e.g., seems to opt for the former.

succeed, at best, in lighting up little areas of life while leaving the rest in darkness. The clarity, or illumination, of the sage, by contrast, is meant to be a vision that brings everything to light (Graham 2001, p. 52; compare also, e.g., the interpretations of Hansen 1983, Schwitzgebel 1996, Watson 2003, and Ziporyn 2009).

But what might this clarity or illumination involve, exactly? Surely, given all that Zhuangzi has said so far, it should not be interpreted as consisting of grasping claims—especially in light of the fact that he, at the beginning of the passage, strongly suggests that it is possible that words cannot have accurate (literal) meanings (as they purport—but arguably fail—to draw accurate distinctions) and perhaps even that words cannot have literal meanings at all. For, to restate the argument somewhat, if there are no accurate or legitimate distinctions between things to draw (or, at least, we are not sufficiently reliable in drawing them), and the words that we use purport to do just this, then words will arguably always fail to refer, which in turn might suggest that they haven’t any meanings in the first place—and not just that their meanings are inaccurate! For they plausibly fall short of their aim of referring to things on account of the fact that they cannot reliably carve reality at its joints (due to our deficiencies, or due to the lack of such joints). After all, as Schwitzgebel points out:

[T]he use of words requires drawing boundaries between things. … Suppose the two of us are together at an aquarium and I remark, “How beautiful that green and yellow striped fish is!” To make such a remark meaningfully, I must presume that distinctions of some sort can be drawn between a fish and what is not a fish, what is green and what is not green, what is beautiful and what is not beautiful, and so on. … If, however, as Zhuangzi seems to suggest in these passages, words cannot reliably be attached to things, any word potentially picking out any object, then there can be no verbal communication or transfer
of meaning between people, unless merely by accident. (Schwitzgebel 1996, pp. 77–79)

Moreover, as Schwitzgebel continues, this is a possibility that Zhuangzi anticipates at the beginning of the cited passage, when he raises the possibility that words may really be no different from the peeps of baby birds (Schwitzgebel 1996, p. 79). And, as Kjellberg observes, Zhuangzi is unique among early Chinese philosophers for his extensive use of onomatopoeia, which may be related to his suggestion that, in the absence of agreed-upon definitions, human discourse might in the end be nothing more than empty sounds (Kjellberg 1996, p. 24, fn. 12).

Such thoughts are very much in keeping with the spirit of global force fictionalism, in particular. For, if words either do not have accurate meanings or do not have meanings at all, then it would seem to follow that they cannot be used to convey truths, thereby making it impossible for some region of discourse to be genuinely truth-directed, although it may present itself (i.e., semantically) as such. Moreover, Zhuangzi’s arguments — as in the case of ‘it’ and ‘other’ — can be used to call into question the distinctions between, e.g., the notions “meaningful” and “meaningless” and “true” and “false” as well. But, despite his apparent skepticism about (accurate) meaning and (literal) truth, Zhuangzi still seems to think that language is useful. (The Zhuangzi itself, after all, is composed of words!) Thus, insofar as some standard or set of standards is thought to apply to successful linguistic practice, it cannot involve (literal) truth.

Further, it is worth observing that Zhuangzi indeed later appears to explicitly elaborate what clarity or illumination involves when he says: “The ‘That’s it’ which deems he [i.e., the sage] does not use, but finds for things lodging-places in the usual. It is this that is meant by ‘using Illumination’” (Graham 2001, p. 55). Graham explains here that, according to Zhuangzi, “[s]ystems of knowledge are partial and temporary like styles on the zither, which in forming sacrifice some of the potentialities of music, and by their very excellence make schools fossilise in decline’ (Graham 2001, p. 55). What I am proposing is that we might think of Zhuangzi as suggesting something similar with respect to linguistic practice: namely, the use of language without commitments to, e.g., truth, or perhaps even meaning, so as to avoid drawing potentially problematic distinctions, and to preserve its open-ended potentialities (and hence flexibility or versatility). Interpreting Zhuangzi as advocating a form of force fictionalism about all regions of discourse can allow us to make sense of how this is possible. For, if the idea is that the sage is uninhibited by overly restrictive conventions that purport to draw accurate distinctions between things on the grounds that they perhaps get things wrong (although they may in some cases appear to get things right, especially to the ordinary person — i.e., the non-sage), and, say, certain linguistic conventions do this, then it will follow that the sage will be uninhibited by the relevant linguistic conventions for the reason just outlined. And it will follow from this that we perhaps ought not take the words of the sage literally, and should expect them to use language in unconventional — and perhaps even bizarre-seeming — ways, especially since the sage will presumably be generally uninhibited by conventions that purport to draw accurate distinctions between, e.g., the “true” and the “false”, or the “right” and the “wrong”. Insofar as we interpret Zhuangzi as modeling — at least to some extent — what he takes to be the behavior of the sage in the text, this is indeed what we do find, given its protean nature. We also find explicit recommendations along these lines, in passages like the following:

The Way has never had borders, saying has never had norms. It is by a ‘That’s it’ which deems that a boundary is marked. Let me say something about the marking of boundaries. You can locate as there and enclose by a line, sort out and assess, divide up and discriminate between alternatives, compete over and fight over: these I call our Eight Powers. What is outside the cosmos the sage locates as there but does not sort out. What is within the cosmos
the sage sorts out but does not assess. The records of former kings in the successive reigns in the Annals the sage assesses, but he does not argue over alternatives.

To ‘divide’, then, is to leave something undivided: to ‘discriminate between alternatives’ is to leave something which is neither alternative. ‘What?’ you ask. The sage keeps it in his breast, common men argue over alternatives to show it to each other. Hence I say: ‘To “discriminate between alternatives” is to fail to see something’. (Graham 2001, p. 57)

Interestingly, here Zhuangzi appears himself to commit an act of discriminating by categorizing the types of distinction that can be made. This prompts the question: Is this an appropriate move, given his project? Interpreting him as a force fictionalist about all regions of discourse can help us to see why it is: if he uses words without commitment to literal meanings, he need not be committed to literal distinguishing, which he has just (apparently) argued to be potentially problematic. What is more, here (as elsewhere) Zhuangzi appears to propose a different sort of argument — one that involves appealing to a potential regress — to undermine the legitimacy of drawing literal distinctions, on the following grounds: Discrimination between A and B always leaves logical space for alternative C, and thus alternatives in principle cannot be mutually exclusive as well as exhaustive. However, this suggests that discriminations are fundamentally inadequate for their purported function of comprehensively carving up logical space in an accurate or legitimate way, because in positing them we only generate further, unseen alternatives. The sage, aware of this, can live in accordance with the way things really are; ordinary people, seduced by the task of discriminating between alternatives (say, by using words literally), cannot.\(^31\) Hence:

31. Many thanks to Zachary Gartenberg for this suggestion. Thank you also to an anonymous referee for recommending that I elaborate further here.

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Is Zhuangzi a Fictionalist?

The greatest Way is not cited as an authority, The greatest discrimination is unspoken, The greatest goodwill is cruel, The greatest honesty does not make itself awkward, The greatest courage does not spoil for a fight. When the Way is lit it does not guide, When speech discriminates it fails to get there, Goodwill too constant is at someone’s expense, Honesty too clean is not to be trusted, Courage that spoils for a fight is immature.

These five in having their corners rounded off come close to pointing the direction. Hence to know how to stay within the sphere of our ignorance is to attain the highest. Who knows an unspoken discrimination, an untold Way? It is this, if any is able to know it, which is called the Treasury of Heaven. Pour into it and it does not fill, bale out from it and it is not drained, and you do not know from what source it comes. It is this that is called our Benetnash Star.\(^32\) (Graham 2001, p. 57)

If this interpretation is on the right track, it—as alluded to above—suggests that, insofar as we should interpret Zhuangzi as a force fictionalist of some kind, we should interpret him as a force fictionalist about all uses of language. This is because his arguments, if compelling, suggest that he cannot believe that anything is literally true or sound—not even his own claims or arguments, whatever those

32. Here Graham adds the following note: “Benetnash Star: The standard text has the obscure Pao kuang (‘Shaded light’(?)), but there is a plausible variant, Yao-kuang, ‘Benetnash’, the star at the far end of the handle of the Dipper. The Dipper by turning its handle up, down, east, and west, marks the progress of the four seasons .... As a metaphor for the prime mover of things [Zhuangzi] chose not the stationary North Star but the circumpolar star which initiates the cyclic motions’ (Graham 2001, p. 57).
might be. For the “true” and the “false”, the “sound” and the “unsound,” and so on, are just specific instances of “It” and “Other,” and thus represent distinctions that are vulnerable to being impugned by the sorts of arguments surveyed above. And this is to say nothing of various other distinctions that individual arguments might employ! Of course, this suggests that his arguments are in some way self-undermining. But this is a point that Zhuangzi arguably recognizes, and which plausibly explains, e.g., the inclusion of certain rhetorical questions, such as those posed in the passage from the Qi Wu Lun discussed at the opening of this subsection. After all, as many have pointed out, if Zhuangzi is radically skeptical about language’s ability to ever get things right, then it would be odd of him to say it — and thus he does not, at least not directly. Reading Zhuangzi as a global force fictionalist can help to explain this curious feature of the text.

iv) Force Fictionalism and Zhuangzi’s Positive Project
What is really interesting, however, is that interpreting Zhuangzi as a fictionalist of this sort also can allow us to better see why he goes on acting as if he is making positive claims, at least in some circumstances. For even if one is inclined to think that language is either generally inaccurate or ultimately meaningless, it need not follow that it is useless. Rather, it may be that, as Zhuangzi sees things, we can instead use and interpret language — and the discriminations that it purports to make — non-literally, without commitment to (the accuracy of) literal meaning. To explain, I will begin with another remark from Graham’s commentary:

Although it is not easy to offer a definition of [D]aoism, thinkers classified as philosophical [D]aoists [such as Zhuangzi] do share one basic insight — that, while other things move spontaneously on the course proper to them, man has stunted and maimed his spontaneous aptitude by the habit of distinguishing alternatives, the right and the wrong, benefit and harm, self and others, and reasoning in order to judge between them. To recover and educate his knack he must learn to reflect his situation with the unclouded clarity of a mirror, and respond to it with the immediacy of an echo to a sound or shadow to a shape. For [Zhuangzi] the fundamental error is to suppose that life presents us with issues which must be formulated in words so that we can envisage 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 angler, do not precede each move by weighing the arguments for different alternatives. They spread attention over the whole situation, let its focus roam freely, forget themselves in their total absorption in the object, and then the trained hand acts spontaneously with a confidence and precision impossible to anyone who is applying rules and thinking out moves. (Graham 2001, p. 6)

If Graham is right, then Zhuangzi at minimum seriously downplays — if not totally discounts — the importance of distinguishing alternatives by employing, say, linguistic expressions. That said, as many have observed, given that the Zhuangzi is composed of words, it is reasonable to suspect that Zhuangzi could not be all that strongly inclined to believe that such things should be dispensed with entirely. Further, as noted above, in certain passages he appears to explicitly recommend that the sage use them, if sometimes in noncommittal or otherwise unconventional ways. Dispensing with linguistic expressions entirely would be unprincipled for independent reasons, anyway: it is not as if people might only problematically distinguish between things by using words — there are plenty of other possible ways to make those kinds of mistakes. And, if using linguistic expressions is just one of many human activities, participated in so that we might better traverse the world, on what grounds could one profitably argue that speech cannot be used for living well, although presumably every
other general type of human action can be so used (especially when such an argument would itself have to consist of linguistic expressions)? What is more, given that there is ample reason to think that Zhuangzi considers the distinction between “usefulness” and “uselessness” to be just another among the multitude of fundamentally problematic distinctions, why suppose that he holds any sort of view to the effect that, e.g., linguistic expressions are either “useless” or “useful”? More plausible instead is that he is at least inclined to believe that one can develop an ability for using words well, just as one can develop an ability for anything else.33

But what might developing an ability for using words well consist in, for Zhuangzi? One plausible suggestion, in light of the foregoing discussion: Rather than seeing ourselves as using language to articulate (which, for reasons just canvassed, arguably requires drawing problematic distinctions), we should rather see ourselves as using language to demonstrate or perform (which do not require such distinctions—at least not in the same purported way). For pointing or gesturing, e.g., can serve practical rather than theoretical functions: they need not involve acts of, say, predication, and thus need not be the kinds of singling-out that could be said to presuppose exclusive disjunctions between discrete alternatives. Instead, they may only draw attention to a possible perspective (thus leaving every other possible alternative perspective unspecified), rather than generating a further alternative perspective that can be characterized specifically as, e.g., “that perspective, C, which remains after we have drawn a distinction between A and B”. After all, while one can disagree with an (assertive) articulation, one cannot disagree with a (non-assertive) demonstration or performance, such as an illustration. Further, while the purpose of (assertive) articulation is principally to motivate one way of thinking, with the implicit aim of excluding others, (non-assertive) demonstrations or performances need not do this. (Non-assertive) demonstrations or performances can have contents that are much more open-ended, and can indicate or create perspectives whose contents either are not propositional, or, if they are, have an essentially demonstrative or indexical component, e.g., which makes it possible for them to be even infinitely open-ended.34 This is consistent with Zhuangzi’s apparent approval of characters that seem to be able to adapt to situations (especially those that people would generally regard as being thoroughly incompatible with thriving), and of flexibility or versatility in general. It also accords nicely with the thought that, for him, using language is one way to participate in living well, even if one’s utterances can never express truths.35 For, given much of what Zhuangzi says, the kinds of pointing or gesturing with language that are likely to be the most broadly productive will be just those kinds which, say, demonstrate or illustrate highly open-ended perspectives. Moreover, (merely) pointing or gesturing (which are kinds of acting)

33. Please note that I have decided to remain neutral, to the extent that I can, regarding the question of whether Zhuangzi celebrates skill as such, especially in light of considerations having to do with the possibility that flexibility, or versatility, is the relevant aim (after all, flexibility and versatility may not be skills as such). (Cf. Schwitzgebel, draft manuscript).

34. Along the lines of, say, the proposition that this is a way to look at that. Perspectives, after all, might be best characterized as involving dispositions that at least partially comprise psychological “points of view” rather than claims. Consider, e.g., Elisabeth Camp’s particularly detailed characterization of perspectives: “I think the best way to understand perspectives at an appropriately abstract level is to treat them as open-ended modes of interpretation. Perspectives are dispositions to characterize: to notice and attend to certain sorts of features, to care about certain sorts of questions and issues, to seek certain sorts of explanations, and to endorse certain sorts of affective and evaluative responses. As such, they are essentially non-propositional: while they can sometimes be crystallized in slogans like ‘Look out for number one’ or ‘Turn the other cheek,’ explicitly entertaining or endorsing such precepts is neither necessary nor sufficient for deploying the perspective. Indeed, it is not sufficient for having a perspective that one possess any particular beliefs or desires, or even that one intuitively ‘get’ any particular characterization. Rather, a perspective is a general ability to assimilate information and respond to the world. In this sense, a perspective is a tool for thinking rather than a thought itself: it determines no truth-conditions of its own, but provides a way of organizing and navigating among thoughts” (Camp forthcoming).

35. Note that such approval need not be expressed propositionally, but could rather be expressed as, e.g., an exclamation, and a flexible disposition demonstrated or performed rather than articulated. Note also that I say “in general” here, as the greatest flexibility might mandate, at least in certain circumstances, that one be — or at least appear — rigid.
in ways that subserve interaction and coordination are just the kinds of relevant activities that admit of being more-or-less well-performed.

The core idea, then, is this: Given sensible views about Zhuangzi’s perspective on language, it is reasonable to interpret him as not being concerned with using it to apprehend or convey truths about the world. Rather, he is plausibly better interpreted as being concerned with using language to (among other things) demonstrate or illustrate perspectives that can be manifested in a multitude of ways in action, depending on the circumstances — which, if right, might even suggest that he act in ways seemingly incompatible with such a stance from time to time. After all, if Zhuangzi would not be willing to do such a thing, then he would be at least tacitly committing himself to some potentially problematic distinction or another. He is better interpreted as being inclined to think that discourse is best conceived as being used to demonstrate or illustrate perspectives or perform in situations, as opposed to, say, state truths — even if that in turn sometimes involves us in talk in which we appear to draw literal distinctions between alternatives, or (as a special case of this) to aim at truth from time to time. Thus, in keeping with Zhuangzi’s noted linguistic aptitude, perhaps we can see him as the Cook Ding of discourse: an expert wordsmith who, unencumbered by literal commitment to distinctions like “right” and “wrong” or “true” and “false,” is maximally flexible and able to respond to any linguistic situation that he might encounter. And perhaps we can interpret him as suggesting — if, naturally, in some tentative respect — that we, his readers, consider developing a similar versatility. To draw out more clearly some of the merits of this interpretation, let us consider another line from Graham’s translation, in which Zhuangzi says, concerning the sage, “To leave off making footprints is easy, never to walk on the ground is hard” (Graham 2001, p. 69). Analogously, we might also think it true, as David Loy has remarked, that “it is easy to keep from talking; the hard thing is to talk without needing to touch

36. Cook Ding is the celebrated butcher of the third chapter of the Zhuangzi, whose ability for carving up oxen is presented as a great marvel (Graham 2001, p. 63–64).
1996, Van Norden 1996, Wong 2005), there are reasons to think that there is at least some sense in which Zhuangzi does not consider all ways of (thinking and) talking to be on equal footing. How can interpreting Zhuangzi as a global force fictionalist help to explain this, in addition to explaining (away) apparent contradictions in the text?

The short answer to this question is that, while interpreting Zhuangzi in this manner suggests that we take everything he says with a grain of salt, this is nonetheless compatible with taking some of the things he says with a few extra grains on top of that. Why hold that treating all ways of thinking and talking as equal would amount to a productive use of language in any wide range of possible situations? Rather, the situation seems the opposite. Treating all ways of thinking and talking as equal is likely to qualify as a productive use of language in some situations, to be sure — particularly situations in which one is trying to promote or realize certain kinds of flexibility or versatility (such as, one might think, a variety of scenarios scattered throughout the Zhuangzi) — but not in anything like the vast majority of everyday, practical situations that people are likely to find themselves in. Treating all ways of thinking and talking as equal in all but the rarest of circumstances would effectively render language useless for any purpose. We could not make even the most provisional of everyday choices if we were to treat all ways of thinking and talking as equal all of the time, or even a lot of the time. It is thus possible to reject the claim that some region of discourse is best interpreted as being (literally) truth-directed while viewing not every use of language as equally productive. And for Zhuangzi, it is plausible that the most broadly applicable uses of language are not going to be those that we take to express (literal) truths — that is not the game he is playing — but rather those that promote its flexible or versatile use in as wide a range of situations or contexts as is possible. They will be those that designate the most open-ended of perspectives, which can then be manifested in a multitude of ways in action, depending on the circumstances.

Given all this, we might think that Zhuangzi provides skeptical arguments for consideration, not to convince us that we do not know anything or that nothing is true, exactly, and not to convince us to give up thinking or talking about, e.g., morality or knowledge, but to inspire us to take conventional ways of thinking and talking far less seriously than we do, and to stop clinging to the idea that the aim of discourse should be to express (literal) truths — either directly or indirectly — in order to allow us to better preserve its open-ended potentialities. And this is why a defender of the approach on offer might have it that the situation is the opposite of what Schwitzgebel claims (at least in some interesting way), despite the numerous points of agreement already canvassed: that perhaps Zhuangzi does seriously endorse radically skeptical positions — at least in a sense — and does not seriously endorse claims that are incompatible with them. For if Zhuangzi need not be interpreted as believing skeptical positions to be interpreted as accepting them (especially if the positions in question suggest taking a neutral or agnostic attitude toward certain sorts of sentences or propositions, rather than a decidedly negative one) then he can be interpreted as endorsing, i.e., in the sense of accepting, skeptical positions without endorsing, i.e., in the sense of believing, them. In other words, Zhuangzi can be understood as aiming to demonstrate or illustrate a fictionalist perspective on discourse, rather than arguing for a thesis.

If one is inclined to think this interpretation helpful, then how might it guide one’s reading of the Zhuangzi? The question is especially vexed given that, as David Wong notes, binding together such a diverse array of themes (some favoring skepticism, some favoring engagement) in one coherent interpretation is a significant challenge, making it no surprise that interpretations tend to favor either skepticism or engagement (Wong 2005, p. 92). It is my view that reading Zhuangzi as a fictionalist along the lines suggested can allow us to give both the skeptical and engaged strands in his work their due, without necessarily, in Wong’s terms, giving “pride of place” to either, or making either “the overarching theme”. For, on this picture, while skepticism may be crucial for engagement, engagement is the very aim of skepticism. Because of this, interpreting Zhuangzi as a global
force fictionalist can also satisfy Schwitzgebel’s incisive call for commentators to provide a general account of how to interpret the Zhuangzi (Schwitzgebel 1996, p. 88), and Van Norden’s similar and equally perspicacious observation that, in order to meet the variety of interpretive challenges posed by the text, “we need to get a clearer idea of what Zhuangzi’s positive project is” (Van Norden 1996, p. 256). And it provides a way of responding to an analogous worry posed by Burton Watson: “Zhuangzi ... rejects all conventional values, and as a result ... rejects the conventional values of words as well, deliberately employing them to mean the opposite of what they ordinarily mean in order to demonstrate their essential meaninglessness.” (Watson 2003, p. 14) This causes trouble for interpreters: “Since Zhuangzi deliberately turns the values of words upside down, how are we ever to know for certain when he is sincerely praising something? This is the most serious problem one encounters in the interpretation of Daoist writings, as it is in the interpretation of the writings of Zen Buddhism. In any given passage, is the writer, regardless of what words he uses, describing a state of affairs that is in his eyes commendable or uncommendable? Depending upon how one answers this question, the interpretation of the entire passage will differ radically” (Watson 2003, p. 16).

Interpreting Zhuangzi as a global force fictionalist might permit us to make some headway on these sorts of issues insofar as it allows us to see the text as hanging together in a certain kind of way — that is, as directing us away from supposedly truth-seeking behaviors and toward developing ones that aim at flexibility and versatility via a globally force-fictionalistic perspective.

In addition to providing a general account of Zhuangzi’s positive project, this interpretation has several additional merits. Although I cannot attempt a comprehensive discussion of them here, I will note two that strike me as being among the most significant. First, it is in keeping with the spirit — if not the letter — of many recent interpretations of the Zhuangzi, and thus promises to unify seemingly disparate views. For instance, it sits comfortably with Kjellberg’s observation that while Zhuangzi seems to share much in common with Sextus Empiricus, whom some have suggested might also be profitably characterized as at least a proto-fictionalist (cf. Rosen 2005), he plausibly goes beyond him in seeming to endorse a view — or, perhaps better, perspective — to the effect that open-mindedness and equanimity (i.e., something like ataraxia) alone are not sufficient for living well; rather, they are beneficial in that they prepare and maintain the ground for flexible or versatile living, which often involves accepting expressions without belief in (what we might take to be) their semantic contents.

It is consonant with many commentators’ suggestions that Zhuangzi’s skepticism is better interpreted as, e.g., a method, recommendation, or therapy rather than a thesis (cf. Kjellberg 1996, Ivanhoe 1996, Raphals 1996, Van Norden 1996, and Schwitzgebel 1996). It can help explain why Zhuangzi at times seems to differentiate between “lesser knowledge” (xiao zhi) and “greater knowledge” (da zhi) — so-called “lesser knowledge” is less flexible, and involves less-open-ended perspectives, and so-called “greater knowledge” is more so, and involves more-open-ended perspectives — as well as to discuss relationships between them, but at other times seems highly skeptical of the possibility of drawing accurate distinctions or knowing anything at all (cf. Connolly 2011 and Sturgeon 2015). It makes clearer why, as Wong observes, Zhuangzi appears to both lament the human obsession with being right and invite our obsession by raising the question and then refusing to answer it (Wong 2005, p. 91). And it comports well with Van Norden’s compelling arguments in favor of the view that the Zhuangzi seems to present a four-level hierarchy of stages along the road to sage-hood: (1) The level of the cicada, dove, quail, and others whose talents suit them only for minor achievements but who scoff at the life of the sage (they take their conventional distinctions and limited perspectives very seriously); (2) the level exemplified by Song Rongzi, who is indifferent to the praise and blame of the world as well as the common distinctions between glory and disgrace (he has abandoned conventional distinctions and developed a broader perspective); (3) the level exemplified by Liezi, whose actions seem magical (the only limitation he has is that there is something that he
“relies upon”, suggesting that Liezi draws distinctions of some kind, although his perspective is extremely flexible and versatile); and (4) the level exemplified by the sage (symbolized by the bird named “Peng”), which lacks much descriptive content (all we are told is that the sage does not “rely upon” anything—not even the “magic” that Liezi uses, and that they have no “self”, “achievement”, or “fame”—and thus, it would seem, that the sage does not draw distinctions of any kind, at least not sincere ones, thus exemplifying the broadest of perspectives) (Van Norden 1996, p. 256). These can all be seen as steps on the path to realizing a globally force-fictionalist perspective, as they together plausibly represent the incremental shedding of purported commitments to (literal) meaning and truth, and the attendant broadening of one’s perspective.

Second, interpreting Zhuangzi as a global force fictionalist can help not only to resolve tensions between skeptical and non-skeptical passages in the Zhuangzi, but also to reconcile objectivist and non-objectivist strands in the work. For even if Zhuangzi is fruitfully interpreted as endorsing a view to the effect that no region of discourse is best interpreted as (literally) truth-directed, some other standard or model (or at least something like one) might well be in play: possibly that of flexibility or versatility. On this picture, views are “mistaken” or “incorrect”, e.g., to the extent that they fail to demonstrate or illustrate an adequately open-ended perspective, and “not mistaken” or “correct”, e.g., to the extent that they succeed at demonstrating or illustrating an adequately open-ended perspective—with the caveat that the temptation to subject all this to a final analysis in terms of truth (or other kinds of) talk, should be avoided, even if a working (and thus, indeed, flexibility- or versatility-based) analysis in such terms is apt.37 In this way, Zhuangzi can, as some have suggested, be potentially brought into constructive conversation with figures like Sextus Empiricus (cf. Kjellberg 1996) and Nāgārjuna (cf. Loy 1996), in addition to (as noted earlier) Nietzsche (cf. Allinson 1986, Shang 2006, Perkins 2011, Connolly 2011) and Wittgenstein (cf. Allinson 2007 and Møllgaard 2007). This is perhaps especially interesting because each of these philosophers has been discussed in connection with fictionalism or said to be fictionalist. What is more, their works contain oft-repeated aphorisms (concerning, e.g., ladders climbed and then thrown or kicked away, errors necessary for life, theses not made, and appearances both trusted and doubted) that bear a striking similarity to a famous passage contained within the so-called miscellaneous chapters of the Zhuangzi:

The bait is the means to get the fish where you want it, catch the fish and you forget the bait. The snare is the means to get the rabbit where you want it, catch the rabbit and you forget the snare. Words are the means to get the idea where you want it, catch on to the idea and you forget about the words. Where shall I find a man who forgets about words, and have a word with him? (Graham, p. 190)

Of course, if we interpret Zhuangzi as a fictionalist in the manner suggested above, then on his view it is perhaps not the case that there is such a thing as an idea with a (literal) meaning to be gotten. However, if by “idea” or “meaning” we simply intend something along the lines of “perspective” or “use” (as, e.g., Wittgenstein might have suggested), then we can see how this passage can take on a fresh significance for us, and guide our reading of the text in fascinating and delightful—and perhaps even indefinitely open-ended—new ways.

4. Bringing Zhuangzi into Broader Conversations

This interpretation of Zhuangzi can also bring him into productive dialogue with a number of longstanding philosophical questions, just two of which will be gestured toward here: first, the question of how we should respond to skeptical (and similar) arguments,38 and second, the question of how works of art—and, in particular, literature—can

37. Thank you again to Zachary Gartenberg for suggesting this way of putting the point.

38. For more detail on this connection, see Chung 2017b.
be said to have cognitive or epistemic value.\textsuperscript{39} I will briefly explain how this is so for each — leaving it open, of course, as to whether there are additional ways that this might be accomplished.

Regarding the first question, concerning skepticism, much work in epistemology, old and new, is devoted to explaining — or explaining away — the appeal of skeptical arguments and the like (that is, arguments designed to impugn most, if not all, of our claims to know), as well as the fact that it also often seems as if we use knowledge-attributing sentences to express truths.\textsuperscript{40} Fictionalism, however, is under-appreciated as a possible approach.\textsuperscript{41} Insofar as the \textit{Zhuangzi} can be fruitfully interpreted as suggesting a force-fictionalist perspective as a response to skeptical arguments (including many that are notably similar to those discussed in contemporary literature), this presents epistemologists with another approach to seriously consider — especially if such a view has enough to be said in its favor.\textsuperscript{42} Importantly, one might find inspiration in the \textit{Zhuangzi} to be a force fictionalist about some domains of discourse (e.g., knowledge discourse) but not others (even if Zhuangzi himself can be interpreted as a global force fictionalist). Some of Zhuangzi’s skeptical arguments might be better than others, after all. For instance, perhaps arguments from skeptical hypotheses,\textsuperscript{43} which we also find in the \textit{Zhuangzi}, give us stronger reason to be attracted to a force-fictionalist account of knowledge-talk than do arguments concerning the nature of language\textsuperscript{44} that (supposedly) give us reason to be attracted to global force fictionalism. And if so, we can possibly pick and choose from the \textit{Zhuangzi}, while still taking our approaches to have been informed by it.\textsuperscript{45}

Regarding the second question, concerning cognitivism about art (and particularly literary cognitivism), those who argue that art can have cognitive or epistemic — in addition to aesthetic — value have long been tasked with reconciling two common, yet seemingly incompatible, ways of thinking about the purpose and value of works of art. The first is that art at least in some cases appears to aim at truth, and can contribute to our understanding of, or knowledge about, the world and ourselves. The second is that it is in some way inappropriate to apply the terms ‘true’ and ‘false’ (or even ‘accurate’ and ‘inaccurate’) to art at all, and that art is just to the extent that it turns its back on reality. Further, it is even more difficult to do this in a way that gives art its due — that is, in a way that does not render it cognitively dispensable on the grounds that the truths (or knowledge, etc.) to which art affords us access might just as easily, if not more so, be discovered by means of other methods. For, it is one thing to say that works of art can have some form of cognitive value, and another to say that works of art can have some distinct and aesthetically significant form of cognitive value (cognitive value that obtains in virtue — rather than in spite — of the aesthetic features that they have). The task of explaining what art’s cognitive value might consist in is made even more challenging because it is not clear whether art makes claims about the world, or, if it does, whether its cognitive value (solely) consists in the claims that it manages to make (cf. Carroll 2002, Gibson 2008).\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{39} For more detail on this connection, see Chung 2018.

\textsuperscript{40} And knowledge-denying sentences to express falsehoods. I say “and the like” because skeptical arguments are comparable to arguments that have been used to motivate views such as (epistemic) contextualism, relativism, and subject-sensitive invariantism (e.g., Keith DeRose’s ‘bank cases’ in DeRose 2009).

\textsuperscript{41} For a defense of the claim that some form of fictionalism (namely, a form of content fictionalism) is worth pursuing further in this domain, see Chung 2017a.

\textsuperscript{42} For elaboration on this point, see Chung 2017b.

\textsuperscript{43} I.e., that aim to impugn the possibility of knowledge about the external world, e.g.

\textsuperscript{44} I.e., that aim to impugn the possibility of (accurate) meaning, e.g.

\textsuperscript{45} Thank you to an anonymous referee and to Ram Neta for pushing me to elaborate on this point. For further discussion of fictionalism as a possible response to skeptical arguments, see Chung 2017a and Chung 2017b. For more on how contemporary discussions of skepticism can be informed by the \textit{Zhuangzi}, see Chung 2017b.

\textsuperscript{46} For instance, the Sherlock Holmes novels might be understood as making certain true claims about aspects of the city of London, but it does not seem
This has led many recent commentators to oppose the traditional view that insofar as the cognitive value of art can be explicated in terms of knowledge, it is propositional knowledge in particular — often characterized as knowing that something is so. Rather, it is alleged that insofar as the cognitive value of art consists in its imparting knowledge, it is more promising to think that it consists in its imparting some other kind of knowledge, such as experiential knowledge, phenomenal knowledge, or perhaps knowing how to do something (cf. Currie 1995, Walton 1997, Burri 2007, and Gibson 2008). Such knowledge is often thought to be non-propositional in nature, though nonetheless concerned with aspects of reality (as it is in the frequently discussed example, at least in contemporary epistemology, of knowing how to ride a bicycle).

The Zhuangzi, however, is an intriguing text to consider in the context of this debate, not only because it strikes many readers as at once both literary and philosophical, but also because — as noted above — interpreters have often remarked that its style, form, or otherwise aesthetic features seem to be related to its cognitive content, or cognitive or epistemic value, in some way (cf. Kjellberg and Ivanhoe 1996 and Raphals 1996).47 Just how they are exactly, of course, is an open question; however, if it is reasonable to think that the inclusion of, e.g., fictional stories and literary devices not only might be to some degree indicative of a fictionalist stance, but indeed might be among the most rhetorically effective ways of motivating such a stance (at least in the case of the Zhuangzi in particular), it is easy to see how interpreting Zhuangzi as a fictionalist in the manner suggested provides an especially interesting example for literary cognitivists — and cognitivists about art more broadly — to consider (in addition to anyone else who wishes to investigate very general questions having to do with how aesthetic features of a work might help to determine its cognitive or epistemic content and value). Furthermore, if it is plausible that the Zhuangzi conveys a fictionalist perspective, this in turn suggests that perhaps its cognitive or epistemic value at least in part consists in its ability to engender know-how as regards adopting and employing that perspective (rather than any thesis, which fits well with much of the foregoing discussion) — something that may be true of literary works more generally.48 Moreover, in reflecting on these sorts of possibilities, we can see in addition how the Zhuangzi promises not just to better inform contemporary analytic epistemology, philosophy of language, and aesthetics, but also to help build additional bridges between these areas — bridges which, if sufficiently strong, might stand as yet another testament to the text’s enduring flexibility and versatility.

Acknowledgements

There are more who deserve thanks than I could mention individually here. Just a few standouts include Bryan Van Norden, Dan Korman, and Zachary Gartenberg, for reading and commenting on earlier versions of this paper, as well as two anonymous referees for doing the same. Many thanks as well to all those who participated in the 12th Annual Midwest Conference on Chinese Thought, who were among the first to hear and comment on my fictionalist interpretation of the Zhuangzi, with special thanks to John Williams, Stephen Walker, Asia Guzowska, Aaron Stalnaker, and Michael Ing. (A revised version of this paper was later also presented at the 2016 Canadian Philosophical Association conference.) I would also like to thank my fellow participants on a panel at the 2017 American Philosophical Association’s Eastern Division conference entitled “What Can We Learn from Chinese Skepticism?” — Alexus McLeod, Eric Schwitzgebel, and Bryan Van Norden — and a panel at their Pacific Division conference in the same year entitled “Dealing with the Unreal”: Laura Guerrero, Anand

47. The fact that Zhuangzi is often interpreted in addition as downplaying (if not totally discounting) knowing-that, while playing up (if not outright extolling) knowing-how might also be interesting to explore in connection with this question; because of the complexities involved, however, I will not attempt this task here.

48. For further discussion, see Chung 2018 and Chung m.s.
Vaidya, and Jay Garfield, who all offered feedback on earlier versions of several claims and arguments discussed in this paper.

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