

Free and Easy Conversing

Liam Kofi Bright and Rose Novick¹

Liam: The Warhol museum really is the best in the city, thanks for inviting me! Tell you what, it's such a lovely evening, why don't we walk into town just for the stroll, rather than going home straight away?

Rose: Definitely! I can't stay out too late, though—I'm meeting with a student tomorrow to discuss the *Zhuangzi*, and I need to do some prep work tonight.

Liam: Don't worry, we can just walk around the cultural district a bit and then I'll get the bus home. Very cool that you have a student interested in the *Zhuangzi*, what will you be discussing?

Rose: We're going to be talking about the happiness of fish passage.

Liam: Nice! I love that passage. I love that Zhuangzi doesn't always win his own dialogues.

Rose: Oh, no, I don't agree with that! It's one of many stories where he comes out on top against his fussy friend Huizi. I have the text here—see for yourself:

Zhuangzi and Huizi were strolling along the bridge over the Hao River. Zhuangzi said, "The minnows swim about so freely, following the openings wherever they take them. Such is the happiness of fish."

Huizi said, "You are not a fish, so whence do you know the happiness of fish?"

Zhuangzi said, "You are not I, so whence do you know I don't know the happiness of fish?"

Huizi said, "I am not you, to be sure, so I don't know what it is to be you. But by the same token, since you are certainly not a fish, my point about your inability to know the happiness of fish stands intact."

Zhuangzi said, "Let's go back to the starting point. You said, 'Whence do you know the happiness of fish?' Since your question was premised on your knowing that I know it, I must have known it from right here, up above the Hao River. (141-42)

¹ Authors are listed in alphabetical order. Both contributed equally. All citations are to: Ziporyn, Brook (trans.). 2020. *Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co.

There's Zhuangzi with the last word, as usual!

Liam: Right, but it's a ridiculous last word, right? He tries to trap Huizi and fails!

Rose: Sure, he fails to trap Huizi with his first rejoinder – that's why he changes tack with the second. But the basic point of each is the same: Huizi's objection is self-undermining. Huizi challenges Zhuangzi's ability to know other minds. But, Zhuangzi retorts (in two different ways), the very conversation he and Huizi are having requires each to know the mind of the other.

Liam: Bloody hell, Rose, you're way off mate! You've just made Zhuangzi the author, one of the most famous sceptics in philosophical history, into a dogmatist! In this passage we see Huizi getting his chance to be the humble sceptic, and Zhuangzi the character experiencing a bit of comeuppance, for once. Don't take this moment away from our boy Huizi.

Rose: I'm afraid I'm going to have to take this moment away from our boy Huizi, Liam. I think you need something like my reading to make sense of the overall structure of the dialogue. After Huizi challenges Zhuangzi ("you are not a fish..."), Zhuangzi has the quite clever retort that, by Huizi's own logic, Huizi, not being Zhuangzi, cannot know what Zhuangzi knows. On my reading, we can see a deeper point behind Zhuangzi's trap. The implication is that the very fact that Huizi is conversing with Zhuangzi suggests that Huizi has some knowledge of Zhuangzi's mind. Zhuangzi wants to suggest that if Huizi were really committed to the skepticism he's pushing for, their conversation would be impossible.

Liam: Interesting read, but I think that's a bit beyond what's actually in the text. That said, before I object more thoroughly, how does this reading make sense of Zhuangzi's final retort? I'm not yet seeing it.

Rose: Think about how Huizi responds to Zhuangzi. Huizi, logician that he is, sees Zhuangzi's clever trap and evades it successfully. He sees Zhuangzi as accusing him of self-contradiction (or at least something nearby): he's making claims about another's mind while denying that claims about other minds are justifiable. Huizi rightly notes that, by reflecting on his own inability to know Zhuangzi's mind, he can reasonably also infer Zhuangzi's inability to know the fish's minds. There's no contradiction. I think we have to recognize that Huizi's reply to the logical trap is entirely adequate. He's not some undergrad who can be tricked into the truth. But – and here's where my reading really starts to help us – Huizi entirely misses Zhuangzi's underlying point. Zhuangzi, in his final reply, takes a step back and makes that point explicit: the very fact that you're talking to me implies you have some knowledge of my mind. And so, Zhuangzi continues, in just the same way, I can know the happiness of fish, and I can know it from here, above the Hao.

Liam: I see where you're going with that, and we agree that Huizi successfully evades the trap, but it still doesn't make sense of why Zhuangzi, so thoroughly skeptical in so much of the work, would suddenly be seen making a knowledge claim, and especially a knowledge claim about something so fraught as the preferences of other minds.

Rose: Well, is Zhuangzi's skepticism really so thorough-going? I'd argue that Zhuangzi quite frequently depicts either himself or other admirable figures as making knowledge claims about other minds. Indeed, I'd go so far as to say that Zhuangzi's ideal of the sage *requires* that one be able to understand the minds of others.

Liam: Why's that?

Rose: Consider the case of the "three in the morning" passage. In this passage, a monkey trainer gives the monkeys three chestnuts in the morning, telling them they'll get four in the evening. This makes the monkeys furious, and so the trainer decides to give them four in the morning and three in the evening. This delights the monkeys. Here is Zhuangzi's comment on this parable:

This change brought them no loss either in name or in fact, but in one case it brought anger and in another delight. He just went along with the 'thisness', relying on the rightness of the present 'this.' Thus the Sage uses various rights and wrongs to harmonize with others, and yet remains at rest in the middle of Heaven the Potter's Wheel. This is called Walking Two Roads. (16)

The monkey-trainer exemplifies sagelike behavior here by walking two roads: by recognizing the inherent indifference between the two ways of distributing the acorns on the one hand, and by going along with the monkeys' wishes on the other. Without getting too far into the weeds here, I think one lesson of this passage is that the ideal of "going along with things" requires – when the things are sentient – being able to understand what it is that those beings desire.

Liam: But then what do you make of the numerous skeptical passages in the book, on this reading?

Rose: I want to suggest two things. First, these passages often establish a limited, targeted skepticism about what is desirable in itself, and not a skepticism about other minds. Second, I want to go even further and suggest that, in at least some cases, the arguments establishing this skepticism presuppose that people are able to know the contents of other minds. Consider what is to my mind, one of Zhuangzi's most compelling skeptical arguments:

Zhuangzi said to Huizi, “Confucius went along for sixty years and transformed sixty times. What he first considered right he later considered wrong. He could never know if what he presently considered right were not fifty-nine times wrong.” (p. 226, see also p. 213 for another instance of this argument)

This argument nicely displays both points. First, Zhuangzi is quite explicit that what Confucius changes his mind about is what he “used to call right” – the target here is not fully general. Second, the argument itself presumes that we can know at least this much about Confucius mind: that it changed.

Liam: That’s certainly suggestive, but you’re treading on dangerous ground here, because that’s an argument that threatens to prove a lot more than you want it to. After all, we change our minds about all sorts of things, not just about what’s desirable in itself. Most pertinently, we certainly change our minds about what other people think, feel, and want with some regularity!

Rose: You’re right that that passage by itself is merely suggestive of the points I want to make. And I am personally inclined to leverage such considerations in service of a more thoroughgoing skepticism than I’m suggesting Zhuangzi intended. But again I think the overall tenor of Zhuangzi’s skeptical arguments – the use Zhuangzi himself makes of them – is limited in these ways. For another example, take Gnawgap’s questioning of Baby Sovereign. Gnawgap asks, “Do you know what all things agree in considering right?” Baby Sovereign replies in the negative (“How could I know that?”). Again the target in question is skepticism about finding a universal standard of right and wrong. And again, when we turn to the arguments for it, we again see that they presuppose knowledge of other minds. Baby Sovereign gives many examples, I’ll mention just one:

Monkeys take she-monkeys for mates, elks mount deer, male fish frolic with female fish, while humans regard Mao Qiang and Lady Li as great beauties – but when fish see them they dart into the depths, when birds see them they soar into the skies, when deer see them they bolt away without looking back. Which of these four ‘knows’ what is rightly alluring? (19)

We may not be able to know how to determine what is “rightly alluring”, or even whether such a determination could be made at all, but we certainly do know that different creatures disagree about this standard!

Liam: Ok so I’ll grant that in some of the skeptical passages, the skepticism in question is limited and targeted in the way you’re suggesting. But there are plenty of other passages wherein Zhuangzi gestures towards a more general scepticism. Take,

for instance, his criterion argument. In the second chapter he outlines the following worry:

Suppose you and I get into a debate. If you win and I lose, does that really mean you are right and I am wrong? If I win and you lose, does that really mean I'm right and you're wrong? Must one of us be right and the other wrong? Or could both of us be right, or both of us wrong? If neither you nor I can know, a third person would be even more benighted. Whom should we have straighten out the matter? Someone who agrees with you? But since he already agrees with you, how can he straighten it out? Someone who agrees with me? But since he already agrees with me, how can he straighten it out? Someone who disagrees with both of us? But if he already disagrees with both of us, how can he straighten it out? Someone who agrees with both of us? But since he already agrees with both of us, how can he straighten it out? So neither you nor I nor any third party can ever know how it is – shall we wait for yet some 'other'? (20)

The upshot of this passage seems to be that there is no perspective-neutral viewpoint from which disagreement can be adjudicated. Any perspective that would settle the matter shows by this very fact that it is biased towards one disputant, and not a fair arbiter. I note that Zhuangzi thus rejects the idea of something like a neutral or absolute perspective which is definitionally just the correct one - Heaven's point of view is just one more point of view, on a par with all the others, on this reading. As such, when we encounter disagreement, we are left with no fair way of deciding which perspective is to be preferred. Whether or not this is persuasive as an argument, it seems on its face to be a quite general argument for scepticism in the face of disagreement - of which Zhuangzi and Huizi's disagreement would seem to be an instance.

And this is far from the only such passage! Probably the most famous passage in the text is the butterfly dream:

Once Zhuang Zhou dreamt he was a butterfly, fluttering about joyfully just as a butterfly would. He followed his whims exactly as he liked and knew nothing about Zhuang Zhou. Suddenly he awoke and there he was, the startled Zhuang Zhou in the flesh. He did not know if Zhou had been dreaming he was a butterfly, or if a butterfly was now dreaming it was Zhou. Now surely Zhou and a butterfly count as two distinct identities, as two quite different beings! And just this is what is meant when we speak of transformation of *any* one being into another – of the transformation of all things. (21)

This seems to be exactly a classical dream argument for general scepticism, does it not?

Rose: That's a tough one – I'm going to need to think more about the criterion passage. But I'll cover up my shame on that point by taking on the butterfly dream passage, which I read quite differently than you do. As western post-Cartesians, it's only natural to read the butterfly passage as a Chinese version of Descartes' dream argument, directed at skepticism toward the external world. But I don't think that's really the fish that Zhuangzi's after in this passage. Consider how the passage ends: "Now surely Zhou and a butterfly count as two distinct identities, as two quite different beings! And just this is what is meant when we speak of transformation of *any* one being into another – of the transformation of all things." When Zhuangzi doesn't know whether he's Zhou dreaming he's a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming he's Zhou, this is not so much a mark of skepticism but of Zhuangzi's ability to move between the two perspectives, to know both his own mind and the butterfly's. To put it bluntly: Zhuangzi doesn't know whose seemings he's having!

Liam: That's an interesting reading, but does it get you what you really want? The butterfly is still a creation of Zhuangzi's own mind -- or Zhuangzi of the butterfly's own mind, if you like. This doesn't really amount to a knowledge of other minds of the sort Zhuangzi seems to be claiming in the happiness of fish passage. Rather than knowledge of other minds, this is the ability to simulate multiple perspectives.

Rose: I think Zhuangzi would challenge your sharp separation of the two cases. The butterfly passage comes from the second chapter, "Equalizing Assessments of Things," as Ziporyn translates it. In the very first passage from the chapter, we see a discussion between Sir Shoestrap of Southwall and Sir Swimmy Faceformed. Faceformed asks Shoestrap, "Who or what is this here? ... Can the body really be made like a withered tree, the mind like dead ashes? What leans against this armrest now is not what leaned against it before" (11). Already we start to see the slipperiness of identity: Shoestrap at the time of questioning is not the same man as he was before. And Shoestrap, in his answer, confirms this: "How good it is that you question this, Yan! What's here now is this: I have lost me" (11). Now, I think we should read the butterfly passage, which closes the chapter, in this light. Zhuangzi, reflecting on his dream, has lost the knowledge of quite who he is, and the boundary between being himself and being some other thing – and, as he notes, to be a butterfly is certainly different than to be Zhou! – has accordingly become unclear. Now, I'll grant you that this still doesn't amount to full-on knowledge of other minds, sure. But anything that undermines the existence of strict boundaries around the self is necessarily going to

undermine the idea that we have privileged access to our own seemings but cannot know the minds of others. So I'd say the butterfly dream passage is actually supportive of the reading I've been pursuing.

Liam: I see I see, but I think this reading raises another puzzle about the passage. After all, the structure of the dialogue relies upon someone being mistaken about the content of another's mind, Zhuangzi if Huizi is right about the inaccessibility of the fish, or Huizi if Zhuangzi is right about the fish. It thus seems that the very dialogue itself is rather reliant upon the idea that we cannot so easily gain access to other people's mental states. What's more, as I say this, I am struck by the fact that this is, after all, essentially what Huizi said to Zhuangzi in his rejoinder. Even if some of Zhuangzi's arguments succeed, the very fact that they must come paired with an error theory for Huizi still essentially relies upon the relative inaccessibility of other people's mental states. And if it's hard for Huizi to know what his lifelong friend and conversational partner has knowledge of, how much harder is it for Zhuangzi to know what the fish want!

Rose: I think you're right, but this only cuts against a too strong reading of what Zhuangzi is arguing. Zhuangzi is not arguing that we can infallibly know the minds of others. Clearly not: he doesn't think we can infallibly know even our own minds! After all, if we could infallibly know our own minds, how could Zhuangzi ever be confused about whether he's Zhou or a butterfly? Rather, what's going on here is a subtle debate over how to understand this fallibility. Huizi is pushing a thoroughgoing skepticism, of a sort that turns on instituting sharp boundaries between individuals. Throughout the text, Zhuangzi breaks down those boundaries. So why shouldn't Zhuangzi know the happiness of fish? And, to push the point a bit further, I'd push back against your claim that, if Zhuangzi is right about the fish, Huizi must be wrong about Zhuangzi. After all, in Zhuangzi's final reply, he quite explicitly says that Huizi does know that Zhuangzi knows, even if Huizi is ignoring this fact to push his skepticism. Huizi's not wrong about Zhuangzi—Huizi's wrong about Huizi!

Liam: Well let's take this back to the start, and think again to the first and most natural guess as to why Zhuangzi takes the fish to be happy; they're engaged in free and easy wandering. You have made your case that Zhuangzi thinks we can have access to the seemings of other critters. That both coheres and contrasts with another passage from the ninth book:

Here are the horses, able to tramp over frost and snow with the hooves they have, to keep out the wind and cold with their coats. Chomping the grass and drinking the waters, prancing and jumping over the terrain—this is the genuine inborn nature of horses. Even if given fancy terraces and great halls, they would have no

use for them. Then along comes Bo Le, saying, "I am good at managing horses!" He proceeds to brand them, shave them, clip them, bridle them, fether them with crupper and martingale, pen them in stable and stall – until about a quarter of the horses have dropped dead. Then he starves them, parches them, trots them, gallops them, lines them up neck to neck or nose to tail, tormenting them with bit and rein in front and with whip and spur behind. By then over *half* of the horses have dropped dead. (81)

It coheres because, after all, the Zhuangzi author evidently takes themselves to know that Bo Le was wrong about what was good for horses. But it contrasts because it also makes it clear that this can be opaque to people, Bo Le was entirely mistaken about what was good for the horses. Well maybe Zhuangzi is best understood in the fish passage as making the mistake of Bo Le. The Zhuangzi character thinks the fish are happy to be engaged in free and easy wandering because, well, that's the sort of thing that Zhuangzi would like - he is making an all too quick inference from the sort of thing that seems from his particular human perspective to be a good life, and that's where he goes wrong.

This, I think, also speaks to the ideal of the sage in the zookeeper passage. The sage doesn't need to understand why the monkeys register the morning/evening feeding regime as so very different, indeed from the sage's perspective it's no real difference at all. But they get harmonious behaviour by simply going along with whatever seems to work - understood as, whatever seems to keep the monkeys from misbehaving - despite not knowing why it works. This is a model of successful action without knowledge, just the sort of thing one needs to be possible if one is going to advocate for the rather curious figure of a sceptical sage. And in this passage it is Huizi who is more closely approximating the sagacious zookeeper than Zhuangzi.

Rose: Hmmmm, I can see the charge (though I'd resist it) that Zhuangzi is assuming that because he enjoys freely wandering, fish must also enjoy it. But I think your read of Zhuangzi as making the same mistake as Bo Le is far too strong. First, Zhuangzi is merely observing the fish, not "improving" them. Even if he's wrong about what he observes, it's a much more minor error. Second, we know that Bo Le's method is a problem because we can see the effect it has on the horses: they die. But we see no such ill effects on the fish: they are not showing signs of distress. And do you really think Zhuangzi would be depicted as so thoroughly oblivious in his own book?

Liam: I mean I do actually think an episode showing Zhuangzi making a mistake is what we would expect of Zhuangzi as an author. I'm reminded of the paradox of the preface, where an author who would defend each individual claim in their book nonetheless says "I am sure some mistakes are to be found in this book" in

the preface. Whatever one thinks of the logic or epistemology of such a situation, I feel quite sure that the authorial persona that shines forth in this text -- despite the fact that it certainly does not correspond to one real person for the whole book -- would absolutely delight in this paradox. They would never want you to read the book and come away thinking they never made a mistake, and would delight in some proof that a mistake in the text is inevitable. In fact there is a story in the book which seems to involve a paradox of the preface esque situation. A wheelwright makes a convincing case that reading the texts of old sages can give you nothing more than the "chaff and dregs of the men of old". The text itself advises against taking too seriously the sort of thing that sages record in texts!

So, like, yeah; the Zhaungzi author would want the audience to know that they too can make mistakes. The happiness of fish episode then is a nod to this wonderfully humane fallibility of the authorial persona. They make an over confident claim, attempt but fail to dodge Huizi's charge against them, then when it is apparent their trap failed they more or less just shrug and laugh it off, giving a jokey non-sequitur to move the conversation along.

Rose: Yes, I'll grant that what we are discussing here is only the dregs of a long-distant conversation, and I'll grant as well that we have good reason to think Zhuangzi fallible. But I have two concerns about this interpretation of yours. First, I think the wheelwright passage points toward a different sort of fallibility than you indicate. To say that the writings of sages are dregs is to say that they are of limited value; it is not to say that they are wrong. They are of limited value because, in writing, they become fixed, detached from the perspective of their initial utterance. What is a living action in a particular context risks becoming a Confucian rite if stripped from that context; what is a living response to a particular interlocutor risks becoming a stultifying dogma if set down in a text. Writings of sages are the dregs *of sages* – of people who genuinely got something right. They are dregs because, from the text itself, we cannot extract what it is they got right. So to use the wheelwright passage as giving us reason to expect to see Zhuangzi failing seems to me a stretch.

Second, and relatedly, even granting Zhuangzi's fallibility, I think you're going too far, depriving him of the serious point he wants to make. Zhuangzi isn't simply giving a jokey non-sequitur, as you put it. His final reply at least appears to make a serious point – one compatible with him being fallible. It is often remarked that Huizi asks his question in a strange way, using the word *ān* (安). Not so much "how do you know" but "*whence* do you know". And Zhuangzi ends by answering this question, detailing the perspective from which he knows the happiness of fish: he knows it from here, above the river Hao.

Liam: Ah come now, we can't go round making excuses for Zhuangzi's silly answers and mistakes like this! I don't think he'd want us to do that either. The silliness is part of the point he's trying to make!

Rose: But Liam, you are not Zhuangzi. Whence do you know that Zhuangzi wants us to recognize his fallibility?

[At this point, the text bifurcates, with two alternate endings. They may be read in either order.]

ENDING #1

Liam: Well I guess I am just trying to treat this text like I would any other. And, while of course I acknowledge that I am fallible, I do think at least some ability to do something like Gricean intent detection or attribution is an important part of ever recognising the meaning of an utterance. I think Zhuangzi wants us to recognise his fallibility because his intent to do this, and his desire that we recognise this intent, would make sense of this and other passages throughout the text.

Rose: But Liam, look – you've just granted Zhuangzi's point. The very fact that we're having this conversation, that we're able to interpret Zhuangzi, despite a distance of thousands of miles and thousands of years, shows that we can know something about the contents of a distant mind. To be sure, this knowledge is fallible, for reasons Zhuangzi helps us diagnose. For one, we have only the "dregs" of Zhuangzi, and not the man himself. And of course the two of us disagree, and perhaps Zhuangzi is right about the impossibility of resolving disputes.

But, nonetheless, the gap between our minds and Zhuangzi's mind is permeable. It's not absolute, not an unbridgeable chasm. Were Huizi simply noting that Zhuangzi's knowledge of the happiness of fish is fallible and uncertain, that would be fine. But that's not what he does: he tries to set up a general skepticism, an absolute boundary between mind and mind. And that is the error. Of course Zhuangzi's knowledge is from a limited, partial perspective. Zhuangzi knows it from above the Hao, not from nowhere. In just the same way, we know what Zhuangzi meant: we know it from here, above the Allegheny.

Liam: Ah, I want to respond to that, but I think it's time to part ways. I'll need to take this left if I am going to get the bus into Friendship.

ENDING #2

Liam: Ah I got over excited and spoke too strongly when I said I felt sure of what he'd want. I guess I just feel such a strong affinity with the Zhuangzi as a text that I'm tempted to personalise it -- I sometimes think of its author as a friend, even. But that author is not so much any historical person(s) with desires and propensities of their own, more a construction of my mind.

Because, well, I'm with Zhuangzi's wheelwright. We don't have the sages who wrote the Zhuangzi with us anymore, we only have their dregs in this text. So we can't or needn't worry ourselves about what they would have wanted - they're gone now and can never tell us. It's up to us to make of their dregs what we will - and to do that I find it fruitful to think of them as someone with a character, with a spirit, with intents and desires that manifest themselves in various ways throughout the text. Not because there is any real mind reading going on here, to be clear, but rather because doing this helps me keep track of and organise all the perspectives the text throws at me. Through constructing an authorial persona I am doing something like Zhuangzi simulating the butterfly's perspective, or the butterfly his - seeing what it is like to order the flow of experience in a quite different manner, and trying to experience the world from that perspective.

So what is it I want to make coherent here? Well I think the challenge is to find a read of this text which can make sense of not just isolated passages like the Huizi dialogue, but also the many places I have mentioned here wherein Zhuangzi puts forward sceptical considerations. There are so many of these, and some of them - like the criterion argument - seem so sweeping, that I can't help but make a sceptic of the author. What is more, it is not just the content, but also the tone. The author tells jokes, and has passages where the joke seems to me at least partly on him, such as the passage wherein Zhuangzi has a sudden realisation of the oneness of all things and refuses to harm a bird he had intended to poach - just in time to escape the groundskeeper of the lands he was trespassing on! So where possible it seems that the Zhuangzi I construct should be sceptical, playful, and capable of self-deprecation.

So there is the author I am constructing, and it feels to me that this passage can fit that nicely. He's playful with his friend Huizi, the author is a sceptic throughout, and in letting the character of Huizi get the upper hand by making the sceptical point, he is engaging in some self-deprecation too. These are what I make of my dregs. It's not that I know that the real Zhuangzi, whoever or whatever that might be, would want me to do this - but as an imaginative exercise I find this Zhuangzi brings an illuminating unity to a disparate text.

Rose: We agree on at least one thing: counting Zhuangzi as a friend. And I share your interpretive approach, even if I end up somewhere different. I suppose that throws us back to that pesky criterion passage—I haven't forgotten that I never gave a proper response to that. And I'm still not sure what to say. I really do feel the force of it: it *does* seem sweeping in the ways you suggest...

Liam: Well, Rose, if you agree about that, then my point about Zhuangzi's fallibility and willingness to self-deprecate stands intact.

Rose: Ahhhh, I can't let you get away with that! But I really do have to get home now if I want to prep for meeting my student tomorrow. You've given me lots to think about!