

## TAKING SKEPTICISM SERIOUSLY: HOW THE *ZHUANG-ZI* CAN INFORM CONTEMPORARY EPISTEMOLOGY

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper explores a few of the ways that the Zhuang-Zi can inform contemporary analytic epistemology. I begin, in section 1, by briefly outlining and summarizing the case for my fictionalist interpretation of the text. In section 2, I discuss how the Zhuang-Zi can be brought into productive dialogue with the question of how we should respond to skeptical arguments. Specifically, I argue that the Zhuang-Zi can be reasonably interpreted as exemplifying an approach that is different from dominant contemporary responses to skeptical arguments in three ways: (i) it is fictionalist; (ii) it motivates a skeptical perspective rather than a claim; and (iii) it accomplishes its aims in an atypical, but nonetheless contextually appropriate, way. However, the Zhuang-Zi is relevant to contemporary debates about skeptical arguments because it can be used: (i) to respond to the same sorts of skeptical arguments that occupy contemporary commentators; (ii) to address a number of questions that arise in connection with such arguments; and (iii) to suggest important new questions for epistemologists to pursue.*

**Keywords:** *cross-cultural philosophy, fictionalism, literary cognitivism, skepticism, Zhuang Zi*

It is now widely acknowledged that including so-called “non-Western” philosophies in “Western” philosophical discourse is a worthwhile goal.<sup>1</sup> However, as a number of commentators have pointed out, there is sometimes thought to be a *double bind* on philosophers who would seek to promote the engagement of such “alternative” philosophies: specifically, they are expected to demonstrate simultaneously both the substantive novelty of some non-Western philosophical discourse as well as its

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<sup>1</sup> I say “so-called”, as the dichotomy between “non-Western” and “Western” is fraught. A better alternative might distinguish Euro-American traditions from non-Euro-American traditions, though this may turn out to be in some ways problematic, too.

applicability to independently developed contemporary debates (cf. Olberding 2015).<sup>2</sup> Indeed, this challenge can even be phrased much more pointedly as an allegedly intractable *dilemma*: either non-Western philosophies do the same sorts of things as Western philosophies, or they don't. If they do, then there is no reason to include them in discussions of Western philosophies, as they will not offer anything *different*. But if they don't, then there is still no reason to include them in discussions of Western philosophies, as they will not offer anything *relevant* (cf. Ganeri 2016).

Leaving questions concerning its legitimacy aside, the challenge encapsulated in this “double bind” is arguably one that can be met. Indeed, a number of philosophers—far too many to name individually—have already made impressive attempts to meet it. This paper comprises my own modest and programmatic effort to do so. I restrict the scope of my inquiry to a single text, and to one small set of philosophical topics that it addresses. Nonetheless, it is my hope that this case study will form part of a growing literature that aims to enrich Western philosophy (and philosophy more broadly) by bringing diverse philosophical traditions into conversation with each other.

The plan is to explore just a few of the ways that the *Zhuang-Zi* can inform contemporary analytic epistemology.<sup>3</sup> Because it is controversial as to how to interpret the positive philosophical project proposed in the *Zhuang-Zi* (insofar as there is one proposed at all), I begin, in section 1, by briefly outlining and summarizing the case for my ‘fictionalist’ interpretation of it.<sup>4</sup> In section 2, I use this interpretation as a springboard for discussing how the *Zhuang-Zi* can be brought into productive dialogue with a perennial philosophical question: how we should respond

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<sup>2</sup> For dissenting opinion regarding the legitimacy of this double bind, please see the editor's remarks on this concern in “Editor's Words” of this issue of the journal as well as Mou 2015b.

<sup>3</sup> For a succinct and lively introduction to what the *Zhuang-Zi* is and what it does, see Hansen 2014. For the purposes of this paper, I will be using ‘the *Zhuang-Zi*’ and ‘Zhuang Zi’ more or less interchangeably. For even if the *Zhuang-Zi* was not written by a single person picked out by the name ‘Zhuang Zi’, it might still be interpreted as somehow suggesting a view that could have been expressed by such a person. Also, for simplicity, and in keeping with common practice, the view that I defend here is principally constructed so as to apply to the so-called “inner chapters” of the text (those most widely considered to be attributable to a historical person called ‘Zhuang Zi’). However, I am open to reconsidering this approach, especially since I do not think that there is any reason to worry that it cannot be extended beyond the inner chapters. That said, I am also open to the possibility that the view I defend here might be further restricted even within the inner chapters (say, to the *Qi-Wu-Lun*, ch. 2, alone), as it is at present an open question as to whether a fictionalist interpretation of the *Zhuang-Zi* along the lines proposed can accommodate the wisdom and significant contribution conveyed by Zhuang Zi's philosophy that has long been recognized by Chinese scholars. (Many thanks to an anonymous referee for encouraging me to be more explicit about this important point.) There is, however, some recent work by Chinese scholars that may support a more expansive fictionalist interpretation of the *Zhuang-Zi*: e.g., the passages on Zhuang Zi's use of language in *Yu-Yan* (ch. 27) and *Tian-Xia* (ch. 33) could be plausibly read as supporting such a reading, especially if one reads *zhiyan* (“goblet words”) like Wu Kuang-ming (1990, 370) and Shang Geling (2006, 104-105) do. (Many thanks to John Williams for this suggestion.)

<sup>4</sup> I defend this interpretation in more detail in Chung n.d.a.

to skeptical (and similar) arguments.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, I argue that the *Zhuang-Zi* exemplifies an approach that is different from dominant contemporary responses to skeptical arguments in at least three ways: (i) it is fictionalist; (ii) it motivates a skeptical perspective rather than a claim; and (iii) it accomplishes its aims in a stylistically and substantively atypical, but nonetheless contextually appropriate, way. However, there are three further ways in which the text is relevant to contemporary debates about skeptical arguments: it can be used (i) to respond to the same sorts of skeptical arguments that occupy contemporary commentators; (ii) to address a number of questions, influential in contemporary epistemology, that arise in connection with such arguments; and (iii) to suggest important new questions for epistemologists to pursue going forward.

### 1. INTERPRETING THE *ZHUANG-ZI*<sup>6</sup>

An important problem that interpreters of the *Zhuang-Zi* face concerns the role that skeptical arguments play in the work. On the one hand, while the *Zhuang-Zi* appears to advocate several skeptical positions (of varying generality), on the other hand it also seems to make a variety of positive claims that are seemingly inconsistent with the former. Commentators have sought in different ways to resolve these tensions by claiming that Zhuang Zi's skepticism is to some degree more limited than many have been inclined to think (cf. Graham 1983, Eno 1996, Fraser 2009, and Sturgeon 2015); that Zhuang Zi 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 Zhuang Zi's skepticism is better construed as, e.g., a recommendation, method, or therapy rather than a thesis (cf. Kjellberg 1996, Ivanhoe 1996, Raphals 1996, Van Norden 1996, and Wong 2005); or that Zhuang Zi does not sincerely advocate radically skeptical positions, despite appearances to the contrary (cf. Schwitzgebel 1996).<sup>7</sup>

Yet another possibility is that Zhuang Zi can be fruitfully interpreted as some sort of *fictionalist*. Fictionalism can be provisionally characterized as a constellation of views according to which some regions of discourse are not best seen as aiming at (literal) truth either because (a) they should not be seen as truth-directed at all ('force fictionalism'), or (b) they should be seen as truth-directed, though expressions within them are not (typically) used literally ('content fictionalism'). (Cf. Eklund 2015.) Fictionalists grant standard realist semantic interpretations of sentences within the disputed regions of discourse, but maintain that the point of accepting them is not to

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<sup>5</sup> Please note that other plausible interpretations of the *Zhuang-Zi* may yield different suggestions for constructive engagement, and that here I intend to discuss just a few among many interesting and illuminating ways of interpreting the text. Thank you to Anna Lannstrom as well as an anonymous referee for encouraging me to make this clear.

<sup>6</sup> This section draws heavily on my, "Is Zhuangzi a Fictionalist?" (Chung n.d.a.)

<sup>7</sup> 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 Zhuang Zi as a fictionalist can be combined with interpreting his skepticism as, e.g., a recommendation, method, or therapy rather than as a thesis.

commit themselves to their truth, as they (unlike realists) do not hold that they are true (cf. Szabó 2011).<sup>8</sup> To bring out the contrast a bit more clearly, a content (but not merely force) fictionalist about moral discourse could hold, for example, that when a speaker utters the sentence ‘Stealing is wrong’, what they (typically) assert instead is the proposition that according to the fiction of morality, stealing is wrong. Thus, for a content fictionalist, moral discourse can aim at truth at the level of what is pragmatically, rather than semantically, conveyed—or, if one prefers, what is non-literally, rather than literally, conveyed.<sup>9</sup> This, however, is not the approach of a (purely) force fictionalist, who holds that no alternative propositional content gets asserted or otherwise put forth, and hence, that the relevant region of discourse (e.g., moral discourse) cannot aim at truth.<sup>10</sup> Rather, in uttering such sentences, some other (perhaps perlocutionary) speech act is performed. Hence, sentences like ‘Stealing is wrong’ should be accepted, not because we use them to express truths, but because they facilitate prudential action (cf. Joyce 2005). As Matti Eklund describes it, the basic idea is often that for practical reasons—such as 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 aren’t used to express truths. For these requirements make it easier to act not only quickly but also effectively (cf. Eklund 2015).

There is reason to think that Zhuang Zi can be profitably interpreted as a force fictionalist about *all* regions of discourse (or, in other words, as a *global force fictionalist*). Some of the evidence supporting this concerns a variety of arguments, scattered throughout the *Zhuang-Zi* (especially in the *Qi-Wu-Lun*, the second chapter of the text), which suggest a global skepticism about linguistic meaning and literal truth, and appear to aim at discrediting the activity of disputation altogether. Consider, e.g., the famous passage concerning ‘this’ and ‘that’ (Watson 2003,

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<sup>8</sup> 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. Please note also that fictionalism is thus differentiated from certain other forms of anti-realism (e.g., expressivism) as well as from various nearby views such as pragmatism and contextualism. Further, this leaves it open as to whether a discourse could be—in addition—*non-literally* truth-directed or, in other words, that a discourse might be “truth”-directed.

<sup>9</sup> 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 possible examples). As far as I can see, this view could easily be restated so as to alleviate this concern.

<sup>10</sup> 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.

Ziporyn 2009), or ‘it’ and ‘other’ (Graham 2001), in which Zhuang Zi countenances the possibility that words do not have accurate, or even any, meanings (implying that our utterances may really be no different than the ‘twitter of fledgelings’):

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 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, 52-53)<sup>11</sup>

A plausible way of reading the central argument of this passage proceeds roughly as follows. Genuinely distinguishing one thing from another requires us to “carve reality at its joints”, as it were; however, equally plausibly, there are no such joints to carve (or, at least, we’re not sufficiently reliable at using language to do so).<sup>12</sup> Rather, our distinctions only appear to be accurate or legitimate against a backdrop of contextual factors that have more to do with perception than with reality. Moreover, as A.C. Graham notes in his commentary, here Zhuang Zi appears to aim to discredit the activity of disputation by suggesting that under certain circumstances—namely, at

<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed explication of the central argument of this passage, as well as several other pertinent arguments from the *Qi-Wu-Lun*, please see Chung n.d.a.

<sup>12</sup> Kjellberg 1996, e.g., seems to opt for the latter option, whereas Loy 1996, e.g., seems to opt for the former.

the moment when 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. Thus, 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 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, 52; cf. also the interpretations of Hansen 1983, Schwitzgebel 1996, Watson 2003, and Ziporyn 2009).

But what might this clarity or illumination involve? Surely, given what Zhuang Zi has said so far, it shouldn’t be interpreted as consisting of grasping claims, especially because, at the beginning of the passage, he strongly suggests that it is possible that words cannot have accurate (literal) meanings (as they purport—but arguably fail—to draw accurate or legitimate 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, 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! That is to say, words 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. As Eric Schwitzgebel points out in this connection:

[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 [Zhuang Zi] 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, 77-79)

This, Schwitzgebel continues, is a possibility that Zhuang Zi 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, 79). Moreover, as Paul Kjellberg observes, Zhuang Zi is unique among early Chinese philosophers for his extensive use of onomatopoeia, which suggests that, for Zhuang Zi, in the absence of agreed-upon definitions, human discourse might in the end be nothing more than empty sounds (Kjellberg 1996, 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 lack 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, though it may present itself (i.e., semantically) as such. Moreover, Zhuang Zi'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 truth, Zhuang Zi still seems to think that language is useful. (The *Zhuang-Zi* 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.

Interestingly, however, in addition to evidence supporting an interpretation of Zhuang Zi as a fictionalist that stems from the philosophical arguments that he offers, there is evidence that supports such an interpretation that concerns the style in which he writes. To begin with, it is possibly significant that the *Zhuang-Zi* opens with what is most reasonably read as a fictional story, involving a gargantuan 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 an even more magnificent bird named 'Peng' (a name which also presents something of a paradox, as it can be translated as 'Peer Phoenix' [Ziporyn 2009, 3]).<sup>13</sup> 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):

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 spiraling 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

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<sup>13</sup> In his translation, Brook Ziporyn notes that: "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 *Feng*...meaning 'phoenix', a mythical bird of enormous proportions. The phonetic of the form used by [Zhuang Zi] here is the character *peng*, meaning a '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, 3, fn. 1 and fn. 2).

bushes. That is the highest one can fly, where does he think he's going?" (Graham 2001, 43-44)

Notably, this fictional story is attributed to an equally fictional ancient classic, variously translated as, e.g., the *Tall Stories of Ch'i* (Graham 2001) or the *Equalizing Jokebook* (Ziporyn 2009). Consequently, one might think that, from the very beginning, Zhuang Zi sets us up to read what he says as fiction (and does so in a way that mocks the pretensions of, e.g., Confucians and Mohists to give literally true or accurate accounts of the world based on literally true or accurate classical works). But, despite being fictional (as well as highly fantastical and in many ways paradoxical), this story is clearly meant to serve some purpose or other, despite the fact that it is not meant to be taken literally. And there are many other passages in the *Zhuang-Zi* 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, 1].) Just a few of the most memorable of these passages 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 vapor of the clouds, yokes flying dragons to his chariot, and roams beyond the four seas")<sup>14</sup> (Graham 2001, 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, 54)
- *The Useless Tree* (a story involving a talking tree which appears in a carpenter's dream to lecture him about the usefulness of uselessness) (Graham 2001, 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 knobby 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, 74)
- Talking plants and animals (including, as mentioned above, insects, birds, and trees)

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<sup>14</sup> It is perhaps worth noting that this story is explicitly presented as being hard to believe, but nonetheless worth taking seriously for other reasons.



Moreover, in addition to the inclusion of many fictional stories, Zhuang Zi employs an array of literary devices, as well as conventions and techniques that are used more often in fictional or literary than in expository writing, including: literary devices and tropes, including dialogues, fables, allegories, and metaphors (cf. Kjellberg and Ivanhoe 1996, xii); extensive use of quotations (particularly those involving some who were likely perceived as rivals, such as Confucius); outwardly dubious, paradoxical, or nonsensical remarks (cf. Watson 2003, 5, Schwitzgebel 1996, 73); frequent changes of subject and non-sequiturs (cf. Watson 2003, 5); rhetorical questions (Schwitzgebel 1996, 72); and humor, parody, and ridicule (cf. Schwitzgebel 1996, 73 and Watson 2003, 5 and 9).<sup>15</sup>

Paul Kjellberg has also observed that Zhuang Zi frequently uses the rhetorical device of rhyming duplicatives, claiming 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, 215)

As Bryan Van Norden has noted, such textual features have made the *Zhuang-Zi* function much like a Rorschach test in that it tends to elicit many different interpretations from different readers, depending on, e.g., their presuppositions and preferences (Van Norden 1996, 247). Of course, it is likely impossible to say for sure whether Zhuang Zi can be credited with intending to bring about such an effect. 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 itself suggests that Zhuang Zi does not consider the boundary between fictional discourse and non-fictional discourse to be accurately or legitimately drawn—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 discourse needn’t ever aim at truth (even if it purports to) in order to be worth engaging 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 which a fictionalist stance could both explain and motivate).

The proposal, then, is that—in addition to fictionalist arguments—Zhuang Zi uses fiction, and fictional (i.e., literary) devices, conventions, and techniques, to motivate a fictionalist view about all regions of discourse. What, however, is the nature of this view? Is it best construed as a thesis, or something else? Given sensible claims about Zhuang Zi’s attitudes toward (linguistically encoded) distinctions (suggested by, e.g., skeptical arguments that appear in the *Qi-Wu-Lun*), it is reasonable to interpret him as not being concerned with using language to apprehend truths about the world (thus ruling out the thesis option). Rather, he is arguably better interpreted as being concerned with using language to demonstrate or illustrate attitudes or perspectives, which can then be manifested in a multitude of ways in action, depending on the

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<sup>15</sup> Indeed, according to Schwitzgebel, more than half of the inner chapters are in quotation (Schwitzgebel 1996, 72).

circumstances.<sup>16</sup> For pointing and gesturing, e.g., can have practical rather than theoretical functions: they needn't involve acts of predication, and thus needn't be the kinds of singling-out that presuppose exclusive disjunctions between discrete alternatives. This is because they may only draw attention to a possible attitude or perspective (thus leaving every other possible alternative unspecified).<sup>17</sup> 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 an at least implicit aim of excluding others, (non-assertive) demonstrations or illustrations needn't do this. Rather, (non-assertive) demonstrations or illustrations can have contents that are much more open-ended, and can indicate or create attitudes or perspectives whose contents are not propositional.

This not only is consistent with Zhuang Zi's apparent approval of characters that seem to be able to adapt to situations, and of flexibility or versatility in general, but also accords nicely with the thought that, for him, using language is one way to live well, even if one's utterances can never express truths. For, given much of what Zhuang Zi suggests (such as in the passage from the *Qi-Wu-Lun* quoted above), the kinds of pointing or gesturing with language that are likely to be the most broadly productive will be those kinds which, say, demonstrate or illustrate highly open-ended attitudes or perspectives (thereby allowing everything to be brought to light). Moreover, pointing or gesturing in ways that subserve interaction and coordination are just the kinds of relevant activities that admit of being more-or-less well performed.

We can thus conclude that Zhuang Zi aims to convey a fictionalist attitude or perspective on discourse, so as to preserve language's open-ended potentialities. After all, that Zhuang Zi aims to demonstrate or illustrate (rather than articulate) a fictionalist attitude or perspective, rather than a thesis, not only jibes with many of the skeptical arguments that we find suggested in the text, but also explains why he writes as he does: that is, in a way that's largely literary rather than expository; playful rather than serious; and open-ended rather than committal. It also allows us to

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<sup>16</sup> Attitudes or 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).

<sup>17</sup> Many thanks to Zachary Gartenberg for this insightful proposal.

interpret Zhuang Zi as having a positive philosophical project that can avoid charges of self-referential absurdity. This is an important problem that affects both global skeptics and force fictionalists alike, as the claim that nothing can be known, the claim that nothing can be (literally) true, and the claim that nothing can have a meaning all threaten to undermine themselves.<sup>18</sup> Interpreting Zhuang Zi as a global force fictionalist can allow us to see him as aiming to demonstrate or illustrate attitudes or perspectives, and to inspire us to adopt at least some of them—such as those of a global force fictionalist—rather than to argue for any particular philosophical claim.<sup>19</sup>

I have argued in greater detail elsewhere that this fictionalist interpretation is not only independently plausible and can give us a clearer idea of what Zhuang Zi's positive philosophical project is in light of the tensions in the text mentioned earlier, but also that it can unify seemingly disparate scholarly interpretations of it, reconcile objectivist and non-objectivist strands in his work, and bring Zhuang Zi into productive dialogue with a variety of figures and debates in Western philosophy.<sup>20</sup> In the next section of this paper, however, I take a different tack, and explore in detail how the *Zhuang-Zi* can be brought into constructive conversation with the particularly longstanding question of how we should respond to skeptical arguments (and similar types of arguments, such as those that have been discussed in connection with debates about views like contextualism and subject-sensitive invariantism).

## 2. CONTEMPORARY DEBATES ABOUT SKEPTICISM AND THE *ZHUANG-ZI*

Contemporary debates about skeptical arguments have tended to focus on arguments that can be grouped under the heading: *arguments from skeptical hypotheses*. Roughly, skeptical arguments of this sort are designed to call claims to know into question by employing specific skeptical scenarios—incompatible with those claims—that supposedly cannot be ruled out.<sup>21</sup> However, other forms of skeptical argument have also been addressed, if not as extensively. Three of the most powerful

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<sup>18</sup> This is because the claims (e.g.) that nothing can be known (or reasonably believed), that nothing can be (literally) true, and that nothing can have a meaning all arguably presuppose what they deny: after all, if one claims that nothing can be known, or that nothing can be reasonably believed, doesn't this presuppose that one knows, or reasonably believes, at least what one has just said? And things get even worse if we consider the possibility that nothing can be true, or that nothing can be meaningful, two claims that also seem to presuppose what they deny (i.e., that something is true, namely the claim that nothing is, or that something is meaningful, namely the claim that nothing is).

<sup>19</sup> Note that all this is consistent with, and comparable to, the claim mentioned above that Zhuang Zi's skepticism is better construed as, e.g., a recommendation, method, or therapy rather than as a thesis (cf. Kjellberg 1996, Ivanhoe 1996, Raphals 1996, Schwitzgebel 1996, Van Norden 1996, and Wong 2005).

<sup>20</sup> Possibilities include Sextus Empiricus, Hume, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein, all of whom have been discussed in connection with fictionalism or said to be fictionalist, though not in the exact same way as Zhuang Zi, or for the same reasons. For more detail, see Chung n.d.a.

<sup>21</sup> The most well-known example of such an argument is plausibly Descartes' 'dream argument'; contemporary versions often appeal to brains-in-vats instead. The Lottery Problem also involves an example of such an argument. (See, e.g., Hawthorne 2004.)

can be termed: *arguments from regress*, *arguments from circularity*, and *arguments from the nature of language*. Arguments of the first sort are designed to call claims to know into question by demonstrating that they rely on unverified assumptions that would have to be independently verified in order for claims to know to be true (which threatens to result in an infinite regress). Arguments of the second sort are designed to call claims to know into question by demonstrating that we cannot substantiate them in a non-viciously circular fashion.<sup>22</sup> Finally, arguments of the third sort are designed to call claims to know into question by demonstrating that language cannot be trusted, as far as ascertaining or expressing truth is concerned.<sup>23</sup>

Much work in contemporary epistemology is focused on explaining—or explaining away—the appeal of these sorts of skeptical arguments (especially arguments from skeptical hypotheses), as well as the fact that it also often seems as if we use knowledge-attributing sentences to express truths.<sup>24</sup> In addition, more recently, philosophers have sought to explain still other kinds of variability in our use of knowledge-attributing sentences, such as the kinds of variability that occur as a result of changing what is at stake or the salience of alternative possibilities, as in scenarios such as Keith DeRose’s ‘bank cases’ (which themselves involve arguments from skeptical hypotheses at least structurally similar to the canonical examples of such).<sup>25</sup> Five approaches have dominated:

- (i) We are wrong to attribute knowledge so generously (but there is a good explanation for why we do).<sup>26</sup>
- (ii) We are wrong to abandon knowledge attributions at the first sign of doubt (but there is a good explanation for why we do).<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See Wright 2004 for a more detailed description of these styles of argument.

<sup>23</sup> The most well-known contemporary discussion of such an argument can plausibly be found in Kripke’s (1982) discussion of Wittgenstein on rules and private language.

<sup>24</sup> And knowledge-denying sentences to express falsehoods. In what follows I generally only speak of knowledge-attributing sentences; however, this restriction would have to be removed in a final analysis.

<sup>25</sup> For DeRose’s statement of these cases, as well as the problems that they present, see DeRose 2009, 1–2. DeRose uses these cases to motivate the claim that would-be knowledge-attributors are sensitive to what is at stake for agents that they are considering attributing knowledge to, as he expects that many will share his intuition that while knowledge attributions made in low-stakes scenarios often seem true, similar knowledge attributions made in high-stakes scenarios often seem false, even when the relevant agents have the same evidence. According to DeRose, if an agent, say, wants to deposit a check on a particular Saturday, we are normally inclined to think it true that the agent knows that the bank will be open then if the agent recalls being there on that day two weeks prior—but not if (for example) the agent has just written a very important check, a check that will only clear if the deposit is successfully made on that Saturday. Similar cases can be found in the work of others who defend semantic explanations of variability in our use of knowledge-attributing sentences, as well as in the work of defenders of views such as subject-sensitive or interest-relative invariantism.

<sup>26</sup> These are often called ‘skeptical strategies’; for a discussion of such approaches, see, e.g., Unger 1971 and 1975, Stroud 1984, Nagel 1986, and Hawthorne 2004.

<sup>27</sup> These are often called ‘anti-skeptical strategies’. Such approaches have proved the most popular in contemporary epistemology, at least with respect to the project of explaining skeptical debates if not scenarios like DeRose’s bank cases. For this reason, I will not be able to provide anything close to a comprehensive list of such attempts here. With that, (just) a few relatively recent examples can

- (iii) Semantic features of sentences that (at least appear to) attribute knowledge are more complex than one might have thought at first, as the best semantics for knowledge-attributing sentences is, e.g., contextualist.<sup>28</sup>
- (iv) The metaphysics of knowledge is more complex than one might have thought at first, as, e.g., subject-sensitive invariantism with respect to knowledge is true.<sup>29</sup>
- (v) Pragmatic features of our use of sentences that attribute knowledge are more complex than one might have thought at first, which makes it the case that we are often warranted in asserting knowledge-attributing (or -denying) propositions despite their (potential) falsity.<sup>30</sup>

There is, however, another general strategy available for resolving tensions in our use of certain expressions that has not yet received much attention in this domain: namely, *fictionalism*.<sup>31</sup> And while such views might qualify as falling under (v) above, if it is construed very broadly so as to apply to all pragmatic explanations of the relevant variability in our use of knowledge-attributing sentences (and non-literal speech is considered to be a pragmatic phenomenon),<sup>32</sup> they would be very special versions of it. For it is one thing to hold that pragmatic features of knowledge-attributing sentences are more complex than one might have thought at first, and quite another thing to hold that such sentences are generally used non-literally. Insofar as the *Zhuang-Zi* can be fruitfully interpreted as suggesting a fictionalist view (or, perhaps better, an attitude or perspective) in response to skeptical arguments, this might present epistemologists with yet another approach to seriously consider—especially if such a view has enough to be said in its favor.<sup>33</sup> For while the passage

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arguably be found in: Dretske 1970, Goldman 1976 and 1979, Stine 1976, Nozick 1981, Klein 1981 and 1995, Putnam 1981, Vogel 1990a, Sosa 1994, Lehrer 2000, Pryor 2000, Williamson 2000, and Wright 2004.

<sup>28</sup> Examples of this approach include contextualist (see, e.g., DeRose 1995 and 2009, Lewis 1996, Cohen 1999 and 2000a, and Blome-Tillman 2009 and 2014), contrastivist or comparativist (Schaffer 2004a and Schaffer and Szábo 2014) and relativist (MacFarlane 2005 and 2011) accounts of knowledge attributions. I say, “at least appear to” here because some theories, such as expressivist ones (which are gaining traction), may maintain that such sentences do not in fact attribute knowledge.

<sup>29</sup> See, e.g., Hawthorne 2004, Stanley 2005, and Fantl and McGrath 2009.

<sup>30</sup> Approaches that fit this description fall under the banner of what some have called ‘warranted assertability maneuvers’ (e.g., DeRose 2009). Others have called them ‘pragmatic explanations of apparently semantic intuitions’ (e.g., Davis 2007). For discussion of such views, see e.g., Unger 1975, 1984 and 1986, DeRose 2009, Prades 2000, Rysiew 2001 and 2007, Hawthorne 2004, Schaffer 2004b, Pritchard 2005, Brown 2006, Davis 2007 and 2015, Pynn 2015, and Stoutenburg (forthcoming). It is worth emphasizing that fictionalism is *not* a warranted assertability maneuver because it does not make any claims to the effect that we are warranted in asserting (potential) falsehoods because doing so allows us to convey truths. But, as noted below, it *is* a kind of pragmatic explanation of apparently semantic intuitions (albeit one that is distinctly different from many others of the same type).

<sup>31</sup> See Chung 2017 and n.d.b, however, for defenses of such an approach.

<sup>32</sup> Of course, if non-literal speech is a semantic phenomenon, this approach might constitute a special version of approach (iii) (but one that is notably unique).

<sup>33</sup> Granted, one might justifiably wonder at this point whether such an approach is indeed sufficiently promising to warrant closer scrutiny. This worry will be returned to briefly below; for a more sustained

from the *Qi-Wu-Lun* quoted above exemplifies a skeptical argument that can be safely classified as an argument from the nature of language, Zhuang Zi can be interpreted as discussing skeptical arguments that also seem to belong to each of the other three categories as well (including the most popular, viz. arguments from skeptical hypotheses). So, whatever one's favored interpretation of the *Zhuang-Zi*, it is clearly relevant to the concerns of contemporary epistemologists in that it can be interpreted as responding to many of the same sorts of arguments. What is especially interesting, however, is that Zhuangist fictionalism in particular—or, as we will see, something relevantly similar to it—can be used to respond to skeptical arguments that share the same basic form as those that occupy contemporary commentators. Thus, despite the fact that something like Zhuangist fictionalism differs in several significant ways from extant approaches, both it and the *Zhuang-Zi* are obviously germane to recent discussions of skepticism. We have, then, one way in which the *Zhuang-Zi* can be interpreted as exemplifying an approach that is both different and relevant: different in that it is fictionalist, but relevant in that it can be used to respond to the standard array of skeptical arguments discussed in contemporary epistemology.

Before I continue, a potential worry concerning this way of connecting the *Zhuang-Zi* to the contemporary philosophical literature on skeptical arguments should be addressed, along the following lines. Strategies (i)-(v) outlined above all work by allowing us to understand the pull of skepticism without having to commit to anything too extraordinary—at least when compared with global force fictionalism, which seems like too high a cost to pay for resolving the relevant tensions in our use of knowledge-attributing sentences. Moreover, Zhuangist fictionalism doesn't appear to address in any straightforward way a crucial question that occupies center stage in many contemporary discussions of skepticism: viz., why an ordinary, sensible person might be tempted both to say, e.g., “We don't know that we aren't dreaming”, and “We know that here is a hand”. Rather, Zhuang Zi simply gives up on being an ordinary sensible person, it would seem.<sup>34</sup>

There are at least three interesting ways of responding to this worry. First, it should be noted that one might find inspiration in the *Zhuang-Zi* to be a force fictionalist about some regions of discourse (e.g., knowledge discourse), but not others, even if Zhuang Zi himself can be interpreted as a global force fictionalist. Maybe some of Zhuang Zi's skeptical arguments are better than others, after all. For example, perhaps arguments from skeptical hypotheses<sup>35</sup>—ubiquitous in contemporary discussions of skepticism and which we also find in the *Zhuang-Zi*<sup>36</sup>—give us stronger reason to be attracted to a force fictionalist account of knowledge-talk in particular than do arguments concerning the nature of language<sup>37</sup> (such as the

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defense of fictionalism—though not Zhuangist fictionalism—as a way of responding to challenges posed by skeptical arguments, see Chung 2017 and Chung n.d.b.

<sup>34</sup> Many thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this concern.

<sup>35</sup> I.e., that aim to impugn the possibility of knowledge of the external world, for example.

<sup>36</sup> Such arguments can, e.g., be plausibly extrapolated from his discussions of dreams in the *Qi-Wu-Lun*.

<sup>37</sup> E.g., which aim to impugn the possibility of (accurate) meaning.

argument discussed in section 1) that (supposedly) give us reason to be attracted to global force fictionalism. Such an account has yet to be widely discussed in contemporary analytic epistemology. Presenting such an account and exploring its benefits and drawbacks would hence mark a significant advance (a point I will return to below). And the *Zhuang-Zi* might well motivate us to make such an advance. Alternatively, perhaps skeptical arguments along the lines of those that appear in the *Zhuang-Zi* give us stronger reason to be attracted to a content fictionalist account of knowledge-talk in particular than they do a force fictionalist account. And while such accounts have been discussed in contemporary epistemology, they have not been investigated to the degree that strategies (i)-(v) have been, and are as yet underdeveloped as compared with them. Thus, even if we elect not to endorse Zhuang Zi's positive philosophical project, taken as a whole, we can possibly pick and choose from the text while still taking our approaches to have been informed by it.<sup>38</sup> And such approaches may make for very plausible explanations as to why we want to keep uttering knowledge-attributing sentences even in the face of skeptical challenges—that is, to preserve ordinary and successful ways of talking—and to utter sentences that express 'Moorean facts' without having to refute the skeptic (which is almost universally taken to be highly desirable result).

Second, it is far from clear that Zhuang Zi himself must indeed give up on being an 'ordinary, sensible person', and that Zhuangist fictionalism is too extraordinary to speak to the concerns of contemporary analytic epistemologists. To see this, recall that one worry that initially motivated this interpretation was that, on the one hand, while the *Zhuang-Zi* explicitly articulates a variety of skeptical positions, on the other it also puts forward a variety of positive claims that are seemingly inconsistent with them. Reading Zhuang Zi as a global force fictionalist allows us to see these tensions not as contradictions *per se*, but rather as utterances that are simply useful for certain purposes, in spite of the fact that if we took them to express (literally) truth-evaluable claims, they would (at least seem to) be inconsistent with each other. However, if this were the end of the story, it would be deeply unsatisfactory. For, as many have observed (cf. Ivanhoe 1996, Schwitzgebel 1996, Van Norden 1996, and Wong 2005), there are plenty of reasons to think that there is at least some sense in which Zhuang Zi does not consider all ways of talking to be on equal footing. How can interpreting Zhuang Zi 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 Zhuang Zi in this way suggests that we should take everything that he says with a grain of salt, this is nonetheless compatible with taking some of the things that he says with a few extra grains on top of that. For what reason is there to hold that treating all ways of talking as equal would amount to a productive use of language in any wide range of possible situations? Rather, things seem the opposite. Treating all ways of talking as equal is likely to qualify as a productive use of language in some situations, to be sure—particularly in situations in which one is trying to promote a certain attitude of

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<sup>38</sup> Thank you to Ram Neta and to an anonymous referee for pushing me to elaborate on this point.

flexibility—but not in anything like the vast majority of everyday, practical situations in which people are likely to find themselves. Indeed, treating all ways of talking as equal in all but the rarest of circumstances would effectively render language useless for any purpose. We couldn't make even the most provisional of everyday choices if we were to treat all ways of talking as equal all of the time, or even much of the time. It is thus possible to accept the claim that no region of discourse is best interpreted as being (literally) truth-normed while maintaining that not every use of language is equally productive.<sup>39</sup> And, as it turns out, in most contexts in which the opportunity arises, it may simply be far more useful for us to say things like, “We know that here is a hand,” than otherwise—though this may not be so with respect to many contexts in which the opportunity arises regarding, “We know that we're not dreaming.”<sup>40</sup>

Third, while it is true that contemporary discussions of skepticism have focused on arguments from skeptical hypotheses, and on why an ordinary, sensible person might be tempted both to say, e.g., “We don't know that we aren't dreaming,” and “We know that here is a hand,” the focus of these discussions has been extremely limited. For arguments from skeptical hypotheses and their associated complications are not just ubiquitous in recent discourse about skepticism, but are problematically so, as focusing exclusively on them has tended to obscure a variety of interesting possibilities and phenomena. Such possibilities and phenomena include, but are not limited to, the following. First, there are more possible responses to challenges posed by skeptical arguments that employ skeptical hypotheses than have been adequately explored in contemporary epistemology (e.g., fictionalist responses), and there is reason to think that this deficiency should be remedied (a point which will be discussed in greater detail below). In addition, as noted above, there are many other types of general and powerful skeptical arguments than have been thoroughly considered in contemporary epistemology—e.g., arguments from regress, arguments from circularity, and arguments from the nature of language. And there is no reason simply to assume that this plethora of skeptical arguments will admit of a unified response; rather, this is a claim that should be argued for explicitly, especially in light of the fact that while many accounts in contemporary epistemology have proved exceedingly plausible and helpful for understanding certain phenomena, they have failed with respect to others. Moreover, each of these forms of skeptical argument has been proposed—and attacked—by philosophers working across a variety of times and traditions, including Euro-American and Asian. In other words, skepticism—as well as resistance to it—is in some sense a cross-cultural phenomenon. At present, however, it is unclear as to how to explain why exactly this is so, and in what way. None of this is to say, of course, that Zhuangist fictionalism, global force fictionalism, or even fictionalism more generally will fare better than extant approaches once these possibilities and phenomena are sufficiently appreciated. The idea, rather, is that once such possibilities and phenomena are satisfactorily taken into account, and the final scores of competing approaches tallied, there may be reason, at

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<sup>39</sup> For further discussion, see Chung n.d.a.

<sup>40</sup> Additional elaboration on a similar point can be found in Chung 2017.



the end of the day, to prefer approaches that are presently perceived as radical. And if this is so, they should not simply be dismissed out of hand. Thus, even if the fictionalist interpretation of Zhuang Zi motivated here suggests that he gives up on being an ‘ordinary, sensible person’, this might on balance turn out to be a good thing.

To consider a further way in which the *Zhuang-Zi* can be interpreted as exemplifying an approach that is both different from and relevant to contemporary epistemology, let us turn now to a more involved discussion of the way in which this approach is a skeptical approach. As discussed above, Zhuang Zi plausibly motivates a fictionalist attitude or perspective, rather than a claim. And this fictionalist attitude or perspective can also be understood as a certain kind of skeptical attitude or perspective, in that it does not affirm (or deny) any claims. This suggests that a Zhuangist fictionalist, interpreted as a kind of skeptic, is closer to—though importantly distinct from—e.g., a ‘Pyrrhonian’ skeptic than an ‘Academic’ one (as commonly understood), insofar as they will be inclined to try to maintain a certain kind of neutral attitude toward claims, rather than a decidedly positive or negative one. This stands in stark contrast to the typical way of understanding skepticism in contemporary epistemology as solely involving a particular thesis: viz., the thesis that nothing can be known, a characterization that is overly narrow. For, as noted, other possibilities include interpreting it—in Zhuang Zi’s case, say—as, e.g., a recommendation, method, or therapy, rather than as a thesis.

This is particularly problematic because this typical way of understanding skepticism in contemporary epistemology is perniciously narrow, tending to stifle philosophical inquiry. There are several reasons for this. For instance, construing skepticism as the thesis that nothing can be known naturally prompts an objection, alluded to above, that might be described as ‘the skeptic’s circle’ (cf. Raphals 1996): namely, that skepticism is paradoxically self-undermining at best, or fatally self-contradictory at worst.<sup>41</sup> As Robert Nozick writes:

The skeptic about knowledge argues that we know very little or nothing of what we think we know, or at any rate that this position is no less reasonable than the belief in knowledge. The history of philosophy exhibits a number of different attempts to refute the skeptic: to prove him wrong or show that in arguing against knowledge he presupposes there is some and so refutes himself. (Nozick 1981, 197)

It is not clear, though, that other versions of skepticism—e.g., those that do not assert theses—are vulnerable to this objection. After all, recommendations, methods, therapies, attitudes, perspectives, etc., may not involve claims, and to the extent that they do not, cannot express contradictions or allow for refutations, though they can be criticized on other grounds.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Again, that various forms of skepticism are somehow self-undermining is also discussed above; for further elaboration, see fn. 18.

<sup>42</sup> As Harold Thorsrud has put the point, “Just as it is neither consistent nor inconsistent to ride a bicycle, the practice of skepticism, in so far as it is something the skeptic does, can be neither

Construing skepticism as the thesis that nothing can be known also encourages the view that it presents us with something threatening, at least insofar as it portends to extinguish inquiry rather than encourage it. For, if nothing can be known, then what might be the point of inquiring about anything at all? Skepticism, however, has not always been perceived as doing such.<sup>43</sup> As Richard Foley describes the situation:

The kind of skeptical challenge that is most familiar to us is the kind that concerned Descartes. To be sure, the skeptical tradition is an ancient one, but the challenges of the ancient skeptics had a different aim from those discussed by Descartes. The followers of Pyrrho of Elis, for example, saw skepticism as a way of life and a desirable one at that. Suspending judgment about how things really are was thought to be a means to tranquility. There is no hint of this in Descartes or in the Enlightenment philosophers who succeeded him. Descartes did think that skeptical doubt could be put to good use. It could help deliver us from prejudices and thereby help put our beliefs upon a secure foundation. But even for Descartes, skepticism was first and foremost a threat rather than an opportunity, and it remains so for us. (Foley 1990, 69)

By contrast, interpreting skepticism as something other than the thesis that nothing can be known is more easily seen as presenting us with something protective: that is, as something that might shelter us from troubles associated with, e.g., cognitive inflexibility or closed-mindedness, rather than expose our intellectual endeavors as futile. For if the skeptic makes no claim to the effect that nothing can be known, the worry that inquiry therefore has no purpose is easily blunted, as they leave the possibility of knowing open, even if no positive affirmation that some things can be known is made, either. Moreover, it is especially plausible that skepticism can be productive rather than destructive when paired with certain forms of fictionalism, which can allow us to make sense of how a region of discourse (e.g., knowledge discourse) may be successful even if it isn't (literally) true. And that Zhuangist fictionalism comprises a different approach to explaining how this can be so than does, e.g., Pyrrhonian skepticism,<sup>44</sup> is made particularly palpable when one reflects on what the goals of Zhuangist fictionalism might be. Although a comprehensive treatment of this issue is beyond the scope of this paper, a few observations may be instructive. Principally, where Pyrrhonian skepticism plausibly takes as its goal tranquility (*ataraxia*), attained by suspending judgment, Zhuangist fictionalism plausibly takes as its goal a certain kind of flexible, 'non'-action (*wuwei*), attained by being responsive to a variety of perspectives.<sup>45</sup> Thus, Zhuangist fictionalism may encourage us to be curiously skeptical, rather than paralyzed by doubt, as adopting such a perspective may permit us to act as if we are immune from error—but only to

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consistent nor inconsistent..." (Thorsrud 2009, 146). Thank you to Ethan Mills for drawing my attention to this way of stating things.

<sup>43</sup> Please see Mills 2016 for an insightful discussion of some of the ways in which ancient and modern discussions of skepticism differ.

<sup>44</sup> Though it is nonetheless worth remarking that some have claimed that Pyrrhonian skepticism is at least a form of *proto-fictionalism* (Rosen 2005).

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Slingerland 1998

an extent—thereby allowing us to avoid the pitfalls of excessively entertaining doubts while at the same time shielding us from the dangers of dogmatism.

Zhuangist fictionalism can hence also address a variety of practical worries about skepticism, like this one, from Timothy Williamson:

Firms lobbying for skepticism about manmade climate change describe their product as ‘doubt’. For epistemologists, it’s a useful reminder of the dark side of doubt. Skeptics tend to be self-righteous about their skepticism, trumpeting it as a virtuous form of anti-dogmatic open-mindedness. In the context of global warming, it may be a self-indulgence humanity can’t afford. No one is more dogmatic than skeptics in their skepticism; they pretend even to themselves to be open to counter-argument, while it’s obvious to others that nothing will ever change their minds.<sup>46</sup>

However, once one considers the possibility that skepticism can be construed as something other than the thesis that nothing can be known, and that it can be coupled with a fictionalist view, one can see it again as protective, rather than threatening in this sort of way. For even global skeptics—or, at least, those who are fictionalists in addition—can say that it can be practical to “stick with” certain utterances rather than others, on the grounds that it appears more useful to do so.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, such skeptics needn’t be seen as dogmatic in the sense that nothing will change their minds. This is because they will always be disposed to be open to considering, say, newly introduced evidence, though they will, because of practical considerations, at the same time often be disposed to take firm stands regarding certain claims—including, in many circumstances, anti-skeptical ones.<sup>48</sup>

Additionally, construing skepticism as the thesis that nothing can be known appears to place it in direct opposition to what appear to be ordinary and successful ways of talking, and to what some have called Moorean facts: “Things that we know better than we know the premises of any philosophical argument to the contrary” (Lewis 1996, 549). But this in turn is often thought to render it untenable. Continuing the excerpt from Nozick above:

Others [who discuss skepticism] attempt to show that accepting skepticism is unreasonable, since it is more likely that the skeptic’s extreme conclusion is false than

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<sup>46</sup> For the source of this quote, see <<http://www.whatisitliketobeaphilosopher.com/#/timothy-williamson/>>. Note that even if Williamson himself is intending only to target skeptics about climate change, one can see how his concerns might be suitably reframed so as to generalize to other kinds of skeptics, including global skeptics about the possibility of knowing. Many thanks to Greg Stoutenburg for encouraging me to clarify this.

<sup>47</sup> Compare, e.g., Joyce 2005 on moral fictionalism. Note that such approval needn’t be expressed propositionally, but could rather itself be expressed as, e.g., an attitude or perspective.

<sup>48</sup> After all, we might think that for Zhuang Zi in particular, the greatest flexibility might mandate, at least in certain circumstances, that one be—or at least appear—rigid, lest one be too rigid in their flexibility.

that all of his premises are true, or simply because reasonableness of belief just means proceeding in an anti-skeptical way.<sup>49</sup> (Nozick 1981, 197)

Once skepticism is interpreted as something other than the thesis that nothing can be known, though, it is not clear that it is indeed opposed to ordinary and successful ways of thinking and talking, or to Moorean facts. For it may not contradict them *per se*, but only call them into question. It is unclear, however, that this should be a bad thing, for at least the reason, discussed above, that skepticism might have great value, especially when paired with some form of fictionalism. Furthermore, as also discussed above, a Zhuangist fictionalist will likely be inclined to assent to (rather than deny) sentences that express Moorean facts in most situations—a highly significant result.

Thus, construing skepticism just as the thesis that nothing can be known has arguably resulted in philosophers' overlooking many interesting and potentially illuminating ways of addressing crucial epistemological questions, viz., those that are perceived as being overly friendly or concessive to the skeptic. And among these are fictionalist approaches, which—as noted—are underdeveloped in this domain, though such approaches have proved fruitful in others (e.g., metaphysics, the philosophy of mathematics, ethics, and the philosophy of science) (cf. Kalderon 2005 and Eklund 2015). Since there is currently insufficient reason to think that they will not prove to be such in the domain of epistemology, too, there is sufficient reason to think that the best way to proceed with many of epistemology's most intractable debates will be to investigate more thoroughly such heretofore ignored skeptical approaches, rather than to simply set them aside as non-starters, and then to compare them to existing approaches. To return to Nozick:

Even when ... counterarguments [i.e., to skeptical arguments] satisfy their inventors, they fail to satisfy others, as is shown by the persistent attempts against skepticism. The continuing felt need to refute skepticism, and the difficulty in doing so, attests to the power of the skeptic's position, the depth of his worries. (Nozick 1981, 197)

Despite claims—and phenomena—such as these, however, the skeptic is rarely taken seriously as anything other than an opponent to be knocked down. Reflecting on texts such as the *Zhuang-Zi* thus promises to be especially valuable for opening us up to more specific ways in which the skeptic can be interpreted not as an adversary but rather as an ally: as someone who might aid us in our philosophical endeavors rather than impede them. In other words, because *Zhuang Zi*'s response to skeptical arguments is a skeptical (as opposed to anti-skeptical) one, and arguably includes a philosophically significant fictionalist component, the *Zhuang Zi* might give us additional reason to take skepticism more seriously than Western epistemologists have traditionally been inclined.

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<sup>49</sup> As Greg Stoutenburg has pointed out to me, Moore himself has a quote very much like this at the end of "Four Forms of Skepticism".

Notably, this is so even if one is inclined to think that it is impossible for the skeptic to “win” in the sense that it would never be reasonable to be persuaded by any skeptical argument (cf. Kelly 2005). For having an improved view of the philosophical landscape promises to be quite a good thing, insofar as it may inspire new ways of exploring otherwise well-traveled territory. Even if the skeptic is on the wrong track, carefully surveying it may nonetheless bring a number of epistemic advantages, such as those associated with taking on fresh perspectives. Moreover, the thought that the skeptic is aiming to persuade anyone to believe a claim is yet another product of construing skepticism as a thesis. But if the skeptic’s goal is otherwise, then even if the skeptic can’t “win” in the sense under consideration, there may be other ways for her to succeed. In sum, perhaps the skeptic *can* win, if victory consists in getting us to adopt better recommendations, methods, therapies, attitudes, or perspectives.

Zhuangist fictionalism hence contributes something both different from and relevant to contemporary epistemology in a second way: different in that it motivates a skeptical attitude or perspective rather than a claim, and relevant in that it is, or can be, used to address a number of questions, influential in contemporary epistemology, that arise in connection with skeptical arguments (and their upshots).

The third way in which Zhuangist fictionalism contributes something both different from and relevant to contemporary epistemology concerns the style in which the *Zhuang-Zi* is written, and questions that arise when reflecting on the relationship between its aesthetic features and its philosophical content. For it may be that the very best way of motivating global force fictionalism involves writing in a style similar to that of Zhuang Zi. If one wants to convey a fictionalist attitude or perspective, rather than substantiate an apparently self-undermining fictionalist claim (along the lines of, say, ‘No discourse is truth-directed’), then what better way to write than in a manner which appears—among other things—at once enlightening yet mystifying, earnest yet tongue-in-cheek, and insightful yet enigmatic? And if one wants to convey an attitude or perspective that calls into question the possibility of literal truth, or even the possibility of (accurately) distinguishing, e.g., truth from falsity, meaningfulness from meaninglessness, and fiction from non-fiction, then what better way to write than by extensively employing fiction, and fictional devices, alongside a plethora of straightforwardly philosophical remarks and arguments? Unconventional attitudes or perspectives are sometimes most effectively conveyed in unconventional fashions, and if one wants to call into question conventions regarding certain ways of distinguishing, then what better way to do this than to flout those very conventions in one’s writing?

The basic idea is thus that interpreting Zhuang Zi as a global force fictionalist can help to explain how the text’s protean form and literary style is intimately bound up with its difficult-to-articulate (fictionalist, non-propositional) content. And, as we have seen, what is especially interesting—at least in the context of contemporary epistemology—is that this content is highly philosophically significant, allowing us to see how interesting philosophical stances (namely, global skepticism and global force fictionalism) can be expressed in ways that do not risk self-refutation, and may be

best characterized as involving the adopting of attitudes or perspectives rather than the endorsing of claims. It also permits us to understand not only why Zhuang Zi is difficult to interpret, but also why he is *appropriately* difficult to interpret.<sup>50</sup> For, again, if he wants to help his audience to take on the attitude or perspective of a global force fictionalist, then what better way to do this than to write in a manner that effectively dislodges confidence regarding the accuracy or even legitimacy of (literal) speech?

We thus have the third, and final, way that the *Zhuang-Zi* can be reasonably interpreted as exemplifying an approach that is both different from and relevant to contemporary debates about skepticism (as well as contemporary debates in epistemology more generally). It is different in that it accomplishes its aims in a stylistically and substantively atypical, but nonetheless contextually appropriate way, and it is relevant in that it can be used to suggest important new questions that promise to considerably advance epistemology (and philosophy more broadly). The suggestion is that Zhuangist fictionalism, due to its manner of expression, can be understood as something of an aesthetic—while at the same time philosophical—response to skepticism, and that taking (global) skepticism seriously might well mandate such a response, unfamiliar as such a thought might be to contemporary analytic philosophers. Moreover, looking beyond the *Zhuang-Zi*, we might think: if such is true in his case, and it is fitting for Zhuang Zi to write in a way that is more literary than expository, then maybe such is true in other cases as well. In other words, perhaps there is much else that might not look like philosophy to us at first, because the authors' styles and methods are different from our own. Taken together, all this suggests not only that we should be more accepting of alternative methods, styles, and texts, but also that we should see their inclusion as being vital to philosophical progress, too. It also suggests that epistemologists (especially those who are interested in better incorporating Chinese philosophy) should pay more attention to questions that would typically be classified as belonging to aesthetics. As Meilin Chinn points out:

Aesthetics often succeeds in philosophizing across borders where other methods fail for a number of reasons. Aesthetics brings together a wide range of philosophical methods and considerations, including but not limited to epistemological, hermeneutical, metaphysical, political, and ethical. The fundamental role of perception in aesthetics should encourage appropriate cultural reflexivity and reflection. Additionally, the philosophical interpretation of a work of art can place demands and yield results in a manner similar to ideal cross-cultural philosophizing. (Chinn 2016, 1)

Moreover, as Chinn points out, the arts are often treated as philosophical practices in a number of Asian traditions, and aesthetics occupies a principal place in the philosophies included here, arguably on par with the preeminent role that metaphysics has played in the history of Euro-American philosophy (Chinn 2016, 1).

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<sup>50</sup> Thank you to Ethan Mills for this suggestion.

Reflections such as these, then, should inspire us to further develop cognitivist accounts about art that can explain how, e.g., literary works can have philosophical (and hence, cognitive) content and value, especially since it remains controversial as to whether such works can have cognitive content and value (in addition to, say, aesthetic) at all.<sup>51</sup> Incorporating texts such as the *Zhuang-Zi* into such conversations thus promises to substantially contribute to debates about literary cognitivism by providing new examples and fresh approaches to consider, which in turn is sure to guarantee lively and profitable conversations regarding how—to name just a few fields of interest—epistemology, philosophy of language, aesthetics, Chinese philosophy, and cross-cultural philosophy can contribute to each other’s development in exciting new ways.

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<sup>51</sup> Indeed, until very recently, interest in developing such accounts had arguably even diminished in light of influential discussions centering on objections ancient (e.g., Plato), modern (e.g., Kant), and contemporary (e.g., Lamarque and Olsen). For an excellent survey of the contemporary state of play regarding this debate, see Gibson 2008.

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