

## 13.1 DAOIST SKEPTICISM

Zhuangzi (also called Chuang Tzu, c. 350 BCE), roughly a contemporary of Plato and early Greek skeptics such as Pyrrho, is one of the two great thinkers of Daoism. He gives skepticism a mystical turn. Laozi wrote of the One, which is indescribable but nevertheless the fount of the entire universe. The One, for Zhuangzi, amounts to the Dao's universal spontaneousness. Wisdom consists in seeking unity with Dao. To achieve such unity, you need to abandon thoughts of yourself and attune yourself to the flow of nature. Zhuangzi goes beyond Laozi in recommending self-development as part of becoming attuned to Dao. The Daoist master learns to use paradox to communicate; only paradox can express the true understanding that comes from overcoming the distinctions and divisions inherent in thinking.

Zhuangzi's skepticism thus seems sweeping, excluding only the paradoxical language that would express a master's true understanding. Distinctions in thought correspond to no distinctions in reality. We cannot trust thinking or even sense experience. In consequence, there is no point in trying to accomplish anything—anything, at least, that depends on the distinctions of an everyday mindset. Effort is pointless (except, perhaps, effort at becoming a Daoist master).

Zhuangzi offers five basic arguments for his conclusion that knowledge (as generally understood) is impossible:

- interdependence of the objective and subjective
- the unity of everything
- universal variability
- the problem of the criterion
- the possibility of dreaming

*The interdependence of the objective and subjective.* We can frame the question of the possibility of knowledge in terms of objectivity: Is it possible to become completely objective? Zhuangzi answers no, because subjectivity and objectivity are inevitably interlocked. The objective and subjective depend on each other. You can attain objective knowledge, if at all, only by beginning with your own subjective mental states and making them match reality. But if you are in a certain subjective mental state, then (a) it is objectively true that you are in that state, and (b) you are in it by virtue of certain objective truths about you. So objectivity and subjectivity go together. They depend on one another. But they are ordinarily supposed to be contraries: The subjective is that which is not objective. Zhuangzi concludes that the distinction between the subjective and the objective is incoherent. But then out the window too goes all pretense to objectivity and thus to knowledge.

How good is this argument? It seems to turn on an equivocation with the word *subjective*. We might call something subjective if it is or relates essentially to a mental state, and objective if it pertains to reality, i.e., our common world. In this way, the subjective and objective need not be contraries at all. Smith's feeling of heat on touching a radiator is subjective and objective at the same time if the radiator really is hot. Alternatively, we might call something subjective if it merely relates to a mental state, that is, relates to a mental state without reflecting reality. Then the subjective and objective are indeed

contraries, but there is no longer any reason to think that knowledge is at all subjective. In fact, if it were, it would not be knowledge of the objective world.

*The unity of everything.* Distinctions should be rejected, Zhuangzi insists, because all things are at root identical. Oddly, this argument begins with what makes individual objects distinct. Each thing has its own nature (*de*), which determines what it is, what it can be, and what it tends to be. But the argument concludes with the statement that individual objects are not distinct after all. The contradiction disappears when we realize that the identity is only from the “perspective of Dao,” not from our untransformed perspective. That is the real opposition. Thus we see that Zhuangzi’s skepticism is really a recommendation for a certain kind of perspective.

Thus the Daoist not only argues that knowledge is impossible but also advises us about how to think about the world and how to live. The recommendation is threefold: Reject distinctions, take refuge in Dao, and place yourself in subjective relations to things—that is, give up claims to objectivity. Knowledge being impossible, stop pretending to know. This seems reasonable. But the connection between the thesis and the recommendation, easy as it is to understand, is not easy to defend. Does the thesis (knowledge is impossible) justify the recommendation? If so, do we know it? Wouldn’t that undermine the claim that knowledge is impossible? But if the recommendation is unreliable or unjustified, why should we accept it? Skepticism tied to a recommendation like this seems self-defeating.

Zhuangzi does not spell his argument out very explicitly, but he gives an important and entertaining illustration of what he has in mind in the story of the monkeys and the chestnuts. The idea is this. Things seem to have their own individual natures. But at root they are one. We make distinctions between them, dividing one from another by distinguishing one nature from another. Just as the monkeys distinguish the three-in-the-morning arrangement from the three-at-night arrangement even though the number of chestnuts is the same, so we distinguish beams from pillars, beauty from ugliness, and so on, even though the underlying reality is the same. “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” people sometimes say. Zhuangzi is claiming that *everything* is in the eye of the beholder. Everything is merely subjective; there is no such thing as objectivity. So there is no such thing as knowledge.

*Universal variability.* A third argument relies on a premise of universal variability along with a premise of undecidability. Thus:

- *Variability:* Things are perceived differently (by different subjects or at different times).
- *Undecidability:* There is no way to decide which perceptions ought to be trusted.
- *Skeptical conclusion:* Therefore, knowledge is impossible.

Zhuangzi puts this in terms of the different subjectivities belonging to different species: humans versus eels, humans versus monkeys, and so on.

Variability we may admit. But is the undecidability thesis true? Zhuangzi claims that there is no way to decide which way of seeing things is correct. One might try then to defuse the argument by seeking a criterion for distinguishing correct from incorrect perceptions. But where could we get such a touchstone, a measuring rod to put to the task?

*The problem of the criterion.* In support of undecidability Zhuangzi has another argument. If two people, Smith and Jones, argue and Jones concedes defeat, is Smith necessarily right and Jones wrong? Or if Jones “beats” Smith, in Jones’s judgment, is Jones necessarily the one who knows? Couldn’t there be error in how they decide the argument? If Jones says, “By this criterion, I am right,” Smith can say, “By that other one, you are wrong.” The debate jumps a level—focusing now on criteria—and appears unresolvable. Any criterion proposed may itself be disputed.

Can’t a neutral party decide? If Jones employs an arbiter who takes Jones’s view, couldn’t Smith do the same? We have no way to decide who would count as neutral. Arbitration is thus impossible.

It might seem, then, that we could find a criterion for deciding which perceptions are accurate. But the eel will have its criterion; the monkey, another criterion; the owl, yet another; and so on. How can we decide which criterion to choose? That too is undecidable.

Versions of this argument have driven much Western epistemology, and there are responses to it in classical India, too. So let us come back to it and move on to a final argument.

*The Possibility of Dreaming.* This argument is contained in a passage from Zhuangzi that expresses what is probably his most famous image: Zhuangzi dreaming he is a butterfly—or is it a butterfly dreaming he is Zhuangzi?

Many of Zhuangzi’s arguments concern questions of value: standards of beauty or virtue, for example. But here the issue is broader. Given that there is no mark by which we can determine whether a given experience is a dream or reflective of reality, we cannot tell from our own point of view whether we are justified in believing anything. We might be dreaming it. There is no objective point of view from which we can distinguish a genuine means of knowledge, such as perception, from an apparent one—one that presents only fabrications of our own consciousness, such as dreaming.

This argument is used to draw idealist conclusions in early modern Western philosophy and by Buddhists in India. The Buddhist concurrence with the Daoist idea may help to explain Chinese receptivity for Buddhism centuries after Zhuangzi. Zhuangzi himself recommends skepticism and disengagement from ordinary life.

### 13.1.1 From *Zhuangzi*

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“Great knowledge embraces the whole; small knowledge, a part only. Great speech is universal; small speech is particular.

“For whether the mind is locked in sleep or whether in waking hours the body is released, we are subject to daily mental perturbations,

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*Source: Chuang Tzu.* Translated from the Chinese by Herbert A. Giles. First edition, 1889; second edition, 1923. We have made minor editorial changes.

indecision, want of penetration, concealment, fretting fear, and trembling terror. Now like a javelin the mind flies forth, the arbiter of right and wrong. Now like a solemn covenant it remains firm, the guardian of rights secured. Then, as under autumn and winter's blight, comes gradual decay, a passing away, like the flow of water, never to return. Finally, the block when all is choked up like an old drain the failing mind which shall not see light again.

"Joy and anger, sorrow and happiness, caution and remorse, come upon us by turns, with everchanging mood. They come like music from hollowness, like mushrooms from damp. Daily and nightly they alternate within us, but we cannot tell whence they spring. Can we then hope in a moment to lay our finger upon their very cause?

"But for these emotions I should not be. But for me, they would have no scope. So far we can go; but we do not know what it is that brings them into play. 'I would seem to be a soul; but the clue as to its existence is wanting. That such a power operates is credible enough, though we cannot see its form. Perhaps it has functions without form.

"Take the human body with all its manifold divisions. Which part of it does a man love best? Does he not cherish all equally, or has he a preference? Do not all equally serve him? And do these servitors then govern themselves, or are they subdivided into rulers and subjects? Surely there is some soul which sways them all.

"But whether or not we ascertain what are the functions of this soul, it matters but little to the soul itself. For coming into existence with this mortal coil of mine, with the exhaustion of this mortal coil its mandate will also be exhausted. To be harassed by the wear and tear of life, and to pass rapidly through it without possibility of arresting one's course, is not this pitiful indeed? To labour without ceasing, and then, without living to enjoy the fruit, worn out, to depart, suddenly, one knows not whither, is not that a just cause for grief?

"What advantage is there in what men call not dying? The body decomposes, and the mind goes with it. This is our real cause for sorrow. Can the world be so dull as not to see this? Or is it I alone who am dull, and others not so?

"If we are to be guided by the criteria of our own minds, who shall be without a guide? What need to know of the alternations of passion, when the mind thus affords scope to itself? verily even the minds of fools! Whereas, for a mind without criteria to admit the idea of contraries, is like saying, I went to Yuch today, and got there yesterday. Or, like placing nowhere somewhere, topography which even the Great Yu would fail to understand; how much more I?

"Speech is not mere breath. It is differentiated by meaning. Take away that, and you cannot say whether it is speech or not. Can you even distinguish it from the chirping of young birds?

"But how can Dao be so obscured that we speak of it as true and false? And how can speech be so obscured that it admits the idea of contraries? How can Dao go away and yet remain? How can speech exist and yet be impossible?

"Dao is obscured by our want of grasp. Speech is obscured by the gloss of this world. Hence the affirmatives and negatives of the Confucian and Mohist schools, each denying what the other affirmed and affirming what the other denied. But he who would reconcile affirmative with negative and negative with affirmative must do so by the light of nature.

"There is nothing which is not objective: there is nothing which is not subjective. But it is impossible to start from the objective. Only from subjective knowledge is it possible to proceed to objective knowledge. Hence it has been said, 'The objective emanates from the subjective; the subjective is consequent upon the objective. This is the Alternation Theory.' Nevertheless, when one is born, the other dies. When one is possible, the other is impossible. When one is affirmative, the other is negative. Which being the case, the true sage rejects all distinctions of this and that. He takes his refuge in Dao, and places himself in subjective relation with all things.

"And inasmuch as the subjective is also objective, and the objective also subjective, and as the contraries under each are indistinguishably blended, does it not become impossible for us to say whether subjective and objective really exist at all?

"When subjective and objective are both without their correlates, that is the very axis of Dao. And when that axis passes through the centre at which all infinities converge, positive and negative alike blend into an infinite one. Hence it has been said that there is nothing like the light of nature.

"To take a finger in illustration of a finger not being a finger is not so good as to take something which is not a finger. To take a horse in illustration of a horse not being a horse is not so good as to take something which is not a horse.

"So with the universe and all that in it is. These things are but fingers and horses in this sense. The possible is possible; the impossible is impossible. Dao operates, and given results follow. Things receive names and are what they are. They achieve this by their natural affinity for what they are and their natural antagonism to what they are not. For all things have their own particular constitutions and potentialities. Nothing can exist without these.

"Therefore it is that, viewed from the standpoint of Dao, a beam and a pillar are identical. So are ugliness and beauty, greatness, wickedness, perverseness, and strangeness. Separation is the same as construction; construction is the same as destruction. Nothing is subject either to construction or to destruction, for these conditions are brought together into one.

"Only the truly intelligent understand this principle of the identity of all things. They do not view things as apprehended by themselves, subjectively, but transfer themselves into the position of the things viewed. And viewing them thus they are able to comprehend them, nay, to master them; and he who can master them is near. So it is that to place oneself in subjective relation with externals, without consciousness of their objectivity, this is Dao. But to wear out one's intellect in an obstinate adherence to the individuality of things, not

recognizing the fact that all things are one, this is called Three in the Morning."

"What is Three in the Morning?" asked Zi Yu.

"A keeper of monkeys," replied Zi Qi, "said with regard to their rations of chestnuts that each monkey was to have three in the morning and four at night. But at this the monkeys were very angry, so the keeper said they might have four in the morning and three at night, with which arrangement they were all well pleased. The actual number of the chestnuts remained the same, but there was an adaptation to the likes and dislikes of those concerned. Such is the principle of putting oneself into subjective relation with externals.

"Wherefore the true sage, while regarding contraries as identical, adapts himself to the laws of Heaven. This is called following two courses at once....

"Therefore what the true sage aims at is the light which comes out of darkness. He does not view things as apprehended by himself, subjectively, but transfers himself into the position of the things viewed. This is called using the light.

"There remains, however, speech. Is that to be enrolled under either category of contraries, or not? Whether it is so enrolled or not, it will in any case belong to one or the other, and thus be as though it had an objective existence. At any rate, I should like to hear some speech which belongs to neither category....

"If then all things are one, what room is there for speech? On the other hand, since I can utter these words, how can speech not exist?

"If it does exist, we have one and speech = two; and two and one = three. From which point onwards even the best mathematicians will fail to reach: How much more then will ordinary people fail?

"Hence, if from nothing you can proceed to something, and subsequently reach three, it follows that it would be still more easy if you were to start from something. To avoid such progression, you must put yourself into subjective relation with the external.

"Before conditions existed, Dao was. Before definitions existed, speech was. Subjectively, we are conscious of certain delimitations which are,

- Right and Left
- Relationship and Obligation
- Division and Discrimination
- Emulation and Contention.

"These are called the Eight Predicables.

"For the true sage, beyond the limits of an external world, they exist, but are not recognized. By the true sage, within the limits of an external world, they are recognized, but are not assigned. And so, with regard to the wisdom of the ancients, as embodied in the Canon of Spring and Autumn, the true Sage assigns, but does not justify by argument. And thus, classifying he does not classify; arguing, he does not argue."

"How can that be?" asked Zi Yu.

"The true sage," answered Zi Qi, "keeps his knowledge within him, while men in general set forth theirs in argument, in order to convince each other. And therefore it is said that in argument he does not manifest himself.

"Perfect Dao does not declare itself. Nor does perfect argument express itself in words. Nor does perfect charity show itself in act. Nor is perfect honesty absolutely incorruptible. Nor is perfect courage absolutely unyielding.

"For the Dao which shines forth is not Dao. Speech which argues falls short of its aim. Charity which has fixed points loses its scope. Honesty which is absolute is wanting in credit. Courage which is absolute misses its object. These five are, as it were, round, with a strong bias towards squareness. Therefore that knowledge which stops at what it does not know is the highest knowledge.

"Who knows the argument which can be argued without words? the Dao which does not declare itself as Dao? He who knows this may be said to be of Dao. To be able to pour in without making full, and pour out without making empty, in ignorance of the power by which

such results are accomplished, this is accounted Light."

Of old, the Emperor Yao said to Shun, "I would smite the Zongs, and the Guis, and the Xuaos. Ever since I have been on the throne I have had this desire. What do you think?"

"These three states," replied Shun, "are paltry out-of-the-way places. Why can you not shake off this desire? Once upon a time, ten suns came out together, and all things were illuminated thereby. How much more then should virtue excel suns?"

Ye Que asked Wang Yi, saying, "Do you know for certain that all things are subjectively the same?"

"How can I know?" answered Wang Yi. "Do you know what you do not know?"

"How can I know?" replied Ye Que. "But can then nothing be known?"

"How can I know?" said Wang Yi. "Nevertheless, I will try to tell you. How can it be known that what I call knowing is not really not knowing and that what I call not knowing is not really knowing? Now I would ask you this. If a man sleeps in a damp place, he gets lumbago and dies. But how about an eel? And living up in a tree is precarious and trying to the nerves: but how about monkeys? Of the man, the eel, and the monkey, whose habitat is the right one, absolutely? Human beings feed on flesh, deer on grass, centipedes on snakes' brains, owls and crows on mice. Of these four, whose is the right taste, absolutely? Monkey mates with monkey, the buck with the doe; eels consort with fishes, while men admire Mao Ch'iang and Liji, at the sight of whom fishes plunge deep down in the water, birds soar high in the air, and deer hurry away. Yet who shall say which is the correct standard of beauty? In my opinion, the standard of human virtue, and of positive and negative, is so obscured that it is impossible to actually know it as such."

"If you then," asked Ye Que, "do not know what is bad for you, is the perfect man equally without this knowledge?"

"The perfect man," answered Wang Yi, "is a spiritual being. Were the ocean itself scorched up,

he would not feel hot. Were the Milky Way frozen hard, he would not feel cold. Were the mountains to be riven with thunder, and the great deep to be thrown up by storm, he would not tremble. In such case, he would mount upon the clouds of heaven, and driving the sun and the moon before him, would pass beyond the limits of this external world, where death and life have no more victory over man; how much less what is bad for him?"

Zhu Qiao addressed Zhang Wuzi as follows: "I heard Confucius say, 'The true sage pays no heed to mundane affairs. He neither seeks gain nor avoids injury. He asks nothing at the hands of man. He adheres, without questioning, to Dao. Without speaking, he can speak; and he can speak and yet say nothing. And so he roams beyond the limits of this dusty world. These,' added Confucius, 'are wild words.' Now to me they are the skilful embodiment of Dao. What, sir, is your opinion?"

"Points upon which the Yellow Emperor doubted," replied Zhang Wuzi, "how should Confucius know? You are going too fast. You see your egg, and expect to hear it crow. You look at your cross-bow, and expect to have broiled pigeon before you. I will say a few words to you at random, and do you listen at random.

"How does the sage seat himself by the sun and moon, and hold the universe in his grasp? He blends everything into one harmonious whole, rejecting the confusion of this and that. Rank and precedence, which the vulgar prize, the sage stolidly ignores. The revolutions of ten thousand years leave his unity unscathed. The universe itself may pass away, but he will flourish still.

"How do I know that love of life is not a delusion after all? How do I know but that he who dreads to die is not as a child who has lost the way and cannot find his home?"

"The Lady Liji was the daughter of Ai Feng. When the Duke of Jin first got her, she wept until the bosom of her dress was drenched with tears. But when she came to the royal residence, and lived with the Duke, and ate rich food, she repented of having wept. How then do I know

that the dead repent of having previously clung to life?"

"Those who dream of the banquet wake to lamentation and sorrow. Those who dream of lamentation and sorrow wake to join the hunt. While they dream, they do not know that they dream. Some will even interpret the very dream they are dreaming; and only when they awake do they know it was a dream.

"By and by comes the Great Awakening, and then we find out that this life is really a great dream. Fools think they are awake now, and flatter themselves they know if they are really princes or peasants. Confucius and you are both dreams; and I who say you are dreams, I am but a dream myself. This is a paradox. Tomorrow a sage may arise to explain it; but that tomorrow will not be until ten thousand generations have gone by.

"Granting that you and I argue. If you beat me, and not I you, are you necessarily right and I wrong? Or if I beat you and not you me, am I necessarily right and you wrong? Or are we both partly right and partly wrong? Or are we both wholly right and wholly wrong? You and I cannot know this, and consequently the world will be in ignorance of the truth.

"Who shall I employ as arbiter between us? If I employ someone who takes your view, he will side with you. How can such a one arbitrate between us? If I employ someone who takes my view, he will side with me. How can such a one arbitrate between us? And if I employ someone who either differs from, or agrees with, both of us, he will be equally unable to decide between us. Since then you, and I, and man, cannot decide, must we not depend upon another? Such dependence is as though it were not dependence. We are embraced in the obliterating unity of Dao. There is perfect adaption to whatever may eventuate; and so we complete our allotted span.

"But what is it to be embraced in the obliterating unity of Dao? It is this. With reference to positive and negative, to that which is so and that which is not so, if the positive is really positive, it must necessarily be different from its

negative: there is no room for argument. And if that which is so really is so, it must necessarily be different from that which is not so: there is no room for argument.

"Take no heed of time, nor of right and wrong. But passing into the realm of the Infinite, take your final rest therein."

The Penumbra said to the Umbra. "At one moment you move; at another you are at rest. At one moment you sit down; at another you get up. Why this instability of purpose?" "I depend," replied the Umbra, "upon something which causes me to do as I do; and that something

depends in turn upon something else which causes it to do as it does. My dependence is like that of a snake's scales or of a cicada's wings. How can I tell why I do one thing, or why I do not do another?"

Once upon a time, I, Zhuangzi, dreamt I was a butterfly, fluttering hither and thither, to all intents and purposes a butterfly. I was conscious only of following my fancies as a butterfly, and was unconscious of my individuality as a man. Suddenly, I awaked, and there I lay, myself again. Now I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly dreaming I am a man.