

The *Zhuangzi* and Hermeneutics

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Abstract

The *Zhuangzi* to this day continues to be a hermeneutical challenge in that it always calls for new and fresh interpretations. In the past thirty years, however, various scholars have argued in their studies that the *Zhuangzi* does not only pose a hermeneutical challenge, but also carries an implicit hermeneutics. My aim in this paper is to show that underneath its parables and rhetoric, fictional and imaginary characters, as well as its inclination towards relativism and skepticism, a Zhuangzian hermeneutics comparable to the hermeneutical theories of Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer in the West subtly permeates the *Zhuangzi*. To attain this aim, I will first present and examine the three types of words in the *Zhuangzi* and do a Ricoeurian reading of these words. I will consequently identify the hermeneutics of skepticism implied in the *Zhuangzi* and argue that it is a hermeneutical approach that is dominant in the text. I will then contend that in addition to the hermeneutics of skepticism, the *Zhuangzi* also contains what I call a *perspectival hermeneutics* with a number of elements that echo Gadamer's hermeneutical theory.

Keywords: *Zhuangzi*, goblet words, hermeneutics of skepticism, Ricoeur, Gadamer, *perspectival hermeneutics*

1. Introduction

The *Zhuangzi*¹ has been known for millennia as a book that both amuses and bemuses its readers. On one hand, it is amusing because the *Zhuangzi*'s numerous aphorisms, fables, and metaphors are creatively flavored with wit and humor (Hansen 2017). Here is one passage from the *Zhuangzi*, for example, that I find very amusing because, personally, I cannot help but laugh whenever I read it:

Zhuangzi and Hui Shih were once strolling along a path which led across a small stream, when Zhuangzi turned to Hui Shih and said,

“Look how the fish are jumping; it seems to give them pleasure.” Hui Shi answered, “You are not a fish, so how do you know what gives them pleasure?” Zhuangzi said, “You are not I, so how do you know that I do not know what gives pleasure to the fish?” Hui Shih replied, “I am not you, and therefore do not know what you know and what you do not know. But one thing I do know for sure is that you are not a fish.” Zhuangzi said, “Let us return to the first question. You were asking me, ‘How do you know what gives pleasure to the fish?’ But this very question presupposes that I do know; otherwise you would never have asked how I know it!” (Zhuangzi 1994, 165)

According to Chad Hansen (1992, 265), the wit and humor in the *Zhuangzi* are what make it “irresistibly attractive” since with the brilliant inclusion of wit and humor² in the text, the *Zhuangzi* “attracts us like philosophical honey.” On the other hand, the *Zhuangzi* is bemusing because not all its aphorisms, fables, and metaphors are written in plain language; rather, they contain plenty of symbolisms and cryptic expressions whose meanings are open-ended (Coutinho 2017, 4), making “[t]he *Zhuangzi*... a protean text” and quite a confusing corpus (Van Norden 1996, 247). As Guy C. Burneko (1986, 393) attests, the *Zhuangzi* as a literary and philosophical text “is difficult and problematic. It is difficult because of its unexpected use of language and problematic because... [its] potpourri of anecdotes, symbols, ironies, paradoxes, metaphors, and bits of narrative lends itself to no tidy wrapper of meaning.” For this reason, the *Zhuangzi* to this day continues to be a hermeneutical challenge in that it always calls for new and fresh interpretations. In the past thirty years, however, various scholars have argued in their studies that the *Zhuangzi* does not only pose a hermeneutical challenge, but also carries an implicit hermeneutics or what Ming Dong Gu (2005, 119) aptly calls “Zhuangzi’s theory of hermeneutics”, which is a peculiar Zhuangzian approach (which I will elaborate in the later part of this paper) in interpreting words, language, human existence, the world, reality as whole, etc.³ As Yang Guorong (2008, 1) affirms, “[t]he examination of names and words constitutes an important aspect of the philosophy of *Zhuangzi*.” This typical Zhuangzian examination of names and words is essentially interpretive, and therefore, hermeneutical (Guorong 2008, 1). My aim in this paper is to show that underneath its parables and rhetoric, fictional and imaginary characters, as well as its

inclination towards relativism and skepticism, a Zhuangzian hermeneutics comparable to the hermeneutical theories of Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer in the West subtly permeates the *Zhuangzi*. In a way, the overall hermeneutical task in this paper is in consonance with Friederike Assandri's hermeneutical study of ancient Chinese literature. Assandri (2010, 341) says,

There are several ways in which originally European hermeneutics found entrance in the study of Chinese intellectual history. For one, as strategies of reading ancient texts, hermeneutic principles of interpretation provided new perspectives in the interpretation of classical Chinese philosophical texts.... A more explicit approach to apply hermeneutics to the field of Chinese intellectual history consisted in asking for a "Chinese hermeneutic tradition," the hermeneutic strategies Chinese employed to explain their own historical and philosophical tradition.

Thus to attain the aim of this paper, I will first present and examine the three types of words in the *Zhuangzi* and do a Ricoeurian reading of these words. Such a Ricoeurian reading is mainly inspired by Ming Dong Gu's (2005, 119) claim that "Zhuangzi can be brought into a meaningful dialogue with contemporary theorists of hermeneutics." This is why in this paper I will be engaging Zhuangzi in a dialogue with two contemporary theorists of hermeneutics, viz., Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer. I will consequently identify the hermeneutics of skepticism⁴ implied in the *Zhuangzi* and argue that it is a hermeneutical approach that is dominant in the text. I will then contend that in addition to the hermeneutics of skepticism, the *Zhuangzi* also contains what I call a *perspectival hermeneutics* with a number of elements that echo Gadamer's hermeneutical theory.

2. The Three Types of Words in the *Zhuangzi*

Alan Fox (1995, 23) argues that the *Zhuangzi* has been characterized "as advocating relativism, and there are certainly relativistic elements to be found. But unlike the more thoroughgoing forms of relativism, the text gives priority to certain attitudes and behaviors, and thus cannot accurately be dismissed as purely relativistic." These attitudes and behaviors,

especially when taken together – although we cannot definitely conclude yet from them that Zhuangzi is a pure relativist – constitute the hermeneutic theory of Zhuangzi. This is because these attitudes and behaviors mirror a specific way of interpreting things; they reflect a particular approach to reality. Central to this approach is the peculiar Zhuangzian use of language (cf. Vrubliauskaitė 2014, 75-90).

In Zhuangzi's employment of language, there are three types of words. Burton Watson translated them as "imputed words," "repeated words," and "goblet words" (Zhuangzi 1964). Imputed words refer to those high-impact words due to their being spoken by someone who is considered great, whether he or she be a real historical or a legendary personality. Repeated words are those which we are already familiar with; they are words whose meanings we tend to readily accept and believe because of our familiarity with them. Goblet words, meanwhile, refer to

[those] words whose meaning changes, which Zhuangzi describes as 'words that are no-words.' This kind of [words] constantly refreshes itself, and therefore more accurately conveys meaning. It fills and empties, and thus more closely mirrors the distinction necessary for understanding (Fox 1995, 24).

In his study of Zhuangzian language, Youru Wang (2004, 196) argues that goblet words contain the two other types of Zhuangzian words because in his view, it is "only within the general scope and function of goblet words that we gain a better understanding of the role of ... [imputed words and repeated words]." So since goblet words encompass the two other types of words, it is important to possess a clearer grasp of what goblet words signify and how they are used in the *Zhuangzi*.

In the original Chinese, goblet words are called as *zhiyan* (卮言) (cf. Fried 2007, 145-170). Burton Watson (1964, 303, translator's note 1) reasons that the most appropriate translation for this term would be "goblet words"; this is because for him, *zhiyan* is like a wine vessel "that tips when full and rights itself when empty." Kuang-ming Wu (1988, 2) supports this Watsonian translation because he likewise believes that

Chuang Tzu's goblet words are words requesting us to change, to be judged and transformed, so that we become as nothing, absolutely nimble and flex-ing with things. A goblet is an empty vessel that tips itself as it accommodates wine, a funnel that lets through anything that comes in.

Moreover, in his article titled "Goblet Words and Indeterminacy: A Writing Style that is Free of Commitment," Wai Wai Chiu (2015, 255-272) claims that part of the obscurity of the *Zhuangzi* can be traced to Zhuangzi's penchant for goblet words. The constant presence of goblet words throughout the text accounts for the lack of plain language in the *Zhuangzi*. As a result, "figurative language is prevalent in the text, including simile, metaphor, implicature, irony, hyperbole, and parable. They all serve to obscure the position of the text and leave ample room for conjecture" (Chiu 2015, 257). This preference for the use of goblet words indicates that the author/s of the *Zhuangzi* wrote with a certain purpose, and that is: for the text to be always open to different interpretations and for its author/s to be under no obligation to explain in clear-cut language the meaning that the text conveys (Chiu 2015, 257).

In Chapter 2 of the *Zhuangzi*, we can read:

Words are not just wind. Words have something to say. But if what they have to say is not fixed, then do they really say something? Or do they say nothing? People suppose that words are different from the peeps of baby birds, but is there any difference, or isn't there? (Zhuangzi 1964).

The passage above is a clear indication that for Zhuangzi, the meanings of words constantly change: one moment a particular word means this thing, another moment it means that thing. This is the reason why Zhuangzi consistently adopts a skeptical attitude towards words and language in general (cf. Ivanhoe 1993, 639-654). He is not being a skeptic just for the sake of being a skeptic; rather, he is being realistic about the fluid nature of language. In the *Zhuangzi*, language – especially those which comprise of goblet words – are symbols with an inexhaustible layer of meaning (cf. Doeringer 1993, 5-28). As Wolfgang Teubert (2015, 422) succinctly puts it, "Language is, more than anything else, the means to communicate symbolic content."

From a Ricoeurian perspective, words are an essential component of language; they make up language for by and large, words stand as the symbol of our thoughts, feelings, reality, etc. (Ricoeur 1974, 76). Due to their symbolic character, words are by nature polysemic. As Ricoeur (1974, 76) himself declares, “All words used in ordinary language have more than one meaning.” But aside from being polysemic, words, insofar as they are symbols, are also opaque. (Ricoeur 1967, 15). Their underlying meanings are not always readily evident. On account of the polysemy and the opacity of words, then, there is always a need for hermeneutics. As Emerita Quito (1990, 85) avers, “where symbols are involved, interpretation becomes necessary.” It is for this reason that Ricoeur (1970, 27) himself “decided to define, i.e. limit, the notions of symbol and interpretation through one another.” It is the task of hermeneutics to bring to light the hidden meanings of symbols or, in Zhuangzian terminology, goblet words.

Reading the *Zhuangzi* through the lens of Ricoeurian hermeneutics, goblet words perfectly fit into the category of Ricoeur’s notion of symbols. This is so since goblet words, like how Ricoeur understands symbols, are both polysemic (they do not hold fixed meanings) and opaque (they have multiple layers of meanings) (cf. Wang 2004, 195-218; Fried 2007, 145-170). Now from a Ricoeurian viewpoint, the vast array of goblet words that run through the entire *Zhuangzi*, inasmuch as they are by nature polysemic and opaque, call for a hermeneutics of suspicion. The hermeneutics of suspicion, true to its name, is interpretation characterized by doubting (cf. Scott-Baumann 2009, 97). While it primarily doubts the surface meaning of symbols, it also involves doubting ourselves – we, who act as interpreters – in order to destroy our prejudices and arrive at an unbiased interpretation (Scott-Baumann 2009, 68). This Ricoeurian hermeneutics of suspicion is also very much present in the *Zhuangzi*, albeit with a slightly different name: the hermeneutics of skepticism. In his article “Goblet Words: The Chuang-tzu’s Hermeneutic on Words and the Tao,” John Allen Tucker (1984, 24) implies that the hermeneutics of skepticism is the only fitting mode of interpretation when it comes to

goblet words, meaning to say, vis-à-vis goblet words, the best attitude will always be that of a skeptic.

In the next section, I am going to explore deeper Zhuangzi's hermeneutics of skepticism.

3. The Zhuangzian Hermeneutics of Skepticism

Zhuangzi's hermeneutics of skepticism primarily applies to language. But for Zhuangzi, such hermeneutics also very much applies to all things in general. In a famous⁵ story in Chapter 2 of the *Zhuangzi*, we can find an anecdote that strongly depicts Zhuangzi's skeptical attitude:

Once Chuang Chou dreamt he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting and fluttering around, happy with himself and doing as he pleased. He didn't know he was Chuang Chou. Suddenly he woke and there he was, solid and unmistakable Chuang Chou. But he didn't know if he was Chuang Chou who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Chuang Chou. Between Chuang Chou and a butterfly there must be some distinction! This is called the Transformation of Things (Zhuangzi 1964).

In my interpretation of this famous story, there is an implicit necessity here to constantly apply a hermeneutics of skepticism towards everything, be they dreams, real experiences, and even more so goblet words. Zhuangzi's skepticism, however, is not what you might call a "nihilistic skepticism" because he never denies that things, words, dreams, and experiences do have meanings. Rather, his hermeneutics of skepticism is one that shares some resemblance to the hermeneutics of suspicion of Paul Ricoeur. For Ricoeur, the hermeneutics of suspicion is a way of interpreting language and reality wherein one initially doubts given meanings. In the *Zhuangzi*, such a hermeneutics permeates the whole corpus in that Zhuangzi either questions things or lets us question our understanding of what is said in the text (cf. Ivanhoe 1993, 639-654). In the following dialogue between Nie Que and Wang Ni, for instance, we can notice that the kind of skepticism at play between these interlocutors have a striking resemblance to Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion.

Nie Que: Would you know something of which all things agreed "That's it"?

Wang Ni: How would I know that?

Nie Que: Would you know what you did not know?

Wang Ni: How would I know that?

Nie Que: Then does no thing know anything?

Wang Ni: How would I know that? However, let me try to say it — “How do I know that what I call knowing is not ignorance? How do I know that what I call ignorance is not knowing?” (Zhuangzi 1986, 58).

I suppose that the above passage, while containing the characteristic skeptical style of the *Zhuangzi*, could be read as implying a hermeneutics of suspicion. The dialogue hints of a certain skepticism – the uncertainty whether one has really ignorance or knowledge – that clearly employs a method of suspicion akin to Ricoeur’s, that is, the doubting not only of one’s interpretation but also of oneself as the interpreter. And as further proof that the Zhuangzian hermeneutics of skepticism shares some affinity with the Ricoeurian hermeneutics of suspicion, here is another passage from the *Zhuangzi* where the same skepticism is employed, a skepticism that is laden with a hermeneutics of suspicion.

How do I know that to take pleasure in life is not a delusion? How do I know that we who hate death are not exiles since childhood who have forgotten the way home? Lady Li was the daughter of a frontier guard at Ai. When the kingdom of Chin first took her the tears stained her dress; only when she came to the palace and shared the Ring’s square couch and ate the flesh of hay-fed and grain-fed beasts did she begin to regret her tears. How do I know that the dead do not regret that ever they had an urge to life? Who banquets in a dream at dawn wails and weeps, who wails and weeps in a dream at dawn goes out to hunt. While we dream we do not know that we are dreaming, and in the middle of a dream interpret a dream within it; not until we wake do we know that we were dreaming. Only at the ultimate awakening shall we know that this is the ultimate dream. Yet fools think they are awake, so confident that they know what they are, princes, herdsman, incorrigible! (Zhuangzi 1986, 123).

In my Ricoeurian reading of the above passage, it indicates the need to adopt a skeptical attitude because we may be under a delusion or in a dream state from which we have not yet awakened. In fact, “How do I know” appears in the passage twice, right at the beginning, denoting a skeptical attitude that combines an attitude of suspicion. And yet, just as Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of suspicion is not the end-all and be-all of his

hermeneutics of symbols, in the *Zhuangzi*, the hermeneutics of skepticism does not signify a dead-end. While Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion gives way to the hermeneutics of faith – the hermeneutics that is characterized by believing and by listening to what the symbols really intend to convey (Itao 2010, 8) – Zhuangzi's hermeneutics of skepticism gives way to a perspectival hermeneutics, that is, the hermeneutics that gives primacy to one's perspective in any interpretive endeavor.⁶

In the next section, I will attempt to go in-depth on the perspectival hermeneutics found in the *Zhuangzi*.

4. The Zhuangzian Perspectival Hermeneutics

Donald Sturgeon (2015, 893) claims that perspectivism is “a recurring theme in the *Zhuangzi*.” This more than indicates that Zhuangzi is a perspectivist thinker (cf. Tan 2016, 100-121) or, in the words of Ewing Chinn (2007, 207), “a *perspectival realist*.”⁷ According to Tom Connolly (2011, 487, 492), there are two ways of looking at Zhuangzian perspectivism: first, as the reductionist view that what I know is just “one perspective among many”; and second, as a method that “is practiced precisely for the sake of attaining a greater level of objectivity in our knowledge.” As a method, perspectivism further suggests

open-ended modes of interpretation... a general ability to assimilate information and respond to the world... a tool for thinking rather than a thought itself... [that] determines no truth-conditions of its own, but provides a way of organizing and navigating among thoughts (Elisabeth Camp quoted in Chung, 2017, 12).

Thus, in general, what I would like to call as the Zhuangzian *perspectival hermeneutics* is no other than a method of interpretation that is aimed at “greater knowledge” (*dai zhi*).⁸ Such hermeneutics can be found throughout the *Zhuangzi*, and in my view, its role and function is to balance the hermeneutics of skepticism that is equally prevalent throughout the Zhuangzian corpus. Whereas the hermeneutics of skepticism proceeds via the path of doubting, the hermeneutics of perspectivism proceeds via the path of openness (cf. Camp quoted in Chung 2017, 12). In other words, from the viewpoint of Zhuangzi, any interpretation – be it of

texts, language, reality, etc. – can be valid in that, whether I am for or against it, it still springs from a particular perspective which I ought to respect. Let's take the story of the Peng Bird – the very story which opens the *Zhuangzi* – as our example. Zhuangzi recounts that the Peng Bird, whose gargantuan size makes it fly way higher than the smaller flying creatures, is being laughed at by the cicada and the dove. The two, being far and way smaller than the Peng Bird, can neither reach the same altitude nor match the speed of the Peng Bird; so what they do instead is to laugh at the giant bird. But then, Zhuangzi immediately informs us that such action (the two smaller flying creatures laughing at the giant Peng Bird), is wrong. “What do these two creatures understand?” Zhuangzi asks. “Little understanding cannot come up to great understanding; the short-lived cannot come up to the long-lived” (Zhuangzi 1994, 2).

Based on the explications above, the employment of the Zhuangzian perspectival hermeneutics connotes that I remain open to other possible meanings and that I can enlarge my limited point of view by merging my perspective to, or by appropriating, another's perspective (cf. Sturgeon 2015, 903). This is where this Zhuangzian hermeneutics echoes some elements from Gadamer's hermeneutical theory. As Ming Dong Gu (2005, 1) notes, Gadamerian hermeneutics “entails a sense of openness in interpretation.” In addition, in Gadamer, every perspective is called a horizon and it refers to “the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vintage point” (Gadamer 1975, 302). That is to say, every horizon “designates everything that can be seen from a particular position” (Johnson 2000, 32). In short, “a horizon is the interpreter's perspective, his particular viewpoint” (Itao and Benitez 2011, 3; Warnke 1987, 82). In order to arrive at understanding, Gadamer holds that my horizon should fully merge into the horizon of the other (this can be a text, language, object, etc.) so that there would be a “fusion of horizons” (Gadamer 1975, 306). In a similar vein, the Zhuangzian perspectival hermeneutics equally calls for the same Gadamerian fusion of horizons in order to acquire a larger

perspective or a better and richer point of view (Connolly 2011, 492).

5. Conclusion

As I have shown in this paper, the *Zhuangzi* is not only a hermeneutical challenge that poses numerous interpretive difficulties but it is also a rich hermeneutical reserve in that it houses two hermeneutical methods that permeate the Zhuangzian corpus: the hermeneutics of skepticism and perspectival hermeneutics. These two, in my opinion, are not really opposed to each other because they complement and balance one another. The Zhuangzian hermeneutics of skepticism is very much similar to Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion while the Zhuangzian perspectival hermeneutics carries certain resemblance to Gadamer's hermeneutical theory.

Although it is not really within the scope of this paper to enter into the on-going conversation whether or not Zhuangzi is really a skeptic, still I would say that, based on the discussion in this paper, Zhuangzi can simply be considered to have skeptical views (which are more hermeneutical than epistemological) but he cannot and can never be considered as a total skeptic. The *Zhuangzi*, in my view, is not a book of skepticism; rather, if we go beyond its cacophony of skeptical innuendos, we will find that the *Zhuangzi* is a book of openness. It is a text that invites us to broaden our horizons and enlarge our understanding.

NOTES

¹ When rendered in Italics in this paper, the term *Zhuangzi* refers to the classical Chinese book. When not rendered in Italics, the term Zhuangzi refers to the sage, the supposed author of the book named after him. Scholars, however, seem to agree that the *Zhuangzi* is not a work of an individual person, but mostly likely of a team of ancient philosophical writers

² Burton Watson (1983, ix) explicitly claims that "there is the incomparable wit and humor that lie at the very heart of the *Chuang-tzu*."

³ See also Guy C. Burneko (1986, 393-409); Wolfgang Teubert (2015, 421-444); Lin Ma and Jaap van Brakel (2016, 575-589); Chen Guo and Ying Zhang (2018, 47-61).

⁴ My usage of the phrase “hermeneutics of skepticism” in this paper is adopted from Victor H. Mair (2001, xii) who first christened the hermeneutics in the *Zhuangzi* as a “skeptical hermeneutics.”

⁵ In his book *The Butterfly as Companion: Meditations on the First Three Chapters of the Chuang Tzu*, Kuang-ming Wu (1990, 89) reveals that the “Butterfly Story” in the *Zhuangzi* is famous because for many subsequent Daoists, this story has been used over and over for meditation purposes owing to its open-endedness and richness in possible meanings.

⁶ See Tim Connolly (2011, 487-505); Donald Sturgeon (2015, 892-917); Ewing Y. Chinn (2007, 207-220); Christine Abigail L. Tan (2016, 100-121); Erki Lind (2014, 145-154).

⁷ Emphasis by Chinn.

⁸ This is Tom Connolly’s view which I am also adopting in this paper. For further reading see, Connolly (2011, 492).

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