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The *Zhuangzi*, creativity, and epistemic virtue

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Abstract
This article explores how aspects of traditional Chinese thought regarding creativity can influence and enrich contemporary thought about related topics: specifically, how creativity can be construed as an epistemic or intellectual virtue, and the benefits of considering it as such. It proceeds in three parts. First, I review a conception of creativity suggested by aspects of the *Zhuangzi* that centrally involves forms of spontaneity and adaptivity engendered by embracing *you* 遊, or "wandering", contrasting it with more conventional conceptions of creativity that emphasize novelty or originality. Second, I explain how this conception of creativity illuminates how creativity can be an epistemic virtue of a surprising sort: one that concerns a disposition to—borrowing an expression from Chris Fraser—"ride along with things". This "riding along" is ironically engendered by letting go of what David Wong has characterized as "the obsession with being right", about which the *Zhuangzi* expresses concern. I argue that, while this conception of creativity eschews fixed goals, including epistemically-oriented goals like apprehending truth or developing knowledge, there are nevertheless good reasons to count creativity (so understood) as an epistemic virtue. Third, I connect these explorations with current conversations (begun by Matthew Kieran and C. Thi Nguyen) that already treat creativity or, relatedly, play as an epistemic or intellectual virtue, and explore how engaging the *Zhuangzi* in the manner outlined promises to help extend them.

Keywords *Zhuangzi* · Creativity · *You* 遊 · Play · Epistemic virtue · Intellectual virtue

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1 The *Zhuangzi* and creativity[1]

As psychologists Weihua Niu and Robert Sternberg note in some of their work on creativity, people often tend to think that creativity centrally involves *novelty* or *originality*, and this tendency has operated both historically and across cultures.[2] For example, they observe that this way of thinking about creativity is common in ancient to current European[3] thought, regardless of whether creativity is, say, taken to be of *divine* origin (emanating from one God or sets of Gods) or *worldly* origin (emanating from single worldly entities or sets of single worldly entities, human or otherwise).[4] (cf. Niu & Sternberg, 2006) In other words, regardless of whether it's held that the origins of creativity are divine or worldly, it's common to think that creativity centrally involves the generation of something substantively new or original. Indeed, it's so common that this view is considered by some to be a truism, or at least the product of an emerging consensus (cf. Gaut, 2010, 1039).

Niu and Sternberg also point out, however, that this way of thinking about creativity isn't universal. Elsewhere, creativity has been understood as centrally involving what might be referred to as *spontaneity* and *adaptivity* rather than novelty or originality: that is, at first pass, as centrally involving contextually unanticipated or unplanned developments, whether substantively new or original, or not. My use of these terms is to some degree technical and influenced by Brian Bruya's work on the notion of spontaneity (in classical Daoist philosophy) and Mercedes Valmisa's work on the notion of adaptivity (in classical Chinese philosophy more broadly). Drawing aspects of their accounts together, spontaneity and adaptivity can be conceptually linked in the following way. Actions are *adaptive* to the extent that they're spontaneous, which is to say performed in a manner that exemplifies, on Bruya's account, "a holistic fluency that can be analyzed generally as cognitive-affective focus (collection), the shedding of distractions, ease [in a sense], and

[1] This section closely follows Sect. 2.1 of Chung (2021) and Sect. 1 of Chung (2023), which are themselves abridgements and slight reformulations of Sects. 2.1–2.2 of Chung (2022a).

[2] The term "centrally involves" is used to leave it open as to whether the concept of creativity is a *definitional concept* that includes, as a necessary condition, novelty or originality, for example, or whether the concept of creativity is a *non-definitional* concept that lacks necessary and sufficient conditions but that includes originality or novelty in some other way (cf. Margolis & Laurence, 2019).

[3] The term "European" is used to replace what other commentators have discussed using the term "Western", as the supposed distinction between "Western" and "non-Western" or "Eastern" is fraught—although, the supposed distinction between "European" and "non-European" may turn out to be in some ways problematic as well. Further, "European" should be taken to refer to the cultures and traditions of Europe and to those whose cultural origins are most heavily influenced by European cultures or traditions (cf. Niu & Sternberg, 2006).

[4] Note that some instances of "divine" creativity may also have "worldly" origins and vice versa, as these two ways of thinking about sources of creativity are not mutually exclusive. Also, while divine creativity is the focus of much historical European scholarship, contemporary scholars tend to focus on worldly creativity, especially in the social sciences and sciences (cf. Fara, 2002; Niu & Sternberg, 2006).

responsiveness to constantly changing circumstances."[5] (Bruya 2010, 218) Further, actions are *spontaneous* to the extent that they're adaptive, which is to say performed in a manner that exemplifies, on Valmisa's account, "a course of action […] in accordance with the temporary situation in which [an agent] is embedded—that is, all the entities and potential actors with which [an agent] interacts in a particular situation." (Valmisa, 2021, 5) It's important to note that this is not to reduce adaptivity to spontaneity or vice versa. Rather, these two approaches drawn together can be interpreted as suggesting that spontaneity and adaptivity go hand-in-hand: spontaneous, adaptive agents "choose in the moment" (rather than ahead of time), while nonetheless (in some cases) devising highly malleable strategic approaches (or "strategies ad hoc", to use Valmisa's terminology) as they respond to constantly changing circumstances.[6] On this alternative way of thinking about creativity, then, a creative entity is conceived more along the lines of a *facilitator* than an *innovator*, participating in a creative process that has been unfolding that could yield all manner of results, rather than invariably generating anything substantively different. This conception of creativity can hence be understood as making connections between the new and the old, and therefore as *evolutionary*, rather than *revolutionary*[7] (cf. Niu, 2012; Niu & Sternberg, 2006).

[5] To this Bruya adds, "If one allows 'spontaneity' as a technical term for Daoist self-causation, it would be consistent with the Western etymology of the term, but, of course, both 'self' and 'causation' mean something quite different in the different cultural contexts." (Bruya, 2010, 218) One might also add that products, processes, or agents that are creative in this sense involve "productivity" insofar as they facilitate integrative creative processes. For more on this conception of spontaneity, see Bruya (2010).

[6] For more on strategies ad hoc, see Valmisa (2021).

[7] In one paper, Weihua Niu points out that on this understanding "novelty is implied as a feature of everlasting production or context co-created by humans and the prior context." (Niu, 2012, 280) In this way, one can include novelty or originality as a condition of creativity if one chooses. However, as discussed below, that approach suggests that novelty or originality can be marginal or had "on the cheap", in the sense that all actions are, or everything we do is, in some sense "novel" or "original" because we haven't done exactly those things ever before—a position that contemporary commentators on creativity have typically been reluctant to adopt. For this reason, some add an additional constraint: surprise (cf. Gaut, 2010, 1039). That addition can be criticized, however, on the grounds that it's unclear that creative products, processes, or agents universally involve any surprise or "surprisingness", *especially* if we take seriously the possibility, for example, that the wheelwright in the *Zhuangzi*, or people engaging actively in processes related to grief and bereavement (cf. Chung, 2023) are engaging in creative activities. If all products, processes, or agents trivially exemplify novelty or originality, but creativity needn't involve any sort of "surprisingness", it might then be preferable to conceptualize creativity in a way that takes account of the different degrees of spontaneity and adaptivity at work in diverse creative enterprises. My approach suggests that products, processes, or agents exemplify creativity to the extent that they involve spontaneity and adaptivity (with less creative products, processes, or agents involving less, and more creative products, processes, or agents involving more).

This alternative way of thinking about creativity is common in classical Chinese thought, or at least plausibly so, regardless of whether creativity is taken to be of *cosmic* origin (emanating from *Tian* 天 ("Heaven")[8] or *Dao* 道 ("[the] Way")[9] as a whole) or *worldly* (or sub-cosmic) origin (emanating from single worldly entities or sets of single worldly entities, human or otherwise).[10] The degree to which *Tian* or *Dao* are considered to be natural phenomena can be helpfully considered when deliberating about how best to characterize the former, cosmic, view regarding the origins of creativity. For, to the extent that *Tian* or *Dao* are considered to be largely or wholly natural phenomena, one might appropriately consider the origins of creativity to be natural, rather than supernatural. Additionally, however one chooses to characterize the cosmic view of creativity's origins, it can nonetheless be contrasted with the latter, worldly (sub-cosmic) view, according to which creativity resides in single worldly entities or sets of single worldly entities (falling short of the whole of *Tian* or *Dao*) (cf. Niu & Sternberg, 2006).

Relatedly, a perspective shared by a variety of classical Chinese philosophers emphasizes what has been termed "the unity of nature and human thought" or, perhaps better, the *continuity* of nature and human thought.[11] On this view, since

[8] A note on translating "天" or "*Tian*" as "Heaven": according to Stephen Angle, "[a] quick summary of the career of *tian* runs something like the following. Early meanings include 'the sky' and the name of the Zhou people's sky deity. During the classical era, many texts continue to imbue *tian* with what we can loosely call normative and religious significances, though compared to the early Zhou, *tian* in the classical period is often considerably abstracted or naturalized." (Angle, 2018) For more on translating "天" or "*Tian*", see, e.g., Yang (2008), Huff (2017), and Angle (2018).

[9] As Bryan Van Norden explains, "This crucial philosophical term has five related senses. '*Dao*' can mean a path or road (as in the modern Chinese compound "*dàolù* 道路," roadway). In both Chinese and English, there is a natural metaphorical extension from 'way' in the sense of a literal *path* to 'way' in the sense of *a way to do something*. Closely related to this is 'Way' as *the linguistic account of a way* of doing something. From these senses, 'Way' came to refer to *the right way to live one's life and organize society*. Eventually the term also came to mean *the ultimate metaphysical entity* that was responsible for the way the world is and the way that it ought to be…. [However,] [a]lthough it can have any of these five senses, the primary meaning of *dao* (for most Eastern Zhou [i.e., pre-Qin] thinkers) is the right way to live and organize society" (Van Norden, 2011, 11). The fifth sense of the term, however, is often considered to be in play in so-called "Daoist" texts such as the *Zhuangzi*. Like many commentators, I'll use the capitalized *Dao* to refer to the so-called "Great *Dao*" 大道, the totality that constitutes the cosmos, with the lowercase *dao* referring to one or more distinct ways or paths within *Dao* (cf. Fraser, 2014a 546, fn. 16).

[10] For more on the topic of creativity in classical Chinese contexts, see, for example, Puett (2001), Niu and Sternberg (2006), Niu (2012), Ames (2014), and Mattice (2017).

[11] The former way of explicating this view is taken from Niu & Sternberg (2006, 30). However, the latter may be preferable for a number of reasons, including the following, courtesy of an anonymous referee: "There is a sense that human beings are 'natural', in the sense of our being embedded agents within the world—among the 'ten thousand things', as the *Zhuangzi* says. But talk of unity is complicated by two further emphases. First, humans have certain distinctive capacities or features, ones which serve to simultaneously distinguish us as certain special kinds of things (most notably, creatures able to apprehend the Way) while also, to a degree, setting us apart from the world—alienating us from it, such that the unity with the world enjoyed by other creatures is all too easily lost. Second, there is the lament across all the Schools that human existence, as it has come to be, encourages alienation from the world—upsetting the more innocent, natural sense of integration with the world enjoyed by other creatures (the Daoists, Zhuangzi and Liezi, are especially good on this). It is unclear, for the Daoists, whether human beings, as they have come to be, could actually attain the desired sort of unity: too much has gone wrong, for too long for that to be an attainable existential possibility."

humans are considered to be a part of nature rather than separate from it, worldly (sub-cosmic) creativity (including human creativity) is characterized as continuous with, or even as an aspect of, cosmic creativity. Indeed, classical Chinese philosophy contains a number of discussions of how human creativity can be attained or exercised through experiencing and interacting with cosmic creativity.[12]

Daoist philosophy in particular is often claimed to have had an exceptionally great and lasting impact on Chinese conceptions of creativity, specifically as those conceptions pertain to artistic and aesthetic creativity.[13] On one influential approach to interpreting the relevance of Daoist classics to the topic of creativity, including foundational texts like the *Daodejing* 道德經 (or, alternatively, the *Laozi* 老子)[14] and the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, creative processes are processes of inner apprehensions of *Dao*—itself partially explicable as (e.g.) "the totality… [e.g., of objects, events, and processes] that constitute[s] the cosmos" (Fraser, 2014a, 546, fn. 16) or "the ultimate metaphysical entity … responsible for the way the world is and the way that it ought to be" (Van Norden, 2011, 11).[15] When these processes occur, distinctions between subject (e.g., self) and object (e.g., not-self) either vanish, or at least fade into the background (as they're viewed as, for example, perspective-dependent, the realization of which can enable agents to, as will be further explicated below, transform themselves and other things in the world along with broader creative processes, as they're no longer perceived as entirely or absolutely distinct)[16] (cf. Niu & Sternberg, 2006, 30–31; Fraser, 2014a, 546–547 and 2014b, 17; Mattice, 2017, 264).

Another widely discussed and highly relevant aspect of the *Zhuangzi* is its use of skeptical arguments and paradoxical statements to question conventional ways of thinking and acting, with the apparent aim of encouraging readers to consider alternative approaches to thought and action. These alternative approaches are generally considered by interpreters to be characterized by features such as spontaneity, adaptivity, flexibility, playfulness, and creativity, rather than excessively rigid reliance on self-serving plans, characterizations of prior experiences, and fixed preconceptions. Further, these alternative approaches can in turn be interpreted as engendered by a specific response to skeptical critiques located within the text: the embracing of *you* 遊 (or, sometimes, 游), translatable as, for example, "wandering", "roaming" or "rambling".

[12] For discussion see, for example, Puett (2001), Niu (2012), Ames (2014), and Mattice (2017).

[13] Claims along these lines can be found in, for example, Niu & Sternberg (2006) and Mattice (2017), both of which cite a variety of other sources in this connection.

[14] For the uninitiated, the *Daodejing* and the *Laozi* are two different names for one and the same text.

[15] For more on *Dao* and its relationship to *dao*, see fn. 9.

[16] Related to this, Karyn Lai has recently proposed an account of Zhuangzian freedom that incorporates the notion of *working with constraints*, which fits with these suggestions insofar as agents who embrace *you* embody a spirit of openness in their undertakings: a spirit of openness that I venture can be engendered by a general skepticism regarding distinctions (cf. Lai, 2022, 15–16).

What does embracing *you* involve, what is it like, and how does it relate to other terms and concepts in the *Zhuangzi,* as well as the conception of creativity under discussion?[17] To assist me in answering this question, I'll draw on the work of Chris Fraser, who over several papers provides a particularly detailed and insightful account. Various passages in the text, Fraser explains, suggest that human beings have a distinctive capacity to experience and interact with a plurality of distinct *dao* 道 ("ways" or "paths") within the totality that constitutes the aforementioned holistic *Dao* of the cosmos. Embracing *you* is a mode of activity in which we employ this capacity. Unlike the pursuit of a single, fixed *dao*, embracing *you* involves meandering through life without a fixed destination, flexibly adapting to circumstances and "riding along with things" in general without depending on any one thing in particular[18] (Fraser, 2014a, 555).

Fraser connects his explorations regarding the embracing of *you* with what he characterizes as a Zhuangzian conception of freedom that centrally involves freedom from the bonds of intense, disruptive emotions, which tend to interfere with agents' fully exercising their agency in the way under discussion. Fraser is careful to target "intense, disruptive" emotions because, as he notes, various sections of the text seem to endorse (at minimum) mild, helpful emotions (or at least ways of feeling), such as being "at peace with the moment". Further, these mild, helpful emotions (or ways of feeling) are claimed to be typical signs of the sense of ease, security, poise, and equanimity that Philip J. Ivanhoe characterizes as aspects of "metaphysical comfort" and suggests to be constituents of the spontaneity valorized in early Daoist texts such as the *Zhuangzi*. (Ivanhoe, 2010; in Fraser, 2014a) According to Fraser, such spontaneity seems to be identical to the adaptive, creative responses he associates with embracing *you*—and hence, I'll add, to understanding the conception of creativity explored here. (Fraser, 2014a, 552, fn. 25) I'll add also that since embracing *you* is associated with things like freedom, spontaneity, and ease, there may—as intimated—be connections between embracing *you* and other notions that figure prominently in many discussions of creativity related to the *Zhuangzi* worth exploring, including *ziran* 自然 (translatable as, e.g., "self-so", "spontaneous", and "natural"), *yin* 因 (translatable as, e.g., "adapting"), and *wu-wei* 無為 (translatable as, e.g., "no-trying", "no-doing", and "non-action").[19] What's

[17] While Fraser himself discusses *you simpliciter*, in an attempt to remain neutral between his interpretation and that of commentators like Michael Nylan (2017), according to which *you* is less an ideal than it is an inescapable feature of life, I've elected to use the expression "embracing *you*" instead, as in Fraser's terms, *you*-ing appears to entail embracing *you*. Relatedly, regarding the matter of translating the title of the first chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, Nylan comments: "I would not deny that the famous binomial term *xiaoyao* gains the delicious meaning of 'free and easy wandering' during the Six Dynasties period (third–sixth centuries), only that in the sole Han-era reading, *xiaoyao* indisputably means 'befuddled'" (Nylan, 2017, 416).

[18] [Embracing] *you* can, in Fraser's terms, therefore be interpreted as a "second-order" *dao* by which we explore the various "first-order" *dao* open to us—a meta-*dao* of recognizing and taking up potential paths presented by interactions between agents' personal capacities and motivations and the circumstances in which they find themselves. Individual instances of *de* 德, translatable as, for example, "virtuosity" or "potency", can hence be understood as, in effect, agents' proficiency by which agents *you* through [the] *Dao* (Fraser, 2014a, 555).

[19] For more on *ziran*, see, e.g., Bruya (2010), for more on *yin*, see, e.g., Valmisa (2021), and for more on *wu-wei*, see, e.g., Slingerland (2003).

more, as some commentators have observed, even strong emotions (or ways of feeling) might be experienced at times—say, in response to the death of a loved one—given a Zhuangzian framework.[20]

It's important to emphasize that although spontaneity in European-influenced traditions is commonly associated with things like *subjectivity*, *willfulness*, *caprice*, and *emotional excess*, as a variety of commentators have explained, the opposite can be said of the sort of spontaneity engendered by embracing *you*. Indeed, there's a sense in which this sort of spontaneity can be thought of as representing the highest degree of things like *objectivity*, *sensitivity*, *stability*, and *equanimity*. For, while exemplifying it, an agent is thought to act in accordance with something larger (e.g., the will of *Tian* or the order represented by *Dao*). (cf. Bruya, 2010; Slingerland, 2003) Spontaneity in this sense, then, involves more open receptivity and supple responsiveness than self-expression that attempts to project aspects of oneself onto the world (thereby engendering adaptivity in turn).

We can now pose the question: Precisely how might creativity in general centrally involve spontaneity and adaptivity engendered by embracing *you*, on this construal of what embracing *you* involves? We can begin to answer this question by first considering how aesthetic or artistic creativity in particular might centrally involve spontaneity and adaptivity engendered by embracing *you*. As a number of commentators have argued (and as the above discussion suggests) in the case of the *Zhuangzi* the ideal of aesthetic experience is depicted as a creative activity of spontaneous and adaptive integrating—or, perhaps better, combining or balancing—that goes beyond the ordinary so as to integrate the agent with the extraordinary, thereby resulting in a certain kind of transformation that includes self-transformation. (cf. Mattice, 2017) As Sarah Mattice has put the point, transformation and self-transformation, as the text tends to portray them, aren't matters of simple passivity. *Dao* and processes of transformation aren't just manifested in us. Rather, we as human beings are in a special position of not only having freedom to engage in flowing, riding, or going along with processes of transformation in a non-impositional manner, but embracing them in addition, and in so doing finding ourselves to be active, creative agents of transformation. (cf. Mattice, 2017, 259; Niu & Sternberg, 2006, 31–32) This freedom, to use a way of putting a similar point from Fraser, is non-contingent (that is, can always be exercised by agents), "in that even in the limiting case, when the constraints on us are nearly total—while being tortured on the rack, say—we can still be engaged in intelligent navigation, alert to alternative possibilities, though the only course actually open to us may be to identify with the inevitable and [thereby] 'ride along' with it" (Fraser, 2014a, 553).

I want to re-emphasize at this stage that here creativity isn't conceived as centrally involving novelty or originality, but rather spontaneity and adaptivity (in the senses in play). It's active not in that it involves agents in exerting or imposing their will upon the world but rather in working or "riding along" with what we might call

[20] See, e.g., Wong (2006, 2009), Olberding (2007), and Machek (2019) for discussion.

"the will of the world" of which they are a part. Creativity is hence conceived as involving recognition of the interdependence and impermanence of "all the myriad things", and willingness to be sensitive and responsive to that interdependence and impermanence (cf. Mattice, 2017; Niu & Sternberg, 2006).

As Mattice observes, the story of "Wheelwright Flatty" (Ziporyn, 2020) exemplifies well this overall perspective on creativity. It can be found in the thirteenth chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, the *Tian Dao* 天道, translatable as, for example, "Heaven's Way" or "The Way of Heaven":

> Duke Huan was reading up in his pavilion, while Wheelwright Flatty was hewing a wheel below. Putting down his hammer and chisel, he ascended and asked Duke Huan, "Sir, may I ask what sort of words you are perusing?"
> The duke said, "The words of the sages."
> "Are those sages still alive?"
> "They are dead," said the duke.
> "Then what you are perusing is no more than the dregs and dust of the ancients."
> Duke Huan said, "Does a wheelwright dare pass judgment on what his ruler reads? If you can explain yourself, well and good. If not, you shall die."
> Wheelwright Flatty said, "I am looking at it from the point of view of my own profession. In hewing a wheel, if I spin slowly and make the hub too loose, it attaches easily to the crossbar but not firmly. If I spin quickly and make it too tight, I have to struggle to attach it, and it still never really gets all the way in. I have to make it not too loose and not too tight, my hand feeling it and my mind constantly responsive to it. I cannot explain this with my mouth, and yet there is a certain knack to the procedure. I cannot even get my own son to grasp it, so even he has no way to learn it from me. Thus I am already seventy years old and still here busily hewing wheels as an old man. The ancients died, and that which they could not transmit died along with them. So I say that what you, my lord, are perusing is just the dregs and dust of the ancients, nothing more. (Ziporyn, 2020, 116)

As Mattice explains, one thought conveyed by this story is that, although he's a "lowly" artisan, the wheelwright has something important to teach the duke. He's been making wheels for many years, and in that time, he's developed an ability to act in a manner that can't be captured through an algorithmic set of instructions, or easily appropriated by others. He must respond to precise particularities in the wood, in his tools, and in his body to create what he wants to create, which he doesn't accomplish by imposing a plan. This is why he can't teach his craft to his son, and his son can't learn it from him. Creativity is a living vitality that one has to engage in personally. The ancients' or sages' advice for living well is just "dregs" if it's taken as directions that one can simply read and then perform. Living well in general involves much more: namely, spontaneous and adaptive integrating—or, combining or balancing—of contrasting aspects such as the hard and the soft, the learned and the spontaneous, the fixed and the adaptive, and even the unproductive and the productive. (cf. Mattice, 2017, 259–260) In other words, living well involves, in the sense under discussion, creativity: specifically, the kind of creativity engendered by embracing *you*. The wheelwright doesn't purport to be

adhering to any predetermined course. Rather, he constantly attends and responds to specifics of his circumstances, "feeling things out", we might say, as he proceeds. Observe again that this form of creativity isn't taken to centrally involve novelty or originality as such. The wheelwright is presented as a creative agent not because of his or his projects' novelty or originality, but because of his ability to create wheels in a sensitive, responsive and—crucially—integrated manner: one not attained or exercised by rote, but rather via engaging in sustained, spontaneous, adaptive activity.[21]

Before I go on, notice that the conception outlined above doesn't preclude the possibility that creativity might involve both spontaneity and adaptivity *and* novelty or originality. We can find such an instance famously presented near the end of the first chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, the *Xiao Yao You* 逍遙遊 (translatable, e.g., as "Wandering Far and Unfettered") in a vignette involving Zhuangzi's friend Huizi, Zhuangzi himself, and a giant gourd. I submit that here Zhuangzi presents as extraordinarily creative not only because he could think of a novel or original use for the gourd (hollowing it out for use as a leisure raft) when Huizi could not, but also because Huizi is trying to impose a plan on the gourd in the situation at hand. Rather than working with the fact that the gourd is too large to use in the ways with which he is most accustomed (as a water container or as a dipper) Huizi instead struggles to use it in such familiar ways, and in the process is unable to create anything whatsoever of use, different or not. Zhuangzi, however, is able to see that an unusual use of the gourd would be more appropriate. Importantly, even though Zhuangzi's suggestion is not conventional—and hence may present as novel or original—it's nonetheless also better spontaneously and adaptively integrated with the situation, and to some extent creative in virtue of that alone on the proposed approach. Moreover, Zhuangzi's creativity is engendered by embracing *you*, whereas Huizi's lack of creativity is due to the fact that he is not himself similarly positioned to ride along with change. Zhuangzi is willing and able to work with particularities of the situation in a non-impositional, cooperative manner. Huizi is not.

[21] Elsewhere I've written about how the approach to creativity motivated above can help us to understand why navigating loss—specifically, the type of loss involving the death of loved ones—is a creative activity. There, I explain that we can employ the story of the wheelwright in this connection. For, although there's an abundance of books dispensing advice on how to do so, ultimately living with death is a deeply personal endeavor that—like carving wheels by hand—can't be fully captured through a programmatic collection of directions. We must rather respond to precise particularities of our situations (concerning our thoughts, feelings, and overall circumstances) to create what we want to create (such as a sense of peace or lasting appreciation of love of the deceased), something that can't be accomplished by imposing a plan, even if we work with various provisional and highly malleable strategic approaches on the fly as we go along. Moreover, in working through our thoughts, feelings, and overall circumstances in all their idiosyncrasies, it's not that we're doing anything all that different from what many others have already done as they've grappled with their own losses, or even what we've already done ourselves as we've grappled with our own. Nonetheless—again, like carving wheels—this process is creative to the extent that it involves spontaneous and adaptive integrating, combining, or balancing of contrasting aspects such as the mournful and the celebratory, the resentful and the grateful, and the despairing and the joyous. Indeed, even Zhuangzi himself can be understood as engaging in such a creative activity after the death of his own wife in chapter eighteen of the text, the *Zhi Le* 至樂, translatable as (e.g.) "Perfect Happiness" or "Perfect Joy" (Chung, 2023).

2 Creativity as an epistemic virtue

We're now almost positioned to explore how the conception of creativity reviewed in Sect. 1 illuminates how creativity can be an epistemic virtue, but a tension should be dealt with first: Given its distinctive skepticism about so many dimensions of human activity and understanding, how can the *Zhuangzi* be interpreted as suggesting that there are *any* virtues, and *especially* epistemic ones? Epistemic virtues are often conceived in terms of their capacity to yield apprehensions of truth or developments (or at least maintenance) of knowledge—in other words, in terms of their capacity to help us to aim at and to realize such epistemic goals. But much of the text is explicitly skeptical about our potential to realize these goals (or, more generally, any goals that involve normativity). David Wong summarizes the skeptical thrust of one of the more prominent portions of the text thus:

> In chapter two, we are invited to take a stance above the debating Confucians and Mohists. What one *shi*s 是 the other *fei*s 非 (what is "right" for one is "not right" for the other); what one *fei*s the other *shi*s. Argument is powerless to declare a victor. Zhuangzi asks, "Are there really *shi* and *fei*, or really no *shi* and *fei*?" (Wong, 2005, 91)

One interesting way to resolve this tension is to notice that even though epistemic goals are frequently thought to necessarily involve truth or knowledge, thinking only in terms of such goals is bound to leave a lot out. For example, as Matthew Kieran argues, *epistemic creativity* often involves working along or even across boundaries of what we take to be true or what we take ourselves to know—and hence, much of the time, the impetus to being epistemically creative is that we feel as if we can't rely on our present epistemic practices. In slogan form, epistemic creativity is required most where epistemic practices fall short. Thus, continues Kieran, it shouldn't be surprising if epistemic creativity doesn't reliably yield apprehensions of truth or developments of knowledge. Because epistemic creativity often operates at the boundaries of discovery, it may get things wrong (or at least, not get things right) far more often than it (indeed) gets things right[22] (Kieran, 2018, 169).

To illustrate, Kieran invites readers to consider what goes on in much philosophy and what one aims at and realizes when writing a philosophy paper. This activity, he contends, is by its nature an epistemic endeavor. It involves inquiry into, or an attempt to conceive, some aspect of the world. As he puts the point, while doing philosophy: "People strive to work out possible ways of conceiving of a particular

[22] Concerning this, Kieran notes that one might respond that while epistemic creativity admittedly might not yield a high percentage of apprehensions of truths or developments of knowledge, when it does, the apprehensions of truths or developments of knowledge that it does yield are of the most valuable kinds—therefore making it appropriate to consider apprehensions of truth or developments of knowledge to be fundamental goals of epistemic creativity (cf. Zagzebski, 1996, 182). However, as Kieran himself replies, this overlooks the fact that even more fundamentally, epistemic creativity doesn't aim at apprehensions of truth or developments of knowledge at all, even if ultimately it can yield such achievements. Rather, much of the time what's aimed at is the development of epistemically promising ways of inquiring into and conceiving of the world. And the range of epistemic goods that this incorporates goes well beyond apprehensions of truth or developments of knowledge, even if such are included.

problem, potential positions in the conceptual space, different ways of framing conceptualizations, the commitments and implications of some theory, what might look like important challenges, what kind of method or approach looks promising, what kind of analysis might be called for and so on." (Kieran, 2018, 170) However, as he observes, much of the time, it's a further question as to whether any of this yields apprehensions of truth or developments of knowledge. Rather, the aim is to enrich one's inquiries or conceptual toolbox very broadly speaking, which may or may not contribute to such results. Further, all this can be said about our inquiries, or attempts to conceive, more generally.[23] We frequently seek out and pursue inquiries or explorations into what strike us as interesting or otherwise fruitful ways that phenomena might be investigated or conceived, without making these activities' value contingent on whether they actually yield apprehensions of truth or developments of knowledge. As a result, the relation between epistemic creativity and apprehending truths or developing knowledge is often indirect, and much epistemic creativity can be valuable yet speculative or even profoundly mistaken. (Kieran, 2018, 170) One might object that in such cases the relevant activities only turn out to be valuable in some other, non-epistemic way (e.g., aesthetic, ethical, or perhaps instrumentally, that is, as a means to eventual apprehensions of truth or developments of knowledge); but, without further argument, this simply begs the question in favor of an approach that accepts only apprehensions of truth or developments of knowledge as final epistemic goods, and rejects out of hand the possibility that other aspects of inquiry or attempts to conceive may be such final goods as well.

We can now more easily see how there is room for epistemic creativity to be an epistemic virtue even if (as compilers of the *Zhuangzi* might have it) one is concerned that the very act of philosophizing, or inquiring or attempting to conceive more generally, is bound to lead to error if performed in certain kinds of ways: particularly, in ways that, ironically, directly aim at apprehensions of truth or developments of knowledge. For, while this might seem untenable on its face—surely the final goal of any epistemic endeavor worthy of the name must be apprehensions of truth or developments of knowledge, some might protest—it's not clear that it is. Rather, as Kieran's explorations suggest, epistemic creativity might involve other goals in addition to, or perhaps even instead of, these ones.

In particular, I want to advance an interpretation of Zhuangzian philosophy that highlights a form of epistemic virtue that's more about spontaneously and adaptively integrating, combining, or balancing contrasting aspects of inquiry or attempts to conceive features of the world—that is, facilitating what might be termed *epistemic fits* via epistemic creativity—than it is about discovering facts about the world or even cultivating skill at investigating or conceiving it. This possibility is highly appealing not only if we take seriously skeptical arguments for which the text is

[23] Admittedly, the way this is written is such that it can sound like I'm describing a couple trying to get pregnant. I've therefore left this written as it is intentionally, as our inquiries are very much like this insofar as they're meant to bear some kind of fruit, even if that fruit isn't truth or knowledge and may even consist in the process of inquiry itself. This relates to the discussion of epistemic creativity, intellectual playfulness, and autotelicity below.

famous (or infamous), but also if we countenance the possibility—as Fraser (Fraser, 2009) and Wai Wai Chiu (Chiu, 2018) do—that skeptical arguments in the *Zhuangzi* apply not only to propositional knowledge, or "know-that", but to practical or procedural knowledge as well, or "know-what" or "know-how". For, even practical or procedural knowledge may require standards of correctness that the *Zhuangzi* tends to cast doubt on, as in the case of its discussion of virtuoso musicians Zhao and Kuang (which appears in the second chapter of the text, the *Qi Wu Lun* 齊物論, translatable as, e.g., "Equalizing Assessments of Things"):

> It is easy to see that mastery of musical performance requires one to "directly feel it in the hand and respond from the heart," as [Wheelright Flatty] says. It is extremely difficult to state the qualitative difference between a master and a novice in terms of clear concepts, and even if it can be done, stating this is neither necessary nor sufficient for one to qualify as a master. In this respect, musical performance requires spontaneity like any other skillful performance. However, Zhuangzi refers to Zhao and Kuang because he wants to note their deficiency rather than praise them: as soon as Zhao plays the zither, there is completion and flaw. Why? …[E]very case of completion presupposes a criterion, which must exclude something that might turn out to be valuable in another context. Applying this to Zhao's case, when Zhao plays a piece of music he spends his time and effort playing music instead of something else, he performs this piece instead of that piece, he performs the piece in this way instead of that way, and so on. These features do not count against Zhao's good performance, but they signal that each performance is limited, in the sense that it is carried out by sacrificing many possibilities. However beautiful his performance is, it is an achievement only to the extent that there is completion, and it is a loss to the extent that there is exclusion. If completion always comes with loss, every practice is imperfect and can be replaced by something else in another context. Thus, it is a mistake to insist on being "correct" in practice, which is another reason to doubt skill knowledge. Fraser thinks that, given Zhuangzi's views on completion and loss, his skepticism actually should explicitly aim at skill knowledge. This is probably because it is easier to conceive of "completion and flaw" if we take a dynamic rather than a static standpoint concerning our thoughts and actions. (Chiu, 2018, 1071)

We can summarize Chiu's central claims this way: (1) Every action is accompanied by opportunity costs, such that however great an achievement an action may constitute or produce, many potentially equally fruitful opportunities are necessarily left unrealized. Therefore: (2) Every practice is imperfect, and hence could be replaced (or could've been replaced) by something equally fruitful (in another situation). We're then invited to consider that: (3) The *Zhuangzi*'s skepticism can be interpreted as targeting not just the idea that we can know, or

be right or correct about, claims, but also the idea that we can know, or be right or correct about, what to do, or how to do what we do, too.[24]

Assessing this argument's soundness is not a task for this paper. Rather, it's presented to draw attention to the possibility that products or processes that issue from what we might term "epistemic creativity" are not best conceived—at least as far as the *Zhuangzi* is concerned—as aiming, directly *or* indirectly, at apprehensions of truth of developments of knowledge, as the text takes seriously the possibility that we can't apprehend truths or develop knowledge of any kind. How, then, might we nonetheless consider this kind of creativity to be "epistemic"? To return to Kieran's proposal, epistemic creativity aims at realizing epistemically promising ways of inquiring into and conceiving of the world. But, insofar as the *Zhuangzi* expresses such a wide-ranging skepticism about the possibility of apprehending truths or developing knowledge in multiple forms, including propositional knowledge ("know that") and practical or procedural knowledge ("know what" or "know how"), how could *anything* be thought of as "epistemically promising"?

One way of responding to this question proceeds along these lines. While the *Zhuangzi* expresses wide-ranging skepticism about the possibility of apprehending truths or developing knowledge, it doesn't clearly and strongly *deny* that such achievements are possible. Rather, it can be interpreted as expressing a certain kind of agnosticism about such possibilities (as it does regarding our ability to legitimately recognize and affirm whether such possibilities have obtained). In other words, the sort of skepticism suggested by the text is more similar to, for instance, Pyrrhonian or Madhyamaka (Buddhist) skepticism than it is types of skepticism discussed in much contemporary Anglophone philosophy, according to which knowledge is held to be impossible (cf. Raphals, 1996; Williams, 2017; Chung, 2017; Chung, 2020c).

This opens space for a great many ways of inquiring into and conceiving of the world to be, at least potentially, "epistemically promising". (Perhaps even more ways than we might've thought prior to considering that every completion or gain comes with missed opportunity or loss.) And we might find that they're indeed "epistemically promising" if we operate using what the text characterizes as "discriminations that don't deem" rather than discriminations that do—that is,

[24] Note that this needn't merely be interpreted as expressing skepticism about knowing-what to do, but also skepticism about knowing-how to do whatever it is that one's doing, as knowing-how, like knowing-that, presupposes that there are applicable standards of assessment—standards of assessment that, like all standards of assessment, can be undermined by skeptical arguments such as those located in the *Qi Wu Lun*. Moreover, the popular view that the *Zhuangzi* particularly exalts know-how or skill has been forcefully questioned as it pertains to the inner chapters. (Schwitzgebel, 2019) It's therefore interesting to note that this argument bears notable similarities to Wittgenstein's treatment of rule-following: as David Egan writes in this connection, "To understand the force of Wittgenstein's example […] it's important to note that everything in the training that the pupil was given is compatible with his going on in this way. Wittgenstein imagines the teacher accounting for the pupil's departure from the expected procedure by saying '[T]his person finds it natural, once given our explanations, to understand our order as we would understand the order 'Add 2 up to 1000, 4 up to 2000, 6 up to 3000, and so on' (PI §185). And if, in our training, we had made that point clear, there are infinitely many other ways in which the pupil might have diverged from us. No training can exhaustively dictate how we should extend a practice in every case." (Egan, 2021, 572–573).

if we take seriously some form of "anti-realism" (or, perhaps better, "arealism") about truth or knowledge-talk, such as fictionalism.[25] The *Zhuangzi*, after all, doesn't counsel in any sustained way withdrawing from the world and all its activity, including human activity. This would've been (nearly) unthinkable for the vast majority of the text's compilers as well as its intended audience: elite literati of Chinese antiquity (Nylan, 2017, 413). Nor is it much more thinkable for most of us living today. There are presumably many constraints in life that we have no other choice than to work with, or that are inevitable or unavoidable: this jibes with Fraser's remarks (explored in Sect. 1) about "riding along with things", for example. But there are also presumably many constraints that we put on ourselves that may well be avoidable; and, there's much in the *Zhuangzi* that suggests that while some such constraints possibly can't be avoided, there are many that threaten to hinder us that possibly can. One of these constraints is what Wong has characterized as "the obsession with being right", which he elaborates as follows:

> […] much skeptical argument in this text is directed toward undermining our initial perspectives in the interests of broadening them or becoming more flexible in adopting new perspectives. The skeptical thrust is directed at current perspectives conceived as obscuring what else is there for us to experience (the "underbrush" in our heads), but there is a non-skeptical thrust in that the new perspectives we are invited to adopt really do seem to reveal something genuine we have not experienced before. Zhuangzi points out uses for the huge gourd [shell] to which Huizi had been blinded by his narrow preconceptions. Our experience of the world always overflows our perspectives on [it] precisely because the function of these perspectives is to make experience manageable by deeming most of it irrelevant for our purposes. But this means that on the most basic level experience is an inexhaustible resource for new perspectives if only we let go of the obsession with being right once and for all. (Wong, 2005, 98)

Perhaps, then, we can embrace *you* in a specifically epistemic sense and wander with and in the possibility that we can't apprehend truths or develop knowledge. For, regardless of whether we can *in fact* apprehend truths or develop knowledge, acting *as if* we might be able to do so nonetheless may have great utility for us. At minimum, such can push us to test ourselves so as to expand or otherwise add to our perspectives, and hence make it more likely that we'll be able to coordinate and cooperate with others and the world more broadly, whether our endeavors can be categorized as, perhaps just for starters, aesthetic, ethical, or (in the fashion most germane to present purposes) epistemic—that is, having to do with inquiry (rather than, say, beauty or flourishing).[26] In this way, the conception of creativity

[25] For related discussion, see Chung (2017), Chung (2018a, 2018b), Chung (2020a), Chung (2020b), Chung (2020c), and Chung (2022b).

[26] I'm inclined to think this a welcome result, as there's ample reason to suspect that compilers of the *Zhuangzi* might've been suspicious of inclinations to, in a clear and final, "deeming" fashion, discriminate between these sorts of features.

motivated in Sect. 1 might interestingly encompass an epistemic virtue, surprisingly and ironically obtained not by directly aiming at truth or knowledge, but rather by accepting a certain form of skepticism or agnosticism; by letting go of the pursuit of correctness for its own sake and embracing *you* in the epistemic realm instead.

To better illustrate, I'll continue by discussing an important segment of the *Qi Wu Lun*:

> Where could any speaking be present without that speech thus being deemed acceptable there? "But courses qua courses get concealed behind the small formations that they themselves succeed in shaping, and speech qua speech gets concealed behind the garlands of honor it itself brings on. Hence we have the rights and wrongs of the Confucians and Mohists, each affirming what the other denies and denying what the other affirms. But if you want to affirm what they deny and deny what they affirm, nothing compares to the Illumination of the Obvious [*ming* 明]: "There is no thing that is not a 'that.' There is no thing that is not a 'this.' One is oneself also a 'that,' an other, but this is not something one can directly see. Rather, it is known through the understanding, which thus says 'thatness' emerges from 'thisness,' and 'thisness' follows from 'thatness.' This is its theory of the simultaneous generation of the 'this' and the 'that.' However, by the very same token, it can say that their simultaneous generation means also their simultaneous demise, and vice versa. When it affirms either one, it simultaneously finds it has denied it; when it denies either one, it simultaneously finds it has affirmed it. By going along with the affirmation it goes along with the denial; by going along with the denial it goes along with the affirmation. "Thus the Sage does not proceed from any one of these alone but instead lets them all bask in the broad daylight of Heaven. That is also a way of going along with the rightness of each 'this,' going along with 'thisness' itself. For to be a 'this' is in fact also to be a 'that,' and every 'that' is also a 'this.' (Ziporyn, 2020)

As I've remarked elsewhere, it'd be an understatement to say that there's a lot going on in this passage. For the purposes of this discussion, it's worth noticing that the line, "Where could any speaking be present without that speech thus being acceptable there?" can be interpreted as drawing attention to the following. Utterances, as well as perspectives that give rise to them, are made with an accompanying assumption that they're acceptable in some way. However, it's unclear that they're acceptable because they're "true" or "right" or "correct" as such implies that conflicting utterances, as well as perspectives that give rise to them, are "false" or "wrong" or "incorrect". This is because each utterance, or perspective, depends for its existence on that of conflicting others (in the sense of conflicting utterances or perspectives), which could just as easily be taken up by, well, conflicting others (in the sense of conflicting persons, or people with whom one might find oneself in some manner of discord). Following commentary by A.C. Graham, the text therefore here appears to aim to discredit the activity of disputation (i.e., as decisive) by suggesting that under certain circumstances—namely, at the moment one shifts from "this" to "that"—both alternatives will be admissible, and that what disputation shows is that we could be entitled to affirm or deny anything of anything in a given situation. In other words, there's nothing that's really "this" (and

not "that"), or really "that" (and not "this"). According to Graham, one lesson to take away from this is that those—for example, 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[27] (Graham, 2001, p. 52; compare also, e.g., the interpretations of Watson, 2013, and Ziporyn, 2009).

Thus, the *Zhuangzi* can be interpreted as challenging us via skepticism and doubt—propositional and perspectival—to think, feel, and (otherwise) act differently, by opening us up to various points of view and encouraging us to consider various, sometimes unusual, possibilities (such as, for example, that one could be dreaming of a butterfly, or the dream of a butterfly, a discussion of which concludes the *Qi Wu Lun*).[28] This in turn might allow us to expand our ways of thinking, feeling, and acting beyond the assorted limited perspectives that we've adopted, often by chance, and that frequently, to adopt terms from Michael Puett and Christine Gross-Loh (Puett & Gross-Loh, 2016), "dominate and constrain" us (epistemically and otherwise) without our realizing it—and hence, to more spontaneously and adaptively, and therefore creatively (again, in the senses in play), integrate and transform ourselves into and along with others, and the world of which we are a part.

In this connection, I'll say more about what "epistemic fits" might involve, as well as how the foregoing discussion regarding doubt can help us to create them.

Karyn Lai, in explicating what "working with constraints" involves in the context of the *Zhuangzi*, explicates the notion of *fit* as follows:

> 'Fit' is the measure of whether one's chosen actions (the 'human') appropriately address constraints (some of which are associated with the 'heavenly') in the contexts in which they are encountered (Lai, 2022, 13).

If we take "epistemic fits" to involve a particular subspecies of fit, we can therefore make more precise in that way Lai's proposal so as to apply it to the question of what epistemic fits involve specifically, yielding:

> "Epistemic fit" is the measure of whether one's chosen actions (the "human") appropriately address epistemic constraints (some of which are associated with the "heavenly") in the contexts in which they are encountered.

What does it mean to "appropriately address constraints" in general, or epistemic constraints in particular? Although Lai is not explicit on this point, her discussion emphasizes *responsiveness*, which she terms a "higher order concept" that captures the complex process of perceiving and discerning the salient features of a situation, understanding how these may be harnessed, or how they are restrictive, and

[27] This closely follows a similar exploration of the relevant section of the *Qi Wu Lun* in Chung (2018a, 2018b).

[28] For more on the difference between the propositional and perspectival doubt, as well as some of their mechanics and purposes, see Chung (2021). Briefly, propositional doubt involves us in doubting the truth of claims, and perspectival doubt involves us in doubting the fittingness of perspectives.

performing actions (informed by such awareness) to optimize outcomes (outcomes that are determined "on the fly", rather than prior to events):

> The *Zhuangzi*'s aversion to outcome-driven actions does not imply that no outcomes should ever be sought, but rather that outcomes determined prior to the event—a fixation on particular goals—will tend to hinder our perception of opportunities that might arise in our contexts of engagement. The idea of responsiveness is expressed in the character *ying* (應), manifest in the imagery of sagely attainment. Such attainment is likened to a rotating pivot that is able to respond limitlessly because it is not bound by the perspective of any one doctrine. The nature of *ying* is aptly illustrated, for example, by the story of the wheelwright, who is not guided by the standard compass and square used in carving: "I feel it in my hand and respond [*ying*] to it with my heart-mind." The wheelwright's approach to carving stands in stark contrast to the strategy developed by Yan Hui [a would-be diplomat], who has not allowed himself the opportunity to be responsive. (Lai, 2022, 13–14)

Lai's remarks on fit and responsiveness can be applied to the foregoing discussion of epistemic creativity as follows. Extending the general approach to creativity reviewed in Sect. 1 to epistemic creativity, and applying results of the above reflections, we can say that on this approach to epistemic creativity, epistemic products, processes, or agents exemplify epistemic creativity to the extent that they involve spontaneity and adaptivity (with less epistemically creative products, processes, or agents involving less, and more creative products, processes, or agents involving more). This, again, involves a holistic fluency that can be analyzed generally as cognitive-affective focus (collection), the shedding of distractions, ease [in a sense], and responsiveness to constantly changing circumstances, so as to aim at epistemic outcomes approached on the fly, as well as a course of action in accordance with the temporary situation in which an agent is embedded—that is, all the entities and potential actors with which an agent interacts in a particular situation. While epistemically creative outcomes could involve apprehensions of truth or developments of knowledge, they needn't. Rather, other relevant outcomes could include exploring others' perspectives or otherwise facilitating inquiry (say, by pursuing epistemic goals suggested by Kieran's discussion), regardless of "truth", "rightness", or "correctness". For, in an ever-shifting world that incorporates a great diversity of perspectives, and in which disputation is therefore bound to be indecisive, facilitating inquiry is of paramount—perhaps even fundamental or primary—epistemic importance, if we're to maintain even any pretensions to seeking after apprehensions of truth or developments of knowledge (which thus can be regarded as secondary). Further, outcomes that emphasize perspective-shifting and facilitating inquiry in general are particularly well-served by a conception of epistemic creativity that emphasizes spontaneity and adaptivity (and hence, sensitivity, responsiveness, integration, and productivity) rather than novelty or originality (as approaches that emphasize novelty or originality will be more constraining at least to that extent).[29]

[29] For further discussion regarding this suggestion, see Chung (2022a).

To understand better what I have in mind, consider what can happen when people discuss aesthetic matters. For example, I was talking with an old friend recently about some of the reasons I don't like The Rolling Stones very much (while, naturally, listening to The Rolling Stones), noting that Mick Jagger's particular brand of "front-man swagger" is somehow off-putting to me, even though I like certain Stones songs well enough when covered by others (The Sisters of Mercy's "Gimme Shelter", for starters). My friend laughed and responded, "But they wouldn't even *be* The Rolling Stones without Mick Jagger!" Somehow, I found myself inclined to appreciate The Rolling Stones more in light of his perspective-shifting comment. While I could've argued against him, I chose not to. I preferred, for the purposes of our conversation, to "see things his way", so as to better appreciate the music we were listening to and to pave the way for different sorts of inquiries (into, say, why Jagger's swagger is more off-putting to me than it is to my friend, and why we both appreciate Keith Richards very much).

While a lot more could be said about this example, what I want to emphasize is that my conversation with my friend was well-served by the conception of epistemic creativity delineated above. I aimed to do my part to create an interesting, memorable, and enjoyable bonding experience between us via mutual inquiry. This didn't involve anything substantively novel or original. Rather, it involved acting in a way that was spontaneous and adaptive, integrating my perspectives with those of my friend, so as to engender further inquiries hoped to be contextually epistemically productive for both of us, rather than leading to our unproductively getting stuck in a conversational rut regarding "the truth about The Rolling Stones". It involved not just propositional, but perspectival doubt: doubt regarding not only claims about The Rolling Stones, but perspectives on them too.

Of course, I'm not claiming that conversations regarding "the truth about The Rolling Stones" could never be epistemically creative or productive. Rather, I'm suggesting that they sometimes aren't, and that conversations that aren't aimed at truth or knowledge (but instead, say, perspective-shifting or cooperation in inquiry) sometimes are. It depends on the circumstances, and epistemic creativity can involve us in other aims besides those concerning truth or knowledge, such as better connecting with people, particularly in situations where such would be more likely to facilitate inquiry and help us to transform ourselves into and along with others and the world, as hinted at above. I'm not sure I learned (much less came to know) anything substantively new or different about The Rolling Stones, or my friend, or even myself or broader aspects of the world from our conversation, including how to "take", "try on", or "have" any substantively new perspectives. But here I am, writing about our conversation in this paper just the same, appreciating it (as well as my friend and our friendship), and exploring its philosophical import.[30]

Consequently, one might think that the compilers of the *Zhuangzi* don't issue an epistemic demand as much as they issue an epistemic invitation: an invitation to think and act differently than we have before, concerning even possibilities that we'd not yet been able to imagine—much less contemplate—previously. In other

[30] Thanks are due to the inimitable Mike Yuill for this conversation, and, as ever, his friendship.

words, we can interpret the text as prompting us to consider engaging in more perspectival, and not just propositional, doubt, in order to more adeptly engage and specifically (for the purposes of this paper) inquire into varied phenomena and situations in the world and more fluidly and spontaneously adapt to and fit with changing circumstances. This can both engender further creativity, epistemic and otherwise, and allow us to see the creativity already demanded in a greater range of activities. For, many of life's undertakings, from the mundane to the meaningful, aren't attained or performed by rote, but rather via spontaneous and adaptive action that integrates, combines, or balances contrasting aspects—such as engaging and interpreting others whose perspectives are very different from, or even clash with, our own (as in the case of philosophy and philosophers, discussed earlier in this section, or the case of people who don't like the Stones very much and those who do), as well as carving wheels and considering what to use objects for (discussed in Sect. 1). And these kinds of spontaneity and adaptivity—and with them, a corresponding type of creativity (again, epistemic and otherwise)—can be promoted, rather than prevented, by perspectival alongside propositional doubt. This will be further explored in Sect. 3, below.

3 Contemporary connections and extensions

The foregoing discussion can productively—and even creatively, in the sense discussed in Sect. 1—further interface with contemporary discussions related to epistemic creativity in a variety of ways. I'll explore two examples in this section.

First, all the above jibes with and further supports many core aspects of Kieran's proposals regarding epistemic creativity, as well as what they imply. For example, Kieran argues that many reliabilist theories of epistemic virtue are lacking given that epistemic creativity constitutively involves a motivation of curiosity: as Kieran puts the point, to be epistemically creative, "someone must be intrigued by something or ask and address questions in need of an answer" (Kieran, 2018, 173). He further argues that many responsibilist theories of epistemic virtue are lacking given that epistemic creativity doesn't require the ultimate motivation of epistemically creative people to concern pursuing truth, or knowledge, for its own sake. Rather, epistemically creative people are motivated by curiosity to seek out and to take on inquiries that engage their epistemic agency in ways that engender new and epistemically valuable things—or, adapting Kieran's language to fit the approach to creativity reviewed in Sect. 1, spontaneously and adaptively epistemically integrated results (cf. Kieran, 2018, 175). This is, according to Kieran, what it is to possess the disposition of epistemic creativity. For such a disposition to be virtuous, it must be motivated to respond to and respect relevant epistemic features, constraints, duties, or norms in a non-instrumentalized way (even where the value of being epistemically creative is taken to depend more fundamentally on some further non-epistemic end or value). Exemplary or fully virtuous epistemically creative people, Kieran alleges, are this way to a high degree even in the face of

strong pressures to do otherwise (internal or external). Kieran hence claims that exemplary or fully virtuous epistemically creative people are both highly admirable and tend to generate newer (or, in the sense explored in Sect. 1, more spontaneous and adaptive), more interesting, and more worthwhile (or, in the sense explored in Sect. 1, more integrated) instantiations of epistemic goods (cf. Kieran, 2018, 175).

The approach to creativity explored in Sect. 1, which involves embracing *you* so as to act in ways that are spontaneously and adaptively integrated with situations, can accommodate each of these insights. For, it too suggests that epistemic creativity constitutively involves a motivation of curiosity, as can be seen in various places within the text, including those discussed above. The wheelwright evinces curiosity toward the specifics of each and every piece of wood he encounters, uniquely "feeling each out"—along with other aspects of his situation, including, as mentioned, his tools and his body—to "ride along with things" so as to perform his trade. Zhuangzi evinces similar curiosity toward the range of possibilities offered by Huizi's giant gourd. The wheelwright and Zhuangzi's creativity in these situations depends on their curiosity, even if their ultimate motivation isn't the pursuit of truth, or knowledge, for its own sake. Rather, they might be motivated by curiosity to seek out and to take on inquiries that engage their epistemic agency in ways that generate something spontaneously and adaptively epistemically integrated. Through convergent (or more focused) attention, again engendered by curiosity, the wheelwright comes to discern more about specifics of the wood with which he works, as well as other aspects of his situation, and in so doing is able to create what we can only assume are finely crafted wheels. Likewise, through divergent (or more distributed) attention, also engendered by curiosity, Zhuangzi comes to discern more about ways in which Huizi's supposedly "useless" gourd might turn out to have a use after all. Without curiosity, the wheelwright and Zhuangzi would neither look for, nor find out, anything about their respective situations. Curiosity—a drive to attentively explore features of our evolving circumstances—underlies all of our spontaneous, adaptive activity, in part.[31]

Moreover, both the wheelwright and Zhuangzi are motivated to respond to and respect what can be characterized as relevant epistemic features, constraints, duties, or norms in a non-instrumentalized way (even where the value of being epistemically creative is taken to depend more fundamentally on further non-epistemic purposes, such as those connected with constructing a cart or floating in a boat). For, while acting toward various purposes, they're at the same time guided by an autotelic impulse to wonder about and connect with the world in a way that aims to work with, rather than against, aspects of their situations, which in turn enables them to embrace *you* and become less committed to any self-serving plans, characterizations of prior experiences, and fixed preconceptions. Hence, they're able to bring about

[31] It's worth noting in this connection that *curious* is etymologically connected to Latin *cūriōsus* used only subjectively "full of care or pains, careful, assiduous, inquisitive" and has been used in the past, though such uses are obsolete, to mean things like "ingenious, skilful, clever, expert." (Oxford English Dictionary, 2022) Also, none of this is to suggest that *only* curiosity underlies all of our spontaneous, adaptive activity. Rather, it's to suggest that it's an integral component.

their respective spontaneously and adaptively integrated creations (in the case of the wheelwright, a carefully carved wheel, and in the case of Zhuangzi, an amusing idea for how to use the "useless" gourd). Further, we can draw on Kieran to explain why these two figures are exemplary: they manifest curiosity to a high degree even in the face of internal and external pressures to do otherwise (for example, from the duke or from Huizi, along with any attendant preoccupations with what has come before, rather than what is occurring in the "here-and-now"). We can therefore see why, again in keeping with Kieran's claims, these characters are exemplary epistemically creative agents who are both highly admirable for it, and who engender, in these cases, more spontaneous, adaptive, and integrated instantiations of epistemic (alongside other) goods. Thus, Kieran's proposals—though reformulated so as to apply to a conception of creativity that includes novelty or originality as central—appear, with minor modification, to generalize so as to fit with and be supported by the approach to creativity discussed in Sect. 1.

Second, and related to the above discussion regarding Kieran, is that the *Zhuangzi* can also be seen to productively interface with contemporary work on the epistemic or intellectual virtue of *intellectual playfulness*, which C. Thi Nguyen characterizes as: a disposition to try out new ideas, perspectives, and systems of thought for the value of the exploration itself. (Nguyen, 2022, 1) As Nguyen reports, the ramblings of intellectual playfulness aren't guided, in their particular movements, by a hope of finding a truer and therefore better theory. While truth-seeking people's intellectual explorations are guided by their current belief systems, such that they're driven to check out what they consider to be the most plausible alternatives by their lights, intellectually playful people don't prioritize appearances of plausibility in this way. Rather, intellectually playful people can have an array of other motivations that they value, at least at times, more highly. The key is that their motivations, and hence explorations, are autotelic in nature: they're fundamentally or primarily interested in intellectual exploration for its own sake, whether they deem it likely to lead them to the truth, or not (Nguyen, 2022, 1–2).

Ironically, however, as Nguyen argues, intellectually playful exploration can sometimes better serve the goals of apprehending truths or developing knowledge than can explorations invariably directly aimed at such. Nguyen illustrates this by discussing intellectual playfulness in connection with what he terms *epistemic traps*: belief systems that undermine our epistemic efforts, thereby leaving us epistemically stuck. Nguyen distinguishes three types of epistemic traps, which can be briefly outlined as follows. *Anti-Reflective Traps* discourage reflection on, say, one's beliefs (as in belief systems that emphasize unwavering obedience to some authority, or other situations that constitute "epistemic bubbles" that tend to block or omit new information from consideration). (Nguyen, 2022, 2–3) *Inquiry Traps* re-direct various intellectual processes such that good faith, epistemically-oriented efforts are led astray (as in belief systems that encourage distrust of alternative sources, or other situations that constitute "echo chambers" that—unlike "epistemic bubbles"—admit new information but discredit it as untrustworthy). (Nguyen, 2022, 3) Finally, *Insensitivity Traps* cut off attention to certain areas of life by attributing valuelessness to those areas. (Nguyen, 2022, 5) As Nguyen, with credit to Melissa Hughs, eloquently summarizes the difference between these three: "[A]

n anti-reflective trap gets you not to see the man behind the curtain by persuading you not to look at all. An inquiry trap lets you see the man behind the curtain, but tells you he's actually something else. And an insensitivity trap tells you not to care about or pay serious attention to the man behind the curtain, because he's far less important than [something else]" (Nguyen, 2022, 6).

How, then, can we free ourselves from such traps, as well as avoid getting ensnared in them in the first place? Nguyen suggests that intellectual playfulness can help. On his approach, *play* has two recurring qualities relevant to explaining how this can happen. First, as suggested above, play is *autotelic*. Second, play involves *perspective-shifting*, stepping outside of one's normal perspectives and stepping into other ones. This second feature is crucial, for as Nguyen puts the point, play is not the same as chaos, destruction, or a refusal to follow any sort of norm whatsoever. (Nguyen, 2022, 7) Rather, it involves us in taking on different roles and accepting different rules—precisely by encouraging us to shed, if temporarily, old ones. In this connection, Nguyen illustrates with a gorgeous passage from the work of Maria Lugones:

> The playfulness that gives meaning to our activity includes uncertainty, but in this case the uncertainty is an openness to surprise. This is a particular metaphysical attitude that does not expect the world to be neatly packaged, ruly. Rules may fail to explain what we are doing. We are not self-important, we are not fixed in particular constructions of ourselves, which is part of saying that we are open to self-construction. We may not have rules, and when we do have rules, there are no rules that are to us sacred. We are not worried about competence. We are not wedded to a particular way of doing things. While playful we have not abandoned ourselves to, nor are we stuck in, any particular "world." We are there *creatively*. (Lugones, 1987, 16; in Nguyen, 2022, 8)

I'll have more to say about deep resemblances between these remarks by Lugones and the approach to creativity discussed in Sect. 1 shortly. Before that, I'll first explore in a bit more detail why playfulness, understood in this way, can help us to free ourselves from, as well as to avoid, epistemic traps, in a way that (again, ironically) could promote truth-seeking better than truth-seeking alone is able to do. The crux of the argument is this: striving for apprehensions of truth (or, *mutatis mutandis*, developments of knowledge)—like striving for *wu-wei* in Daoist philosophy (cf. Chung 2020b), *nirvana* in Buddhist philosophy (cf. Chung 2020b), the pleasures of love (cf. Nguyen, 2022, 12), pleasure or happiness in general (cf. Mauss et al., 2011), creativity itself (cf. Chung, 2022a), and many more—may be what Nguyen characterizes as a "self-effacing end": an end that can't be reached (or perhaps is merely more difficult to reach) through direct pursuit.[32] Why might

[32] As Mercedes Valmisa has suggested to me, these are what Jon Elster has called "by-product states": states that only come about as the by-product of actions undertaken for other ends and cannot be attained by willful trying. For some of them, the more you try, the less you can achieve them, like trying to go to sleep when you're insomniac. In these cases, Elster adds, the failures of action can't be explained by an inadequate choice of means to an end; that is, it's not a failure by lack of means, but by an excess, as the mere fact of having a willed strategy prevents the state from manifesting.

this be so? As Nguyen points out, an interest in getting at the truth has a way of constraining searches in logical space, such that only paths deemed to be most likely to lead to truth are explored, thereby leaving out much that could've contributed to discovery. But since playfulness is unconcerned with truth, it allows for less initially promising-looking paths to be explored, too. This often leads to creative discoveries, and—crucially, for Nguyen's project—for the jaws of epistemic traps to be loosened. Exploration that's conducted autotelically—done without (to echo Wong) any underlying "obsession with being right", or even care about being right at all—can bring people to more fully and deeply explore belief systems that their current background beliefs treat as beyond the pale, as simply out of the question. Moreover, once this exploration occurs, it can effect personal epistemic transformation, or at least revision, as new information is incorporated into agents' perspectives (cf. Nguyen 2022, 12–14; Chung 2022a). Exploration that's conducted with concern for truth, however, is less likely to have this consequence, as it increases the chance that one will explore alternatives that one deems initially implausible only to the extent that one wishes to further see what one might consider wrong, rather than right, with them. In addition, autotelic exploration also increases the chances that we'll pay more attention to fine details, thereby better helping us to attune ourselves to various aspects of the world (cf. Nguyen, 2022, 15–16; Chung, 2022a).

As I did in the case of Kieran's proposals, I'll now explain how Nguyen's compare with and can be supported by similar proposals suggested by relevant aspects of the *Zhuangzi*, before going on to explore (if briefly) how drawing from the *Zhuangzi* can extend these conversations. First, I'll return to discussing how aspects of the *Zhuangzi* mirror many of Lugones's observations. In the *Zhuangzi,* we also see an impetus to uncertainty, in the form of openness to surprise, or at least spontaneity and adaptivity (in the senses discussed in Sect. 1), that gives rise to embracing *you*, and hence playfulness (in Nguyen's sense), and creativity (also in the sense discussed in Sect. 1): autotelic activity that derives its significance from itself, even if it derives further significance in other ways. We also see there a "metaphysical attitude that does not expect the world to be neatly packaged" or "ruly", as well as a sentiment expressed to the effect that rules may fail to explain what we're doing and can constrain us in unhelpful ways. In the *Zhuangzi,* too, agents are discouraged from being "self-important", "fixed in particular constructions of themselves", "wedded to particular ways of doing things" or "stuck in any particular 'world'". Rather, they're encouraged to be "open to self-construction", "having no rules that are to them sacred", and "unworried about competence". Further, as a result, they're prompted not to "abandon any particular world", but rather to exist "creatively"—that is, in a sense that involves spontaneous and adaptive integration via, in part, embracing *you* and any attendant perspective-shifting involved. We can see all these features of the text exemplified in both the story of the wheelwright as well as that of Huizi and his giant gourd—though there are a great many other passages that exemplify them besides. Finally, the *Zhuangzi* and many of its commentators are also concerned to discuss various "self-effacing ends" and embracing *you* as a means of addressing problems that arise as a result of such ends—again, epistemic and otherwise.

Many aspects of Lugones's and Nguyen's discussions substantively resemble aspects of the *Zhuangzi*, but if this were all that were so, there'd be little point in consulting the *Zhuangzi* for further guidance in order to build on their insights. Instead, the *Zhuangzi* can be profitably interpreted as not only linking up with, but also helping us to build upon, their suggestions, so as to assist us in constructively exploring and extending their conversations. Below I'll explore just three such ways this might be done, though I surmise that there are wonderfully many others besides.

First, the *Zhuangzi* can be interpreted as opening readers up to the possibility and potential benefits of an autotelic life, rather than merely occasional attempts at autotelic activity. It also draws our attention to the possibility that one can use skeptical arguments and paradoxical statements to assist us in embracing *you,* and hence play (again, in Nguyen's sense), thereby according with Nguyen's comments regarding the cultural archetypes of the "joking genius" or "laughing sage" (both of which the *Zhuangzi* exemplifies in spades)—popular associations that Nguyen persuasively argues turn out to reveal genuine and deep connections between playfulness and epistemic or intellectual virtue (as well as, the *Zhuangzi* can be read as suggesting, other kinds of virtue, including aesthetic and ethical virtue). The *Zhuangzi* also prompts us to, in Nguyen's terms, associate lighthearted humor and a sense of fun with a more intellectually (and otherwise) fluid mode of being. However, in addition to this, the *Zhuangzi* can be interpreted as countenancing the possibility that autotelic activity, or embracing *you*, needn't be pleasurable, fun, or even playful in the sense that it's unserious or unpainful. Rather, the text appears to be open to the possibility of serious and even painful play; activity done for its own sake, with goals held lightly, but also earnestly (perhaps, for example, in a pretense or fictional fashion). Insofar as the wheelwright can be interpreted as embracing *you*, he exemplifies an example of such serious play, especially in his response to the duke, who is, after all, threatening his life. Other paradigmatic examples within the *Zhuangzi* might involve characters with "disabilities" or "deformities" who've creatively used what would conventionally be considered as liabilities profitably, and paradigmatic examples within contemporary life might include composing poetry or other writing (a process that can involve one in experiencing and exploring a wide array of emotions or ways of feeling, "positive" and "negative").[33]

Second, such considerations illuminate a potential difference between Nguyen's characterization of play as "done for its own sake… because playing is fun, pleasurable, or satisfying" and embracing *you.* For embracing *you* can be autotelic, or done for its own sake, without necessarily being all that fun, pleasurable, or even satisfying (perhaps depending on one's perspective on fun, etc.). This is particularly salient when one (re)considers Fraser's example concerning how one might embrace *you* while being tortured on the rack. As we've seen, Fraser notes that even in such a "limiting case … we can still be engaged in intelligent navigation, alert to alternative possibilities, though the only course actually open to us may be to identify with the inevitable and [thereby] 'ride along' with it." (Fraser, 2014a, 553) These sorts of remarks therefore open us up to the possibility that one can embrace "wandering"

[33] For additional discussion on poetry writing in this connection, see Chung (2023).

and consider all activity as done for its own sake (at least first and foremost), even if some activities (such as those related to grief and bereavement, for example) are in many ways quite unpleasant. Embracing *you* may tend to make all activities more pleasant than they would've been otherwise, and hence be associated with fun, pleasure, and satisfaction, without necessitating them. And play and embracing *you* are undoubtedly at minimum similar: they're both autotelic and involve, as Nguyen says, "a certain fluidity" with respect to things such as norms and beliefs. But, insofar as the experience or phenomenology of embracing *you* can vary between the pleasurable to the painful (and play *isn't* like this), they may be to some degree different. Hence, connecting with Nguyen's account can help us to better probe the nature and role of play, as well as what the *Zhuangzi* is encouraging readers to do: perhaps not necessarily to enjoy their lives all of the time, but rather simply to be there, or be present, so as to appreciatively work with their circumstances as best they can as they unfold. This is something that we have the freedom to practice, or not, depending on whether we choose to embrace *you* or to remain in epistemic (as well as other kinds of) traps of our making.[34]

Third—and connected with both of the suggestions for conversational extension canvassed directly above—we can extend Nguyen's account to, perhaps just for starters, desires and entire perspectives as well as beliefs, as many aspects of the *Zhuangzi* appear to suggest.[35] We can, for instance, talk about *desire traps,* analogous to Nguyen's epistemic traps: systems of desires that undermine our practical efforts, thereby leaving us practically stuck. We therefore can similarly distinguish three types of desire traps, as follows. *Anti-Consideration Traps*, we might say, discourage modification of one's desires by blocking or omitting alternatives from consideration. *Exploration Traps* re-direct various processes involving desires such that good faith, practically-oriented efforts are led astray by admitting alternatives while invariably (through distrust or otherwise) leading us to find them unappealing. Finally, *Insensitivity Traps* cut off attention to certain areas of life by attributing valuelessness to those areas (interestingly, here there doesn't seem to be any modification needed). Many of us, I suspect, have found ourselves ensnared in desire traps, just as we've found ourselves ensnared in epistemic traps. We've all, for example, had a romantic relationship end (or know someone who has) such that we (or they) have been left yearning for a former partner intensely, even in cases where no reconciliation is sought. For my part, sometimes this has resulted in my feeling so "stuck on someone" that I've been unable to even consider being with another. This is an anti-consideration trap, analogous to an anti-reflective trap: new flames can't be lit, because the old one's still burning so brightly. Other times, I've been able to consider being with another, but couldn't help but write potential

[34] I don't take myself to have come anywhere near settling the matter of how similar embracing *you* and play are here, as this issue is complex and controversial; for the purposes of this paper, I want merely to register the possibility that they may be to some degree different. For further discussion on why we might seek to treat these concepts differently, see Levinovitz (2012).

[35] I'm interpreting perspectives, as Elisabeth Camp does (Camp, 2017), in dispositional rather than propositional terms, thereby distinguishing them from sets of beliefs.

candidates off as unappealing because, well, they simply seem too different from the person I was yearning for.[36] This is an exploration trap, analogous to an inquiry trap: new flames can get lit, for a time, but they're rapidly extinguished simply because they're ruled out for being supposedly insufficiently like the old one. Still other times, I've found myself feeling so bothered by certain features of former partners such that I never want to be around anyone who displays such features ever again. This is an insensitivity trap: anyone who displays such features is ruled out as undesirable before the relevant exploration has even begun. In addition, this sort of approach can be fruitfully applied to entire perspectives, too: to get a sense of how, simply substitute "perspective" for "desire" above. And it would seem that a combination of the *Zhuangzi*'s and Nguyen's proposed means of escape from epistemic traps might be modified so as to apply in these cases, too. We can begin to doubt that the desires or perspectives we have are worthwhile, or fitting. We can open ourselves up to the possibility of developing different ones. We can wander, and we can play, in order to not just work with what we already want, or how we already see things, but also to want different things, or to see things differently. (This is borne out by advice that people are sometimes given when romantic relationships end: try new things, connect with new people, and so on, so as to work with what is, rather than dwell on what has been or what one is longing for.)

If this is on the right track, we can see how Nguyen's account, especially when brought into dialogue with the *Zhuangzi*, can generalize so as to partially explain why playfulness is an ethical and aesthetic virtue, too: it can help us to get out of desire or perspective traps that can impede not only our epistemic behavior (e.g., how we attempt to facilitate and appreciate inquiry or conceptualization), but also our ethical and aesthetic behavior (e.g., how we attempt to facilitate and appreciate flourishing, or how we attempt to facilitate and appreciate beauty). But the *Zhuangzi* goes beyond Nguyen's proposals in that it encourages us not just to play or to engage in autotelic activity sometimes, but rather to act autotelically in all that we do, to the extent that we can. One might therefore summarize a central theme of the text as follows: we're here to be here, so the best we can do is to endeavor to actually do that—that is, to be here, to be present—as much and as appreciatively as possible as we navigate the world. And one of the best ways to be "present" in the relevant sense (rather than "absent") is to immerse ourselves in what we're doing: something that can be done more fully if we're willing to more often shed things like self-serving plans, characterizations of prior experiences, and fixed preconceptions,

[36] As David Egan has suggested to me, there's plausibly a more general version of this problem that goes beyond being captivated by an old flame: "To the extent that you decide you have a 'type', you might be unwilling to consider people who don't fall into that type when a more open consideration might reveal valuable new possibilities. This is one of the dangers, I think, of online dating, where you're pretty much encouraged to decide in advance what you're looking for in a way that limits the possibilities you might discover.".

and attempt to open ourselves up to new perspectives (by embracing *you* and hence acting spontaneously, adaptively, and creatively, in inquiry as well as elsewhere).[37]

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