

Title: The Relatively Happy Fish Revisited

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An acknowledgment: I have benefited from Judd Kinzley's comments on an earlier draft as well as his suggestions of how to improve the writing.

## The Relatively Happy Fish Revisited

## Abstract

The anecdote of Zhuangzi and Hui Shi's brief discussion on a bridge above the Hao river gives us a nice piece of reasoning in ancient Chinese texts that may serve as a platform for a productive philosophical exchange between the East and the West. The present study examines Hansen's inferential analysis of Zhuangzi and Hui Shi's discussion in this spirit. It is argued that Hansen's analysis founders. To do justice to both Hui Shi and Zhuangzi, the present study proposes that we apply the logic developed in the later Mohist text, the *Lesser Pick*, to an analysis of their discussion. The re-analysis shows that the intricate dialectic of the reasoning in which Zhuangzi and Hui Shi engage, neatly accords with the pattern of discourse expounded in the *Lesser Pick*, and gives us global insight into Zhuangzi's final statement in the anecdote, which is notoriously recondite, or confusing.

## The Relatively Happy Fish Revisited

### 1

Zhuangzi and Hui Shi were strolling on the bridge above the Hao river. ‘Out swim the minnows, so free and easy,’ said Zhuangzi. ‘This is fish happiness.’

‘You are not a fish; whence do you know fish happiness?’

‘You are not me; whence do you know that I don’t know fish happiness?’

‘I am not you so I don’t know you. You are not fish so you don’t know fish happiness. That is the whole of it.’

‘Let us go back to the root from which we have branched out into this conversation. When you said “Whence do you know fish happiness,” it was asking me already knowing I knew it. I knew it from above the Hao.’

This dialogue is found in the closing passage in the *Zhuangzi*, chapter 17, ‘Autumn floods.’ The translation is mine, which is basically a combined version of Graham’s (1981, p. 123) and Hansen’s (2003, p. 145) respective translations, with one

exception: I foreground the metaphorical usage of *ben*<sup>root</sup> in ‘Let us go back to the root...,’ which was rendered as ‘the beginning’ in Hansen’s translation and ‘where we started’ in Graham’s translation. My intent to render it this way will become clear in the following discussion.

As Chad Hansen points out, ‘this passage is one of a small cluster of examples of reasoning in ancient Chinese texts that Sinologists recognise as having a surface resemblance to Western philosophy more than to the manifest image of Chinese thought’ (Hansen, 2003, p. 149). Let me add that this passage also provides an excellent opportunity for exploring ways of productive philosophical exchanges between the East and the West. The present study examines Hansen’s analysis of it in this spirit

Built on Graham’s (1981, p. 123) insight that *an*<sup>whence</sup> in the question ‘Whence do you know...?’ marks an exchange of perspectives, Hansen (2003) proposes that we take this dialogue as exemplifying a distinctive form of philosophical perspectivalism in epistemology. He argues for an inferential analysis to solve philosophical puzzles:

How is the final remark a resolution or a plausible conclusion to the disagreement? What perspectival point is Zhuangzi’s argument supposed to have made? Are there not internal contradictions in each discussant’s position? Is not

Zhuangzi's penultimate riposte a non sequitur? Is Hui Shi right that Zhuangzi is forced by his own logic to acknowledge he does not know fish happiness?

(Hansen, 2003, p. 147)

Asking those questions is already a step towards dispelling the standard notion of Zhuangzi as not seriously participating in the debate and playfully dismissing Hui Shi's logic. Hansen goes on to turn the standard notion on its head, and explain the deep structure of the dialogue, in which Zhuangzi is the more skilful dialectician, leading Hui Shi into a logical trap. According to Hansen, Hui Shi's opening question, when unpacked, presumes (1) an acceptance of the norm of assertion that in claiming something one should know it and (2) a commitment to the privileged status for the first person standard of knowledge. Zhuangzi plays along, answering Hui Shi's question with a question, which is in fact a trap. In his next move, Hui Shi takes Zhuangzi's bait: 'I am not you so I don't know you. You are not fish so you don't know fish happiness.' The second sentence contradicts the first, given Hui Shi's acceptance of the norm of assertion and his commitment to the privileged status for the first person standard of knowledge. Hansen concludes, 'Hui Shi is committed to both that he knows and that he does not know what Zhuangzi knows' (Hansen, 2003, p. 153).

As to Zhuangzi's final statement, it seems that Zhuangzi simply relies on a verbal trick. Normally, when one takes part in debates, asking questions of the form 'how (or whence) do you know X,' the debater is questioning your claim that you know X, or denying that you know X. Zhuangzi acknowledges this point in his response to Hui Shi's opening question, or so he seems. Yet, his final statement reconstrues Hui Shi's question as a presupposition that he, Zhuangzi, already knows. From this perspective, Zhuangzi's final statement is a clear case of weak sophistry, or dishonesty. To develop an alternative way of understanding Zhuangzi's final remark, Hansen suggests that we focus on the implicit pragmatic theory of language in traditional Daoist texts, i.e., that its core role is to provide guidance, rather than manufacturing factual representations (see Hansen, 1992, chaps. 6, 8). Hui Shi has been caught in a logical trap because, in addition to the acceptance of the norm of assertion, he tries to restrict knowledge to the confines of the first person perspective, which leads him into a contradiction that would otherwise force him to give up the norm of assertion. Zhuangzi's final remark is to guide Hui Shi to a broader view that there are different ways of knowing about affective states, and the way I can know I am happy (from the first person perspective) is different from the way you can know it (from a third person perspective).

Relinquishing the unrealistic, first person standard of knowing, Hui Shi should be able to see that the basis of Zhuangzi's initial assertion has been known to him all along,

simply because he, standing with Zhuangzi above the river, ‘saw exactly the same thing and knew precisely in which sense, how and whence, Zhuangzi knew about the fish’ (Hansen, 2003, p. 157).

Hansen is certainly aware that, in laying out his discussion on the dialogue between Zhuangzi and Hui Shi, he has imposed an inferential framework alien to ancient Chinese thinkers; particularly, regarding standards for the use of *zhi*<sup>know</sup>, ‘their focus would not be on inference or logic, but on what approving or disapproving of the use of a term in a context depends or relies on’ (Hansen, 2003, p. 157). He believes, nonetheless, that it should be fairly easy to rephrase his argument in terms familiar to ancient Chinese thinkers without losing the point. I shall argue that the dialogue takes on a shape different from the one Hansen has painted once one starts re-analyzing the dialogue in terms familiar to ancient Chinese thinkers.

## 2

I agree with Hansen that the dialogue between Zhuangzi and Hui Shi calls for a perspectival analysis. I also agree that the standard notion of Zhuangzi as not seriously participating in the debate is false. But I disagree with his inferential articulation of the dialogue, particularly his portrayal of Hui Shi’s logical

maneuvering as an inept handling of philosophical dialectic, and Zhuangzi's response to Hui Shi's question as a contrived, logical trap. To do justice to both Hui Shi and Zhuangzi, I propose that we apply the logic (or patterns of discourse that guide our distinction making activity and disputation) developed in the later Mohist text, the *Lesser Pick* (the *Xiaoqu*), to an analysis of the dialogue. Let me first quote a relevant passage from the *Lesser Pick*, and then proceed with the analysis. When that is done, I shall explain, albeit briefly, why applying the logic in this case is pertinent.

What is present in one's own case is not to be rejected in the other man's, what is absent from one's own case is not to be demanded of the other man's. (A)

'Illustrating' is referring to other things in order to clarify one's case. (B)

'Parallelising' is comparing propositions and letting all 'proceed'. (C)

'Adducing' is saying: 'If it is so in your case, why may it not be so in mine too?'

(D) 'Inferring' is using what is the same in that which he refuses to accept and that which he does accept in order to propose the former. (Graham, trans., 2003, p. 483)

It is worth mentioning that here Graham translates *ci*<sup>phrase</sup> as 'proposition.'

According to Hansen, this translation can be misleading. He writes: 'The ancient

Chinese concept of *ci*<sup>phrase</sup> ranges across any linguistic strings that we intentionally structure. It includes what we would call a compound word, a noun or verb phrase, duplicated verbs, whole sentences, and even pairs or groups of related sentences (couplets)' (Hansen, 1992, p. 45). I concur, but the following discussion does not rely on this lexical claim and Graham's translation as it stands would do no harm in the present context.

Consider now Hui Shi's opening question and Zhuangzi's response to it.

Hui Shi: You are not a fish; whence do you know fish happiness?

Zhuangzi: You are not me; whence do you know that I don't know fish happiness?

Notice that Zhuangzi is parallelizing in this exchange to support his case. It is also an adducement, that is, a move in which one asks the opponent to see that a parallel pattern is being established. From this perspective, if the opponent approves of his own case, he should approve of your case. It follows that Hui Shi should then take Zhuangzi's question to be as legitimate as his own. This move is a combined exercise of parallelizing and adducing, rather than a contrived, logical trap.

Consider next Hui Shi's response:

I am not you so I don't know you.

You are not fish so you don't know fish happiness.

Notice, again, that there is a parallel pattern in these two sentences. Hui Shi is using parallelizing in his response. It is also a move of inferring, that is, a move of forcing the opponent in the debate to approve of the second sentence, for there is a parallel pattern in what the opponent approves of (the first sentence) and what he rejects (the second sentence). It is a combined exercise of parallelizing and inferring, rather than a mishandling of the dialectic.

Now, even if Hui Shi handles the dialectic adroitly, we can still ask whether or not he falls into the logical trap Hansen describes. This depends on whether or not Hui Shi approves of the norm of assertion that in claiming something one should know it, and whether or not he commits himself to a privileged status for the first person standard of knowledge. I shall bypass questions concerning the norm of assertion, for it seems fairly clear that Hui Shi is making an assertion, and is willing to abide by the norm of assertion. As to the first person standard of knowledge, Hansen's textual evidence for Hui Shi's endorsement of it is meager. It seems that Hansen argues his case only on the basis of his inferential analysis of the dialogue. Indeed, we know so

little about Hui Shi that any substantive claim about him should be hedged with conditions and caveats. That leaves us with the question of whether or not Hansen's analysis is a fair treatment of Hui Shi's line of reasoning in the dialogue. Here I think it is appropriate to draw attention to a guiding principle of debating as it is framed in the *Lesser Pick*: 'What is present in one's own case is not to be rejected in the other man's, what is absent from one's own case is not to be demanded of the other man's.' (Graham, trans., 2003, p. 483) From this perspective, debating is a joint enterprise. It entails an exchange of the views of the debaters, and demands that anyone engaging in a debate should consistently align what he approves or disapproves of with what is to be demanded of the other. Let us now see how we may read the dialogue from this perspective. Hui Shi's opening question 'You are not a fish; whence do you know fish happiness?' carries a message that Zhuangzi is not in a position to know or to make a knowledge claim about fish happiness. Notice that this is not an act of privileging the first person perspective. Rather, it is about how members of one species come to know the affective states of members of another species. Zhuangzi's reply 'You are not me; whence do you know that I don't know fish happiness?' carries a message that Hui Shi is not in a position to know whether or not Zhuangzi knows fish happiness. This reply marks something of a turning point in the dialogue; it directs debaters' attention from species-specific perspectives to the first person perspective. Zhuangzi

is counting on Hui Shi's willingness to reorient himself with this shift in perspective by paralleling their respective questions. Hui Shi indeed follows, and responds with his statement, 'I am not you so I don't know you. You are not fish so you don't know fish happiness.' This line carries a message that if the switch from the species-specific perspectives to the first person perspective is to be approved of, so is the reverse switch. Therefore, Zhuangzi should approve of the reverse switch, and accept that he is not in a position to know or to make a knowledge claim about fish happiness. Again, this is not an inadequate act of privileging the first person perspective. On the contrary, Hui Shi's response is both elegant and powerful from an ancient Chinese dialectical viewpoint.

The alignment of Zhuangzi and Hui Shi's questions and responses crucially hinges on the parallel patterns dynamically established in the dialogue, which can be formulated as follows:

(P1) X is not Y; whence does X know the state Y is in?

(P2) X is not Y so X does not know the state Y is in.

Both (P1) and (P2) can be indefinitely re-applied in a debating situation as long as one finds suitable candidates to fill in X, Y, and Z. I venture that Zhuangzi understands

this possibility very well; he may choose to employ (P2), and rejoin, ‘You (Hui Shi) are not me so you don’t know that I don’t know fish happiness.’ If Zhuangzi chooses to do so, the debate would end in deadlock, or go on indefinitely. Zhuangzi foresees it, and presumably Hui Shi does, too. Neither would come out top of this debating game. Instead of re-applying (P2), Zhuangzi invites Hui Shi to go back to the root from which they have branched out into this situation, and answers, ‘When you said “Whence do you know fish happiness,” it was asking me already knowing I knew it. I knew it from above the Hao.’ And the dialogue ends. I shall return to this final remark and probe its significance in the next section. Here let me quote again from the *Lesser Pick*:

(A) Of things in general, if there are respects in which they are the same, it does not follow that they are altogether the same. (B) The parallelism of propositions is valid only as far as it reaches. (C) If something is so of them there are reasons why it is so; but though its being so of them is the same, the reasons why it is so are not necessarily the same. (D) If we accept a claim we have reasons for accepting it; but though we are the same in accepting it, the reasons why we accept it are not necessarily the same. *Therefore propositions which illustrate, parallelise, adduce and infer become different as they ‘proceed’, become*

*dangerous when they change direction, fail when carried too far, become detached from their base when we let them drift, so that we must on no account be careless with them, and must not use them too rigidly.* Hence saying has many methods, separate kinds, different reasons, which must not be looked at only from one side. (Graham, trans., 2003, pp. 483-484; my emphasis)

The dialogue between Zhuangzi and Hui Shi ends at the point where the *Lesser Pick* warns debaters that further moves would become dangerous, detached from their base, or fail. Both Zhuangzi and Hui Shi turn out to be worthy dialecticians measured in terms of the patterns of discourse expounded in the *Lesser Pick*. The *Lesser Pick* is arguably the final word on logic in ancient China (Hansen, 1983, p. 139), and also summarizes, I venture to say, the best patterns of disputation known to ancient Chinese thinkers. That, I believe, makes it useful as an analytic tool to probe and measure the qualities and dialectical turns of debates like the one exemplified in the dialogue between Zhuangzi and Hui Shi. The above analysis, if correct, neatly illustrates how the *Lesser Pick* is useful in this respect, and, particularly, in explaining how participants in a debating game act on, and contribute to, the parallel patterns dynamically established in the ongoing discourse. (If readers have a different interpretation of the passages from the *Lesser Pick*, I hope that the analysis proposed

here is still philosophically appealing, and thus may at least serve as a thought experiment for them to explore different ways of interpreting these passages.) Indeed we can go one better if we use tools of analysis afforded by the *Lesser Pick* to tackle Zhuangzi's final remark, which is notoriously recondite, or confusing.

## 3

The puzzle about Zhuangzi's final statement lies in the aforementioned verbal trick 'When you said "Whence do you know fish happiness," it was asking me already knowing I knew it.' The verbal trickery is glaringly unmistakable to an analytic mind. To Hansen, it is neither a piece of playful sarcasm, nor a weak sophistry, nor a dishonest move. It, however, neither picks up on Hui Shi's response nor effectively unravels Zhuangzi's puzzling conclusion, 'I knew it from above the Hao.' Hansen (2003, p. 155) declares his diagnosis, 'The verbal trickery neither illuminates nor develops the perspectival thrust of the discussion,' and offers his inferential articulation as a solution, which is found wanting. I propose that we confront the verbal trick at face value, and see how it may play a part in the dialogue based on the viewpoint expounded in the *Lesser Pick*.

'Let us go back to the root' signals to Hui Shi that Zhuangzi is about to end the

disputation, which they both know would otherwise end in deadlock or go on indefinitely, and instead engage Hui Shi in discussion from a different angle. His statement ‘When you said “Whence do you know fish happiness,” it was asking me already knowing I knew it’ indeed is a verbal trick. The trick is used as a device for reorienting oneself to a different viewpoint, and asking oneself if one knew it all along. Zhuangzi then bets on Hui Shi’s talents, acting on behalf of his beloved philosophical partner but answering the trick from his own perspective, ‘I knew it from above the Hao.’ That answer invites Hui Shi to turn back to where they started, and be aware of the situation they have been in, i.e., that they have been strolling on the bridge above the Hao river and sharing all along the experience of witnessing the fish swimming easily and smoothly. That, I submit, is a more sensible way to read Zhuangzi’s concluding statement in the dialogue. According to this reading, Zhuangzi is playful, Hui Shi is his equal in the debating game, and the intricate dialectic of the dialogue is manifestly appealing. Moreover, it accords with the patterns of discourse known to ancient Chinese thinkers, as they are expounded in the *Lesser Pick*.

We may round off the above analysis with a speculation, which I think is fair to both Zhuangzi and Hui Shi, as they are portrayed in the *Zhuangzi*. Zhuangzi’s initial response to the scene he and Hui Shi walked into carried a metaphorical message for Hui Shi: Do not exert yourself unnecessarily; let go of your personal interests and

fears; as we witness the fish swimming easily and smoothly, we should be in the same state, be happy, and move easily and smoothly. (For an account of metaphor that fits the present discussion, see Teng, 2005, 2006.) Let me digress a bit to explain a difference between Hansen's rendering of Zhuangzi's initial statement and mine. I purposely phrase Zhuangzi's initial statement as a simple response to the scene he and Hui Shi walked into, instead of treating it exclusively as an assertion about the emotional state of the fish. I believe Hansen's inferential analysis forces him to take Zhuangzi's initial statement as an assertion, which causes him to overlook the possibility of interpreting Zhuangzi's final statement in the way proposed here.

It is worth noting that the interpretation proposed here is in agreement with Ames' observation of the dialogue, which, I think, helps illuminate the tone of how the story unfolds. He writes:

for Zhuangzi, knowledge is performative, a function of fruitful correlations. Thus, it is something done – a qualitative achievement. Knowing a situation is the “realizing” of it in the sense of “making it real.” Knowing is also perlocutionary in the sense of setting the affective tone of the experience. The knower and the known, the enjoyer and the enjoyment, are inseparable aspects of this same event.... One and one's posture or perspective is thus integral to and constitutive

of what is known, and contributes immediately to the quality of the experience.

(Ames, 1998, p. 220)

Joining Ames' observation to the analysis proposed here, it is safe to say that the metaphorical usage of 'root' in Zhuangzi's final statement alludes to the qualitative experience he and Hui Shi jointly achieved as they walked into the scene. Zhuangzi was using illustrating in his initial response, and rounds off the illustration with a verbal trick in his final statement. This speculation gains plausibility if we insert a comment made in the *Zhuangzi* on Hui Shi into the above interpretation of the dialogue:

Hui Shih was incapable of satisfying himself with this, he never tired of scattering all over the myriad things, and ended with no more than a reputation for being good at disputation. What a pity that Hui Shih's talents were wasted and never came to anything, that he would not turn back from chasing the myriad things! He had as much chance of making his voice outlast its echo, his body outrun its shadow. Sad, wasn't it? (*Zhuangzi*, chapter 33, Graham, trans., 1981, p. 285)

Here Hui Shi is portrayed as one gifted with a sharp sense of debating games, but prone to a weakness for pointless argumentation. Another passage, which comes just before the anecdote of Zhuangzi and Hui Shi's ambling above the Hao river, may reinforce the above speculation:

When Hui Shih was chief minister of Liang, Chuang-tzŭ went to visit him.

Someone told Hui Shih

‘Chuang-tzŭ is coming, he wants your place as chief minister.’

At this Hui Shih was frightened, and searched throughout the state for three days and nights.

Chuang-Tzŭ did go to visit him.

‘In the South there is a bird,’ he said, ‘its name is the phoenix, do you know of it? The phoenix came up from the South Sea to fly to the North Sea; it would rest no tree but the sterculia, would eat nothing but the seeds of the bamboo, would drink only from the sweetest springs. Just then an owl had found a rotting mouse. As the phoenix flew over, it looked up and glared at it, “Shoo!” Now am I not take it that for the sake of that Liang country of yours you want to shoo at me?’ (*Zhuangzi*, chapter 17, Graham, trans., 1981, pp. 122-123)

Here Hui Shi is portrayed as one who could not let go of his personal interests and fears. Combined with the previous comment, this story may very well be interpreted as the background, which leads to Zhuangzi's initiation of the conversation with Hui Shi above the Hao river.

To sum up: my analysis shows that the dialogue begins with Zhuangzi's using illustrating in his initial response to the scene he and Hui Shi walked into, which is followed by Hui Shi's opening question, then by Zhuangzi's combined exercise of parallelizing and adducing in his answering Hui Shi's question with a question, and later by Hui Shi's combined exercise of parallelizing and inferring, and then ends with Zhuangzi's playful use of a verbal trick, which invites Hui Shi to go back to where they started and be aware of the setting they have been situated in all along. Overall, Zhuangzi is playful; Hui Shi is his equal in their debating games, but is prone to a weakness for pointless argumentation. The intricate dialectic of the dialogue leading to Zhuangzi's final statement accords with the patterns of discourse known to ancient Chinese thinkers as they are expounded in the *Lesser Pick*.

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