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7.5 Zhuangzi's skepticism

Zhuangzi talks skeptically in many different passages, each with a slightly different strength. He seems, on balance, to advocate a **mild skepticism**. Strong skepticism, we should have no confidence in our judgments at all, would imply we should assert nothing—landing us back in an anti-language trap. Zhuangzi's skepticism, has to do mainly with **self-awareness that our knowing is limited and relative**.

The zither player

Zhuangzi illustrates this point with several illustrations about skill. One is his story of a zither player. The player is **highly skilled**: his mallets move with blurring speed. So the whole instrument vibrates in harmony – but he is still dissatified because he can hit but one string at a time – it is impossible for him to play perfectly. Notice the focus here on knowing-how (skill) rather than the knowing-that typical in Western thought. And Zhuangzi speaks of skill in terms of 成 **chéng** (growing up, completion) which came up in lecture 6.4. Zhuangzi's repeated slogan is **there is no completion without deficit** – unless you simply don't play at all (the anti-language conclusion).

The skull in the forest

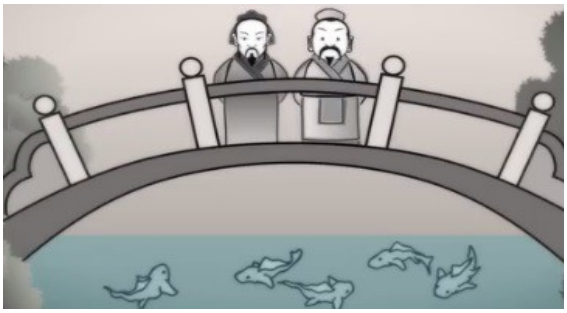
Another one of Zhuangzi's stories shows how our skepticism can extend even towards views that everyone implicitly accepts, e.g. **the value of life**.

Zhuangzi is wandering in the forest, late at night, and has to stop and sleep for a while. And he finds a skull and he uses the skull as a pillow. And before he sleeps, he says to the skull: "Unfortunate person, I'm pity your current state. Do you mind if I use your skull for a pillow?" And in his dreams the skull appears to him and says, "You're really quite arrogant, thinking you know better than I what is good for me. How do you know life is better then death? You have never known that, so be cautious about that judgment."
(See Zhuangzi: Chapter 18: 4.)

Depends on what kind of creature you are

Zhuangzi observes, "If a **man** sleeps on the ground, he shivers and shakes. But does that happen to a **snake**? And if a **man** sleeps in a tree, he's scared of falling – but a **monkey** would be perfectly happy up there. And think about **beauty**: Xi Shi, the most beautiful woman who ever lived – men would die just to gaze at her face. But send her to the bridge over the fish, and the fish would scatter, the birds would fly away, the deer would run!"
(See Zhuangzi: Chapter 2: 11.)

Knowing fish happiness



Zhuangzi and Hui Shi are walking over a bridge, looking at the fish swimming about in the pool below.

Zhuangzi: "See those fish? They're enjoying themselves."

Hui Shi: "You can't know that – ***you're*** not a fish!"

Zhuangzi: "You're not ***me***. How do ***you*** know I don't know?"

Hui Shi: "..."

(Zhuangzi: Chapter 17: 13.)

When Hui Shi says, "You can't know fish enjoyment - you're not a fish!" he is implicitly assuming a **single standard of knowing**: *to know means to know "from the inside"*. Zhuangzi responds that on that standard, Hui Shi's not entitled to claim he doesn't know. His conclusion is **there are different ways of knowing for different contexts**. We do have ways of knowing understand another person's commitments and point of view besides sharing them. We can read and appreciate from here their **dào** and its commitments out there. This enables us to 以明 *yi-míng* appreciate how others view us in our perspective. Putting these lessons together, we can appreciate how other animals might view human thriving as a threat to their own survival.