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7.1 Dangers of relativism

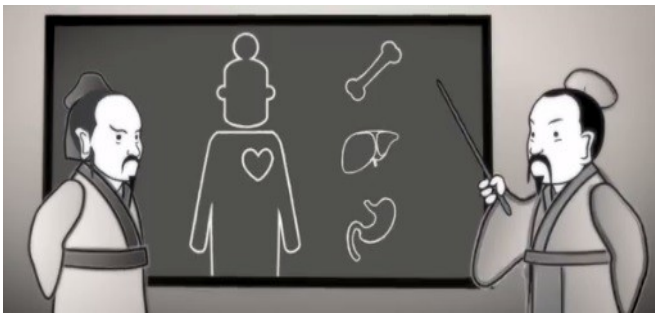
We need to be careful with relativism, because relativism can turn into an easy, lazy approach to morality.

Suppose a relativist simply says: **"All truths are relative."**

The obvious response to that is: **"And *that* claim – that all truths are relative – is *its truth* relative?"**

This familiar difficulty with relativism is this temptation to make an **absolute truth claim** about the relative nature of **all truth claims**. It resembles the anti-language puzzle we noticed earlier (Handout 5.10) since the statement undermines itself.

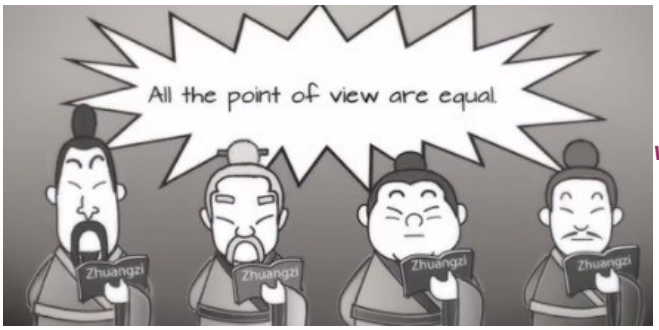
Zhuangzi's approach to relativism



For Zhuangzi, the difficulty is posing as making judgments from the point of view of nature herself. Thus it is related to the problem he sees with Mencius's choice of the 心 **xīn** (heart-mind) to rule the other natural organs as if it were the choice **of nature**. Zhuangzi says, "Nature provided all your organs. When you prefer one of them, **you choose among** natural parts of you. To justify that, you rely on a **prior *dào*** of choice that is **in** your nature and uses all of **your** organs—eyes, ears, feelings etc."

So Zhuangzi thinks **we cannot step outside all dàos** converging on the context of human choice. The key to resisting the temptation to do so is to recall the importance of **dependence**, which Zhuangzi calls 因是 **yīn shì** (see lecture 6.10). Any answer to any question about guidance (and ethics in general) is always going to be **dependent** on something in nature – some context, and some *dào* accessible to us in that context.

Misunderstandings of Zhuangzi



A parallel mistakes readers might fall into with Zhuangzi is to conclude, "Zhuangzi tells us to:

***Treat all points of view as equally right* (*or wrong*).**

But Zhuangzi would note that this judgment of equality is a normative judgment. Thus it should follow from some *dào at* some particular point **in** nature. From those **actual** perspectives **in** nature, some points of view will appear better than others!

Consider this point of view:
"Getting ahead in life, even at the cost of harming others, is the way to go."
And consider a different point of view:
"Take care not to harm others, cooperate with and help others as you make your way in life."

If a person says that these are **equally good ways** to approach life, then that is itself an ethical judgment! The *dào* that equally justifies both would be something like Shen Dao's anti-language position: Make no 是非 shì-fēi judgments.

When people try to summarize relativism, then tend to this kind of self-defeating guidance and portray it as the judgement **of** the cosmos. Zhuangzi denies the cosmos makes any such judgment. Judgments depend on *dào*s **within** the cosmos. Recall from lecture 6.6 his saying **humans are in *dào*s as fish are in water**. From these we get a plethora of different judgments—all depending on the *dào*s in the situation.