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7.2 Hui Shi's monism

Recall in lecture 6.9 we discussed Hui Shi's relativist philosophy of language and his focus on comparative terms ("big", "small", etc.). **Zhuangzi and Hui Shi both have relativist leanings**, but Hui Shi seems tempted to the error we discussed in 7.1. He moves from **relativism** to absolute **monism**: **everything is one**.

Hui Shi's monism

So Hui Shi's view is that **all is one**. In other words, **reality has no distinctions in it**. How does he reach this conclusion?

Hui Shi seems to reason along the following lines:

1. First, he reiterates his insights about language (see lecture 6.9). Recall his two important points:

- When we use words, we draw **comparative** distinctions; which means that where we draw those distinctions varies with *context.* They are in language rather than in the *the world*.
- *Any* two things are bound to be **similar in some ways and different in others**. So there will be **no absolutely correct way of making distinctions and creating categories.** None of the distinctions or categories exist in nature.

2. So that means that the ways we distinguish between objects are **conventional**, hence, not **real**.

3. Therefore, **there are no real distinctions in this world**.

4. And 天地一體也 "The cosmos is one part" (Zhuangzi Ch 33.7): **one seamless body**.

So from his relativist starting point, Hui Shi draws a huge cosmic conclusion: absolute **monism** (see1.4). His monism resonates with the anti-language positions in the primitive Daoism of Shen Dao and Laozi. Many scholars treat this as also Zhuangzi's reasoning without explaining his disagreement with Hui Shi. Hui Shi concluded: all the distinctions in language are **unreal**, errors, so we should stop making them and thus **stop using language**. This is hardly Zhuangzi's attitude—he plainly loves playing with language.

Is Zhuangzi also a monist?

So that doesn't seem to be what Zhuangzi is saying. In the text, **Zhuangzi seems to target Hui Shi's conclusion** for further reflection and finds a paradox in it. But we can already see why Zhuangzi would be suspicious: it looks like Hui Shi is trying to make a judgment from **the point of view of the cosmos**. Essentially Hui Shi is saying something like:

All perspectival judgments are wrong.

We can see the parallel between that as the the simple relativism error we discussed in lecture 7.1. Zhuangzi responds to this attempt to get beyond all perspectives in much the same way as he responds to the attempt to get beyond all normative (ethical) points of view:

"What's the perspective from which you make *that* judgement (that all perspectival judgments are wrong)? What perspective allows you to step outside of perspectives and still make judgments about right and wrong?"

In the next segment we'll look at the response Zhuangzi makes to Hui Shi's conclusion in more detail.