Violent Misreadings: 
The Hermeneutics of Cosmology in the Huainanzi

by
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During the Han dynasty, correlative cosmology came to be utilized as a hermeneutical strategy for re-interpreting earlier texts. As John Henderson has argued in regard to Confucian commentaries to the classics,

Although such cosmological dualities as yin-yang were probably not formulated in the first place to serve-exegetical ends, they were developed through being widely used to support such commentarial assumptions as that the classics were well ordered and coherent. Cosmology is, after all, a science of order par excellence. Thus, the strategic use of cosmological ideas to establish the orderliness of classical discourse is not surprising.  

Henderson goes on to provide an excellent survey of the complex ways that cosmology was utilized in commentaries.

Given that cosmology became such a dominant commentarial strategy, I would like to pose the following question: how could figures during this period have used correlative cosmology to read texts that would seem so obviously unconcerned with cosmological arguments? At first glance, this may seem like an odd question, since the answer would appear to be obvious: if people at the time believed that the cosmos operated in correlative ways, and if they believed that the texts of the sages were repositories of true knowledge, they would of course read such texts according to correlative schema. But, as I have argued elsewhere, correlative cosmology was not an assumption at all—even in the early Han. It was rather a claim, and one that

BULLETIN OF THE MUSEUM OF FAR EASTERN ANTIQUITIES
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was hotly debated. There was thus a strong self-consciousness at the time that other people did not accept correlative ways of thinking. And what I would like to argue here is that was also a strong self-consciousness of the fact that some of the earlier texts—including those authored by figures recognized as great sages—did not use correlative ways of thinking either. There was, in short, a concern precisely with the disjunction—fully apparent to figures at the time—between earlier texts and the correlative cosmology that some Han figures were using to interpret those texts.

To tease out some of these issues, I will turn to a commentary in which, I will argue, the authors clearly recognized, and indeed played with, the discrepancy and incongruity of their cosmology with the text being commented upon. Indeed, the commentary is presented—celebrated might be the better word—as a deliberate and provocative misreading of the earlier text.

Cosmogenies and Commentaries:
Hermeneutical Strategies of Cosmology in Early China

The text I will discuss is the “Chuzhen” chapter two of the *Huainanzi*—a text in which the argument is built to a significant degree upon particular (and seemingly peculiar) readings of the *Zhuangzi*. Indeed, about 15% of the *Huainanzi* chapter consists of passages from the *Zhuangzi*, and substantial portions of the remainder of the chapter consist of lengthy elaborations of the *Zhuangzi* passages.

One of the most fascinating and provocative, as well as oft-discussed, of these elaborations occurs at the very beginning of the chapter. The text opens by quoting a passage from the “Qiwu lun” of the *Zhuangzi*. The passage consists of seven lines:

1. There was a beginning.
2. There was not yet beginning to have something beginning.
3. There was not yet beginning to have a not yet beginning to have something beginning.
4. There was Something.
5. There was Nothing.

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3 I assigned the “Chuzhen” chapter of the *Huainanzi* in my graduate seminar “Chinese History 232: Topics in Han History” in the spring of 1995 and the fall of 1998. I would like to thank the participants of both seminars for their extremely helpful discussions. David Mozina in particular wrote an excellent seminar paper entitled “Cosmogonic Myth in the Huainanzi: An Analysis of Self-Cultivation and Rulership in the ‘Chuzhen.’”

6. There was not yet beginning to have Nothing.
7. There was not yet beginning to have a not yet beginning to have Nothing.  

The text then provides a line-by-line commentary to that passage, building a lengthy cosmogony out of each sentence.

The commentary seems at first glance bizarre, to say the least. In the context of the "Qiwu lun," the passage in question from the Zhuangzi seems clearly a critique of human attempts to posit origins and reified distinctions: if one says that something had a beginning, then one is saying that before such a beginning was something that was not yet that beginning. And before that there was yet another not yet beginning—and so on. Similarly, if one tries to distinguish between something and nothing, then there would have to be something that came before the very distinction of something and nothing. But then where did that something come from? And so on again. In other words, any attempt to posit origins, or to posit a distinction of "something" and "nothing," leads only to nonsense. Allow me to quote the passage in full:

今且有言於此不知其與是類乎其與是不類乎  
類與不類相與為類則與彼無以異矣  
雖然請嘗言之  
有始也者  
有未始有始也者 有未始有始未始有始也者  
有有也者  
有無也者  
有未始有無也者  
有未始有未始有無也者  
無而有無也而  
未知有無之果孰有孰無也  
今我則已有謂矣而未知吾所謂之其  
果有謂乎其果無謂乎

Now, I have something to say. I don’t know if with this I am positing a category or not positing a category. But, since "positing a category" and "not positing a category" themselves involve creating a category, then there is nothing with which to distinguish them. Nonetheless, allow me to try to say it: "There was a beginning. There was not yet beginning to have something beginning. There was not yet beginning to have a not yet beginning to have something beginning. There was Something. There was Nothing. There was not yet beginning to have Nothing. There was not yet beginning to have a not yet beginning to have Nothing." Suddenly we have Something and Nothing, but I don’t yet know, with this Something and Nothing, which is Something and which is Nothing. Now, as for me, I have already referred to something, but I don’t yet know if I have said something or if I have said nothing.  

The seven sentences are given within a larger frame designed to highlight the absurdity of the attempt to posit origins or maintain a dualism of "Something" and "Nothing." As the narrator states, it is unclear, when one makes such a dualism,
which pole is which. Thus, the passage puns, has the narrator’s discussion of Something and Nothing really said something or has it said nothing?

As A. C. Graham astutely comments on the passage,

There can be Nothing only when there is Something, a void only where there are objects with intervals between them, and both divide out from a whole which is neither one nor the other. Each thing has limited properties, is “without something,” but the whole out of which it differentiates is both “without anything,” since things have not yet emerged, and “without nothing,” since everything emerges from it. Then having added Nothing to Something, I have still to add a remainder which “has not yet begun to be without something.” But again we are speaking retrospectively as though there were already things to be present or absent, and again we have to negate: “There had not yet begun to be that ‘not yet having begun to be without something.’” Both Zhuangzi’s sequences are no doubt intended to lead to an infinite regress. 7

But then we have the “Chuzhen” chapter of the Huainanzi. The chapter comments on the seven sentences by reading each one as referring to discrete stages in the cosmogonic unfolding of the universe. How are we to interpret such a commentary? It is not just that the authors are reading a cosmogony into a text that was unconcerned with cosmogony; they are reading a cosmogony into a text that seems obviously opposed to cosmogonic thinking—to any attempt, indeed, to posit discrete origins or clear cosmological distinctions such as “something” and “nothing.”

Since the Huainanzi passage in question has often been celebrated as one of the most sophisticated and elaborate cosmogonies in early Chinese literature, it has generated a tremendous amount of scholarly attention. 8 This has been made even more extreme by the fact that Han cosmogonies have themselves become so important in scholarship on early Chinese thought. Several scholars have emphasized cosmogonies such as those found in the Huainanzi as prototypical examples of correlative cosmology: since the cosmogonies given in the Huainanzi emphasize the notion that everything that exists emerged spontaneously out of a single, undifferentiated state, they are clearly reflective of a correlative cosmology, in which everything that exists is seen as inherently linked and in resonance with everything else. As Frederick Mote, who wants (wrongly, in my opinion 9 ) to read such a cosmogony as part of a “Chinese” way of thinking, has argued:

The genuine Chinese cosmogony is that of organismic process, meaning that all the parts of the entire cosmos belong to one organic whole and that they all interact as participants in one spontaneously self-generating life process. 10

And, since the Huainanzi cosmogonies are so elaborate, they are therefore often given as typical examples of Han correlative thought. A. C. Graham, for example,

7 Graham, Chuang Tzu, 56. Here and throughout this paper I have converted all Wade-Giles romanizations to Pinyin.
8 Fung Yu-lan, for example, states that the Huainanzi cosmogonies, “explain the origin of the universe more clearly than do any earlier philosophical writings.” He then quotes the passage in question as an example. See his A History of Chinese Philosophy, translated by Derk Bodde (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), 395–96.
9 For a critique of Mote’s position, see Puett, To Become a God. I provide an account of the emergence of cosmogonies in early China (with texts such as the Guodian Taiyi sheng shui) on 145–200.
devotes a substantial part of his discussion of correlative thinking to one of the Huainanzi cosmogonies.\textsuperscript{11}

But, if the Huainanzi passage has been celebrated for its sophistication, the fact that it was written as a commentary to the Zhuangzi has been a problem. How can one account for the fact that such a complicated and lengthy cosmogony—a cosmogony that so many scholars want to celebrate as a high-point in the development of cosmological thinking—is written in response to a set of lines that appear to explicitly oppose any attempt to build a cosmogony?

This combination—a cosmogony that scholars want to celebrate along with an earlier set of lines that appear to contradict the premises of the cosmogony—makes it a powerful document in early Chinese literature, and one that brings to the fore many of the crucial questions facing any interpreter of cosmological thinking in early China. A survey of the ways in which twentieth-century scholars have read the Huainanzi passage in relation to the earlier Zhuangzi lines is extremely telling of the ways that correlative cosmology has been conceptualized by those scholars.

Secondary Scholarship

One of the major trends for the study of cosmological thought in early China has been a general "religion-to-philosophy" framework. The argument here is that cosmological thinking is an attempt to shift away from an earlier, theistic worldview and toward one based upon natural, rational laws. A clear example of this approach is Hu Shi, who read the Huainanzi as a high point in this development. Hu read the text as a whole as a naturalistic—and hence a rational—text, and he thus wanted to present the Huainanzi passage in question as a highly developed naturalistic cosmogony.

However, Hu Shi faced an immediate problem with this approach—and it is a problem that was to confront every scholar who hoped to read the passage as a cosmogony. The Huainanzi passage is written as a commentary to the Zhuangzi lines. As such, they simply do not add up to a coherent cosmogony: since the Zhuangzi lines are not in the order of a cosmogony, the Huainanzi commentary is not either. Accordingly, Hu Shi simply reordered the passage in order to fit a clearer developmental process. He thus ordered the passages as: 7, 3, 6, 2, 1, 4, and 5.\textsuperscript{12} In other words, his attempt to read the cosmogony as a successful, convincing, naturalistic cosmogony was privileged over his desire to see the text as a commentary. Indeed, Hu Shi is unconcerned about the apparent disconnect between the passage and the Zhuangzi lines being commented upon.

Wing-Tsit Chan read the Huainanzi, as well as the development of the early Chinese philosophical tradition, very much along the lines developed earlier by Hu Shi. But unlike Hu Shi, Wing-Tsit Chan was explicitly interested in the relationship between the Huainanzi and Zhuangzi lines. Since Wing-Tsit Chan read Zhuangzi himself as a naturalistic philosopher, and hence as a figure pointing toward a more

\textsuperscript{11} A. C. Graham, Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1989), 332-40.

\textsuperscript{12} Hu Shi, Huai-nan Wang shu (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yin shu guan, 1962), 33-37.
rational form of philosophy, Chan saw the *Huainanzi* cosmogony as simply a helpful, if somewhat derivative, continuation of that naturalistic and rationalistic approach:

> Although his [i.e., Liu An's—the compiler of the *Huainanzi*] ideas are no more than reiteration and elaboration of Laozi and Zhuangzi, at least he kept the fire of Daoism burning and helped to make possible the emergence of Neo-Daoism. Because of his essentially rational approach to metaphysics and cosmogony, it may be said that he indirectly, at least, prepared for that rationalistic critic Wang Chong (27-100 AD). 13

Chan thus read the cosmogony in question as simply an attempt to give Zhuangzi's initial passage a fuller content:

> The seven stages were first mentioned by Zhuangzi but *Huainanzi* provided them with a content.... *Huainanzi*'s view may not be scientific or logical. It is remarkable, however, that in an age of prevalent superstitions and common belief in prodigies, he should have maintained an absolutely naturalistic attitude toward creation. 14

Thus, like Hu Shi, Chan emphasized the powerful cosmogony of the *Huainanzi*, and Chan explicitly read the passage as a successful elaboration of Zhuangzi. Indeed, Chan actually criticized the *Huainanzi* passage as being too derivative of the Zhuangzi.

Norman Girardot has also emphasized the links between the *Zhuangzi* and *Huainanzi* passages. Girardot argues that what he calls "early Daoism" was based upon a core mythology dealing with the origin of the cosmos out of chaos. According to such a view, the *Huainanzi* as a whole "might only be a more explicit extension of what was already implicit in both the Daodejing and the Zhuangzi."15 Girardot goes on to see the cosmogony given at the beginning of chapter two of the *Huainanzi* as a continuation of this core myth: "...there is a certain amount of syncretic supererogation, but the basic mythological structure is intact and can be extracted."16 Thus, the cosmogony, and indeed entire cosmology of the *Huainanzi*, is based upon a core myth that informed the *Zhuangzi* as well. Here too, then, the *Huainanzi* cosmogony is read as a continuation of the *Zhuangzi* passage. But, unlike Hu Shi and Wing-Tsit Chan, the continuation is read not as a growing development of naturalistic, rationalistic thought but rather as a common support for a single, core myth. And, because Girardot is committed to reading this same narrative structure as informing both texts, he does not re-order the sequence of the cosmogony but instead provides a lengthy and rather heroic defense of the *Huainanzi* passage as in fact representing a single cosmogony in the order given.17

In contrast to these readings that emphasize the continuity between the *Huainanzi* commentary and the *Zhuangzi* passage, several scholars have instead empha-

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17 Ibid., 150-53.
sized the differences between the two texts. For example, Roger Ames sees the Huainanzi cosmogony as essentially a bad reading of the Zhuangzi passage. The Huainanzi authors, according to this view, just failed to understand the passage:

It cites the Zhuangzi 5/2/49 passage which in context is an illustration of the imprecise nature of language.... This Huainanzi passage restates the Zhuangzi discussion; but rather than associating it with the Zhuangzi concept of relativity, it interprets it literally as stages which can be defined in the genesis of things. The author makes a heroic attempt to make each cosmogetic stage progressively more recondite and obscure as he describes (1) beginning, (2) never beginning to have a beginning, and (3) never beginning to never begin to have a beginning. Not only does this Huainanzi passage add nothing to the Zhuangzi's intended meaning, but it attempts to give precise definition to examples initially posited to demonstrate the imprecision of language.18

Charles Le Blanc notes a similar discrepancy between the Huainanzi and the Zhuangzi passages. Unlike Ames, however, Le Blanc celebrates the cosmogony. And, intriguingly, Le Blanc celebrates it within a framework in some ways quite similar to that employed by Hu Shi and Wing-Tsit Chan. Like Hu and Chan, Le Blanc reads the development of Warring States philosophy in terms of a progressive trend from religion and myth to philosophy. But, unlike Hu and Chan, Le Blanc sees the Huainanzi as a return to myth. Thus, Le Blanc presents the shift from the Zhuangzi to the Huainanzi as an example of a

reversal of the rationalizing trend that can be witnessed in some writings of the Former Han Dynasty (206 BC - 9 AD) which reinterpret formal concepts of classical Chinese philosophy in a kind of materialistic view of the universe.19

The two texts thus represent "two different mental attitudes."20

However, since Le Blanc is committed to reading the Huainanzi passage as a convincing cosmogony, he also, like Hu Shi, attempts to re-order the passages. As he argues, "...the sequence followed by the Huainanzi, based on the seven propositions, does not seem to correspond to the successive stages of the formation of the universe." 21 But, noting that Hu Shi's re-ordering does not really make sense,22 Le Blanc offers a different order: 7, 6, 5, 3, 2, 1, and 4.23

Like Ames, then, Le Blanc emphasizes a discontinuity between the two texts. Unlike Ames, though, Le Blanc takes the Huainanzi passage seriously as a powerful cosmogony—to the point that the degree to which it is a commentary to the Zhuangzi is under-emphasized, and to the point even that the sequence is re-ordered to make it a better (or at least more narratively coherent) cosmogony. Indeed, Le Blanc hypothesizes that the cosmogony here may have already existed, and the

20 Le Blanc, "From Ontology to Cosmogony," 117.
21 Ibid., 126. As Le Blanc points out, "Girardot's efforts to justify the succession of the seven stages according to the order of the seven propositions meet with considerable difficulties." (126, n. 18).
22 Ibid., 126, n. 20.
23 Ibid., 127-28.
Huainanzi passage may have simply been an attempt to artificially fit this cosmogony to the Zhuangzi lines: “It is not impossible that the seven stages pre-existed as an independent cosmogonic scheme which Huainanzi combined in an artificial way with the seven propositions.” 24 Thus, like Girardot, Le Blanc tries to read the cosmogony as an earlier myth. But, whereas Girardot chose to see that cosmogonic myth as informing both texts, Le Blanc argues that the Zhuangzi represented a shift away from myth, while the Huainanzi represented a return to it.

Let us summarize the implications of this survey of the secondary literature. There is a clear pattern to these analytic frameworks. Those analysts who want to see correlative cosmology as a widespread assumption in early China have tended to emphasize the view that the Huainanzi passage is (despite appearances) an accurate reading of the earlier Zhuangzi lines, while those scholars who see correlative cosmology as a specifically Han (or late Warring States) development tend to emphasize the differences between the two passages. For the former scholars, both the Zhuangzi and Huainanzi sections represent either part of a progressive shift toward a rational, naturalistic way of thinking (Hu Shi and Chan) or a common belief in a deeply-rooted mythological worldview (Girardot). For the latter scholars, the Huainanzi represents either a shift away from the rationalistic beliefs in the Warring States period and toward an attempt to recover earlier mythical ideas (Le Blanc) or a simple misreading of the Zhuangzi lines (Ames). But, in all of the analyses discussed, the Huainanzi passage is read as a sophisticated cosmogony that reflects a basic belief at the time in a correlative system.

Phenomenology and Cosmogony in the Huainanzi

Let me begin by stating that I agree with Le Blanc and Ames that there is a clear and significant discrepancy between the Zhuangzi passage and the Huainanzi cosmogonic commentary: I think Chan’s attempt to see the cosmogony as simply an elaboration on the Zhuangzi is unconvincing. We need to admit frankly that the Huainanzi passage is doing precisely what Zhuangzi is quite clearly saying we cannot do: posit beginnings as discrete moments. It is giving a narrative of origins as a commentary to a text that says it is wrong-headed to do so. But I will go one step further and argue that the authors were aware of the discrepancy and were actively playing on that discrepancy in order to develop their claims.

But I will also disagree with the various attempts to read the Huainanzi passage as an elaborate cosmogony. More specifically, I will disagree with Hu Shi and Le Blanc in their attempts to re-arrange the Huainanzi lines in order to fit their vision of how a proper cosmogony should operate. The fact that those scholars who wish to read the Huainanzi passage as a cosmogony are forced to re-arrange the lines is strong evidence that they are trying to do something that the Huainanzi authors were not. And the fact that those scholars trying to find a single, coherent cosmogony have ended up re-arranging the lines in completely different ways demonstrates

24 Ibid., 126.
clearly that the text as stands does not, in spite of the grand claims so often made for
it, make up a single cosmogony.

Why do the re-orderings fail? Precisely because the Huainanzi passage is given
as a commentary: it begins by quoting the entire Zhuangzi passage, and then goes
on to provide a line-by-line commentary to each sentence. Accordingly, the passage
follows the Zhuangzi. And since the Zhuangzi passage is written in the form of two
distinct lines of argument, so, therefore, is the commentary. It is not a single narrative
sequence.

The fact that the authors of the Huainanzi passage are providing a commentary
to the Zhuangzi passage, and are doing so at the expense of narrating a single coher­
ent cosmogony, should force us to recognize that their interests lie elsewhere than
in building a narrative of the beginnings of the cosmos. Instead, we have to start by
trying to figure out why the authors would do this: why read the Zhuangzi passage
in cosmogonic ways, and why give a “cosmogony” that seems to break from any clear
narrative development?

Let us turn to the text. The chapter begins by quoting the Zhuangzi passage in
full, so that is where we should begin as well. The first portion of the Zhuangzi pas­sage is a direct regress:

有始也者
有末始有有始也者
有末始有末始有有始也者
There was a beginning.
There was not yet beginning to have something beginning.
There was not yet beginning to have a not yet beginning to have something
beginning. 25

The passage begins by positing a beginning. But this can only be posited if there was
something before that was not yet that beginning. This leads, as Graham pointed out,
to an infinite regress.

The Zhuangzi passage then turns to an alternate line of argument:

有有者
有无者
有未始有无也者
有未始有未始有无也者
There was Something.
There was Nothing.
There was not yet beginning to have Nothing.
There was not yet beginning to have a not yet beginning to have Nothing. 26

Here, the cosmology is based upon a distinction between Something and Nothing—
you and wu. 27 We do not know what texts the Zhuangzi was criticizing here, but
we certainly know that relatively contemporary texts like the Laozi were develop­
ing cosmologies based upon precisely this distinction. Here too, the Zhuangzi argues,
the cosmology is based upon reified terms that are, in fact, fully unstable. To posit

25 Zhuangzi, “Qiwu lun,” HY 5/2/49.
26 Ibid., HY 5/2/49–50.
27 I have translated wu as “nothing” in the sense of “no-thing”: in other words, a purely undifferentiated state.
a Nothing, a total lack of differentiation, would also force one to posit something that came before that moment when Something and Nothing were split. And if one posits that moment that preceded the split of Something and Nothing, then there had to be an earlier state before that state as well—and so on to yet another infinite regress.

In short, the *Zhuangzi* is arguing that either of these two ways of accounting for the cosmos leads to an infinite regress. Both depend upon positing an earlier moment that was the beginning of the current order we know. And both therefore fail in the attempt to reify the transformational flux of the cosmos.

The *Huainanzi* commentary stays true to these distinct lines of argument. And this is precisely why the re-arrangements of the commentary fail: the re-orderings are an attempt to merge these two series into a single narrative—an effort that is doomed to result in nonsense, no matter how intelligently it is done. The point is that, when the *Zhuangzi* lines are worked out in cosmogonic fashion, you get two different cosmogonies, which work out differently. They cannot be intelligibly joined together as one narrative.

So let us now turn to the *Huainanzi* commentary. The text begins by quoting the *Zhuangzi* passage:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>There was a beginning.</th>
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<tr>
<td>There was not yet beginning to have something beginning.</td>
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<td>There was not yet beginning to have a not yet beginning to have something beginning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There was Something.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There was Nothing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There was not yet beginning to have Something and Nothing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It then comments on each line in turn:

所謂有始者，形容未發萌芽時未有形（呼）（郭）（殱）無形無味將欲生出而成物類

The so-called "There was a beginning" refers to the time when the multitudinous sprouts had yet to emerge; when the boundaries between things had yet to take shape. Enclosed, bounded, undifferentiated, yet beginning to wriggle; there was a desire to be generated and grow, but things and types had not yet been formed.

If one posits a beginning to this world, it would be the point at which distinct things had yet to emerge.

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28 *Huainanzi*, "Chuzhen," Chinese University of Hong Kong, Institute of Chinese Studies, Ancient Chinese Text Concordance Series (hereafter cited as ICS), 2/10/14–15. In this initial quotation, the *Huainanzi* only gives six sentences. In the ensuing commentary, it does give all seven. Also: in the sixth line, as well as in the commentaries to lines six and seven, an additional you appears, thus yielding the phrases, "not yet beginning to have Something and Nothing." It is therefore even clearer here that the sixth line would refer to that which preceded the distinction of Something and Nothing.

Now the next line:

There was not yet beginning to have something beginning refers to when the qi of Heaven began to descend and the qi of Earth began to ascend. The yin and yang mixed and merged, wrangling and expanding in the space of the cosmos. Covering power (de) and containing harmony, confused and chaotic, they desired to connect with things, but they had not yet formed.  

The next step back from that point before distinct things had begun to emerge would be the mating of the qi of Heaven and the qi of Earth. And the period before that would have been when Heaven and Earth had not yet begun to mate:

There was not yet beginning to have a not yet beginning refers to when Heaven contained harmony and had not yet descended; earth embraced qi and had not yet ascended. Empty, still, and dark, the differentiated and the undifferentiated were similar. Qi spread out and penetrated the obscurity.  

The commentary then turns to the second line of argument. Unlike the first, based on a regression into the formation of things through the mating of the qi of Heaven and Earth, the second is based upon the distinction of you and wu. We begin with the commentary to the first line of this second argument:

There was Something speaks of the myriad things emerging. The stems, branches, and stalks were bright and luminous. Insects flew and crawled about. They could be touched, grasped, and counted. You refers to the differentiated world, when the myriad things had already emerged. Wu refers to when one instead views the world in its undifferentiated state:

However, if one can speak of Something and Nothing, then some state must have come earlier that could then give birth to Something and Nothing:

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30 Ibid., 2/10/16–17.
31 Ibid., 2/10/17–19.
32 Ibid., 2/10/21–22.
33 Ibid., 2/10/22–23.
There was not yet beginning to have Something and Nothing" refers to the encompassment of Heaven and Earth and the molding of the myriad things. The Great Penetration was dark. Deep and vast, nothing existed outside it. Even the tiniest hair or sharpest point could not fit within it. A space without walls, it gave birth to the root of Something and Nothing.34

But then there would have to be a state that preceded that state as well:

"There was not yet beginning to have a not yet beginning to have Something and Nothing." refers to when Heaven and Earth had not yet split apart; yin and yang had not yet been cleaved; the four seasons had not yet been distinguished; the myriad things had not yet been born. Even and still, no one could see its form.35

Just as two separate cosmogonic claims are ridiculed in the Zhuangzi, so are two cosmogonies posited in the commentary. The first is worked out in terms of the mating of the qi of Heaven and Earth, and the second is worked out in terms of the interplay of Something and Nothing. This is not to say that the cosmogonies directly contradict each other: both argue for a monistic cosmos—a cosmos in which, ultimately, everything is inter-related. But the cosmogonies are worked out differently.

So what are the authors doing here? The authors appear to be arguing that one can begin with either of these starting points: either a positing of origins or the positing of a distinction between Something and Nothing. Either way, one can then work backward to the point when absolutely everything is seen as fully and inherently linked—not just seen as undifferentiated, but as even so linked that the very distinction of differentiated and undifferentiated is obliterated.

In a sense, then, cosmogony is not even the right word for this. It is perhaps better explicated as a phenomenology. The Huainanzi commentators are not providing a narrative of how the cosmos actually began—since, after all, there are two different narratives. The starting point is rather with the narrator. The narrator begins with two different starting points, and, from these different starting points, works backward in two different ways. But the goal of the reconstruction is the same in both: the reconstruction allows us to see how the differentiated but inter-acting objects of the world once were one. The implication would appear to be that one could in fact start anywhere—with any point, in any situation—and undertake the same reconstruction. And the goal of the exercise would be to allow the practitioner to see that how all things are ultimately and fully inter-related.

To use an imperfect analogy, the move here is somewhat reminiscent of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Hegel's argument was not that human thought actually developed in the way that it is recounted in the *Phenomenology*; the account, after all, is not at all in chronological order. The argument is rather that, if one starts from the vantage of the Absolute Spirit and looks backward from that point, then one would

34 Ibid., 2/10/23-25.
reconstruct the development in the way described. As with the Huainanzi passages, the concern is not to posit claims for the actual development; the concern is with working backward from one's current position and showing the ultimate linkage of all that exists.

But the differences with Hegel's Phenomenology are equally telling. The Phenomenology could only have been written at the point in the development of consciousness when Absolute Spirit had been achieved. The Phenomenology is then a recollection by the Absolute Spirit of that development. In the Huainanzi chapter in question, however, the argument moves otherwise. The recollection can be done at any moment. And it is precisely the act of working backward from any given starting-point that allows one fully to see oneself linked with the cosmos. Accordingly, the narrative proceeds in the opposite way of the Phenomenology. Instead of starting at the beginning of the process and tracing the development toward Absolute Spirit, the text starts from any given point and works backward. It is thus through the process itself that one becomes, to continue my imperfect analogy, like an Absolute Spirit, moment by moment doing what Hegel would say only the Absolute Spirit could do at the end of the developmental process.

The goal, then, is not to explain how the universe actually began. The goal is for the practitioner to undertake such a phenomenological reconstruction in order to allow him to understand that the cosmos is monistic—that everything experienced currently as differentiated is in fact ultimately part of a single, unified cosmos with a single origin (even if our reconstructions back to that origin will always differ based on the point from which we begin the exercise).

But then why would the authors of the Huainanzi chapter build such an argument through a commentary to the Zhuangzi passage? At this stage, it might appear that the commentary is serving as a refutation of the Zhuangzi passage: the authors are trying to demonstrate that they can do exactly what the Zhuangzi said could not be done. According to this reading, indeed, it might appear the Huainanzi authors are claiming themselves superior to Zhuangzi.

In fact, though, I think they may be up to something very different. Let us return to the text. The next line reads:

若光燭之間於無有退而自失也
It was like bright light between Nothing and Something, retreating and becoming lost.36

The line is then followed by a partial quotation from a passage in chapter twenty-two of the Zhuangzi:

曰予能有無而未能無無也及其為無無至妙何從及此裁
I am able to make Something of Nothing (you wu), but I have not be able to make Nothing of Nothing (wu wu). When it comes to making Nothing of Nothing (wu wu) — how could I obtain this?37
Because of the quotation, several commentators to the Huainanzi chapter have recommended an emendation in the above line—changing jian (問) to wen (問). As in the Zhuangzi parallel passage, “bright light” and “Nothing and Something” would be read as characters, and the line would thus read: “It was like Bright Light asking Nothing-Something...” With such an emendation, the section would be a partial parallel to the full Zhuangzi passage in chapter twenty-two, which I will here quote in full:

Although I certainly agree that the Huainanzi authors are playing on the Zhuangzi passage, the emendation to the Huainanzi passage seems to me unnecessary. As Wing-Tsit Chan has correctly argued, “There is no need to change jian (space) to wen (to ask) in order to conform to the story of Light asking Non-being in Zhuangzi 22.” But whereas Chan would deny the emendation in order to maintain his reading of the passage as simply a naturalistic cosmology, I would again read it as a careful employment of the Zhuangzi passage. As such, the passage describes Brightlight, undergoing the process just described, trying to dispense with his continuing attachment to the differentiated world:

Brightlight is thus describing his attempt to undergo precisely the process described in the text: to work backward to seeing everything as interlinked. He has been able to achieve wu (lack of differentiation), but has not yet reached the point of being able to discard the notion of wu itself. And he cannot yet imagine dispensing with such a notion.

The authors then turn to a passage taken directly from the Zhuangzi, chapter six:

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38 Zhuangzi, HY 60/22/65-69.
39 Chan, Sourcebook, 307, n. 8.
41 Zhuangzi, HY 16/6/24-25.
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夫大塊載我以形，勞我以生，逸我以老，休我以死。
善我生者，又何以善我死也。
The Great Clod supports me with a form, labors me with life, eases me with old age, and gives me rest with death. That I esteem my life is thus the same reason that I esteem my death.42

Here again, the reader is called upon to think of an undifferentiated state in order to avoid valuing particular aspects of the life process over another.

The Huainanzi continues by quoting the subsequent narrative in chapter six of the Zhuangzi about hiding a boat: if one hides a boat, it may still be stolen. But, if one hides all under Heaven in all under Heaven, then it can never be stolen.43 In other words, one should not define particular aspects of the differentiated world as one's own but instead think of oneself as linked to the full cosmos.

After the opening sequence, the ensuing passages are taken directly from the Zhuangzi, and are clearly quoted favorably. This would push us strongly against an interpretation of the opening section as simply being a rejection of Zhuangzi. On the contrary, the authors of the Huainanzi chapter clearly hold Zhuangzi in esteem. The anecdotes quoted from the Zhuangzi are uniformly used in a fully positive way to show the importance of placing oneself in the larger cosmos and of seeing oneself inherently linked to the larger cosmos. In short, the authors are portraying Zhuangzi as being a figure who accurately understood the necessity of seeing oneself as fully linked to the cosmos.

The disagreement with Zhuangzi comes down to the approach that one should use to attain such a linkage. In terms of the opening commentary: Zhuangzi argued that positing any point (in this case, a starting point), or any dualism (in this case, Something and Nothing) forces one to reify and lose a sense of the endless transformations with which one is always engaged. The Huainanzi authors are arguing that it works the other way: from any point we can accurately work backward and recognize the inherent inter-relationship of all that exists. And we can thus do what Zhuangzi accurately realized we must do—see ourselves as linked to the endless flux of the cosmos and act in harmony with that flux at any moment. In other words, the Huainanzi authors are arguing that Zhuangzi was, by trying to link himself with the movements of the cosmos, profoundly right, but that in another sense he was profoundly wrong: he opposed the very method—namely, "cosmogonic" reconstruction—that can enable one to accomplish what Zhuangzi accurately realized needed to be accomplished. As a result, Zhuangzi's linkage with the larger cosmos was only done intuitively, and his insights were thus never universalizable. But the Huainanzi authors are arguing that they understand how to universalize what Zhuangzi intuitively understood. The method is the experience of reconstructing the origin of all that is—precisely the thing that Zhuangzi warned against.

The overall point here is that there are Heavenly patterns with which the sage accords, and Zhuangzi accurately sensed this. But whereas Zhuangzi thought you did so by moving beyond positing single origin points or cosmological distinctions ("Something/Nothing"), the Huainanzi argues that you do the opposite: endlessly

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42 Huainanzi, "Chuzhen," ICS, 2/10/29-2/11/1. My translation has been helped by Watson, Chuang Tzu, 80.
working backward from those points or those distinctions in a larger phenomenological reconstruction of the ultimate inter-linkage of everything. And, by doing so, one accomplishes precisely what Zhuangzi accurately realized should be accomplished—even if Zhuangzi himself could never explain how to do it.

This may help to explain the relationship of the *Huainanzi* in general to the *Zhuangzi*. Several of the chapters—just as in chapter two—are built out of passages in the *Zhuangzi*. But, unlike Laozi, who is often quoted favorably by name in the *Huainanzi*, Zhuangzi is never mentioned as an authority. As Charles Le Blanc has argued:

> We know that the influence of the *Zhuangzi* on the *Huainanzi* is even more pervasive and decisive than that of the *Laozi*. Yet the *Zhuangzi* is never treated as an authority: quotations from the *Zhuangzi* are constantly tampered with, nor these “incomplete quotations” acknowledged as deriving from the *Zhuangzi*. 44

The apparent paradox may be explained by the *Huainanzi*’s overall strategy: by providing a full cosmological framework, the text can claim to explicate and make universalizable what Zhuangzi intuitively understood.

Indeed, this is a consistent strategy within the text as a whole. Chapter 21, the postface to the work, operates the same way: the explicit claim is that the *Huainanzi* is a work that is fully universalizable. Earlier figures may have accurately given proper advice at certain moments in history, but the *Huainanzi* is a text that can be used for all times and all places. And the reason for this is that the *Huainanzi* is based upon an understanding of universal, cosmic principles. 45

> The book of Mister Liu observes the images of Heaven and Earth, penetrates the affairs of ancient times and the present, weighs affairs and establishes regulations, measures forms and puts forth what is fitting....Therefore, one can establish it regularly and constantly and never be blocked; one can promulgate it throughout all under Heaven and never make a mistake. 46

Because the *Huainanzi* is based upon universal, cosmic principles, anyone can follow the teachings included in the work and understand how to act properly. In terms of the issues at hand for this paper, this would imply that, while Zhuangzi was able to move within the Heavenly patterns, he could never have made this universalizable for anyone else. The *Huainanzi* authors are arguing that they can.

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Conclusion

What we see here is something very powerful and perhaps a bit disconcerting. The Huainanzi authors were not assuming that Zhuangzi was really providing a cosmogony, nor were they simply misunderstanding Zhuangzi. And they were not even claiming that Zhuangzi was wrong—that Zhuangzi mistakenly thought cosmogony to be impossible, while these authors are claiming that it is possible. I am suggesting instead that perhaps the argument is actually that, through cosmology, they understood Zhuangzi better than Zhuangzi himself did. Or, to be more specific, that they understood the profundity of Zhuangzi’s insight while also recognizing—in a way that Zhuangzi never did—how those insights were achieved and how others could also achieve them. In other words, the Huainanzi authors were arguing, Zhuangzi was right, but, in his opposition to cosmological statements, Zhuangzi was also wrong—failing to understand the cosmology within which his accurate insights were achieved.

I have presented this reading in opposition to several other explanations of the passages in question. In all of these previous discussions, correlative cosmology was treated—at least implicitly—as an assumption, and the question for the interpreters was to understand the relationship between that cosmology assumed by the Huainanzi authors and the Zhuangzi passage—whether that be through a shift from religion to naturalistic philosophy, as a common commitment to a core myth of chaos and cosmos, or as a return from philosophy to a mythical way of thinking. As a consequence, scholars have consistently failed to recognize the degree to which the authors of the Huainanzi were themselves problematizing their relationship to earlier texts. In the case at hand, the mistake of all of these discussions is that they have failed to recognize the degree to which the Huainanzi authors are presenting their arguments in terms of a complex positioning of themselves vis-à-vis Zhuangzi.

I suspect this point can be made more broadly for many of the ways that correlative cosmology has been discussed for early China. All too often it has been presented as an assumption—whether that be as a deep-rooted cultural belief or the result of a general shift in thinking from religion to naturalism. In the former case, early Han cosmology is read as a sophisticated development of an earlier belief system; in the latter case, the early Han authors are read as naively (and incorrectly) reading their beliefs into earlier texts. But, either way, early Han texts are read as if the authors are passive believers in a correlative system.

As I have argued elsewhere, however, cosmological views were arguments in the early Han, not assumptions. And, as I have argued here, at least some of the authors in the early Han were fully aware that, when they read earlier texts according to cosmological schema, they were using schema that those authors were not using themselves.

And this brings us back to the question with which I began this paper. What I would like to suggest is that such a question should be posed not just occasionally but in fact frequently to a number of Han texts. We should not think that the only way to respect the beliefs of Han authors is to read them as assuming their cosmo-

47 Puett, To Become a God.
logical ideas to have been held by the authors they are commenting upon. Sometimes they did; but here we have a case not only where they did not but in fact where that discrepancy is, I would argue, emphasized strongly as a key argument in the text. At least some of the proponents of cosmological thinking in the early Han were fully self-conscious of the fact that they were articulating a framework not held by earlier figures—even by earlier sages. And if we fail to recognize this self-consciousness, we will also fail to recognize many of the complex ways and reasons that cosmological systems were utilized, as well as some of the complex strategies that were employed to deal with the recognized discrepancies and discontinuities separating them from their predecessors.
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