

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.¹

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.² It was rather a claim, and one that

¹ John B. Henderson, *Scripture, Canon, and Commentary: A Comparison of Confucian and Western Exegesis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 163.

² Michael Puett, *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2002).

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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.

Cosmogonies and Commentaries: Hermeneutical Strategies of Cosmology in Early China

The text I will discuss is the “Chuzhen 俶真,” chapter two of the *Huainanzi* 淮南子—a text in which the argument is built to a significant degree upon particular (and seemingly peculiar) readings of the *Zhuangzi* 莊子.³ Indeed, about 15% of the *Huainanzi* chapter consists of passages from the *Zhuangzi*,⁴ 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 齊物論” of the *Zhuangzi*. The passage consists of seven lines:

有始也者
有未始有有始也者
有未始有夫未始有有始也者
有有也者
有无也者
有未始有无也者
有未始有夫未始有无也者

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.

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.’”

⁴ Roger Ames, *The Art of Rulership: A Study of Ancient Chinese Political Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 215, note 36.

6. There was not yet beginning to have Nothing.

7. There was not yet beginning to have a not yet beginning to have Nothing.⁵

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无以異矣
雖然請嘗言之
有始也者
有未始有始也者 有未始有夫未始有始也者
有有也者
有无也者
有未始有無也者
有未始有夫未始有无也者
俄而无矣而
未知有无之果孰有孰无也
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.⁶

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,

⁵ *Zhuangzi*, "Qiwu lun," Harvard-Yenching Sinological Index Series (hereafter cited as HY), 5/2/49–50. All translations in this paper are my own. My translation of this passage has been aided greatly by Burton Watson's, in his *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), 38.

⁶ *Zhuangzi*, "Qiwu lun," HY 5/2/47–51. My translation has benefitted from Watson, *Chuang Tzu*, 38; and A. C. Graham, translator, *Chuang Tzu: The Inner Chapters* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2001), 55.

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 opinion⁹) 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.

¹⁰ *Intellectual Foundations of China*, second edition (New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing Company, 1989), 15.

devotes a substantial part of his discussion of correlative thinking to one of the *Huainanzi* cosmogonies.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 5.¹² 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

¹¹ A. C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1989), 332–40.

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-

¹³ Wing-Tsit Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 305.

¹⁴ Chan, *Sourcebook*, 307.

¹⁵ N. J. Girardot, *Myth and Meaning in Early Taoism: The Theme of Chaos* (hun-tun) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 137.

¹⁶ Girardot, *Myth and Meaning*, 150.

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 cosmogonic 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

¹⁸ Ames, *The Art of Rulership*, 215, n. 36.

¹⁹ Charles Le Blanc, "From Ontology to Cosmogony: Notes on *Chuang Tzu* and *Huai-nan Tzu*," in *Chinese Ideas About Nature and Society: Studies in Honour of Derk Bodde*, edited by Charles Le Blanc and Susan Blader (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1987), 117.

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 coherent 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
有未始有有始也者
有未始有夫未始有有始也者
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:

有有也者
有无也者
有未始有无也者
有未始有夫未始有无也者
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 developing 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:

有始者有未始有有始者有未始有夫未始有有始者
 有有者有無者有未始有有無者
 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.
 There was Something.
 There was Nothing.
 There was not yet beginning to have Something and Nothing.²⁸

It then comments on each line in turn:

所謂有始者繁憤未發萌兆牙孽未有形（呼）
 〔鄂〕（垠堦）無無蠕蠕將欲生興而未成物類
 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.²⁹

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

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.

²⁹ *Huainanzi*, “Chuzhen,” ICS, 2/10/15–16. My translation of the full passage has been aided greatly by the translation given by Chan, *Sourcebook*, 306–7.

Now the next line:

有未始有有始者天氣始下地氣始上
陰陽錯合相與優游競暢于宇宙之間
被德合和續粉蘿蓂欲與物接而未成兆朕

"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.³⁰

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:

有未始有夫未始者有有始者天含和而未降
地懷氣而未揚虛無寂寞蕭條霄霏無有仿佛
氣遂而大通（宜宜）〔冥冥〕者也

"There was not yet beginning to have a not yet beginning to have something 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.³¹

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:

有有者言萬物摻落根莖枝葉青蔥芴龍（萑蘆）〔確屬〕炫煌
蠓飛蟻動蚊行噲息可切循把握而有數量

"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.³²

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:

有無者視之不見其形聽之不聞其聲捫之不可得也
望之不可極也儲與屬（治）〔治〕浩浩瀚瀚
不可隱儀揆度而通光耀者

"There was Nothing" refers to when one could look at it but not see its form, listen to it but not hear its sounds, grasp it but not obtain it; gaze at it but not see its limit. Collected and fused; so vast it could not be measured, and yet it penetrated the brightness.³³

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:

³⁰ Ibid., 2/10/16-17.

³¹ Ibid., 2/10/17-19.

³² Ibid., 2/10/21-22.

³³ Ibid., 2/10/22-23.

有未始有有無者包裹天地陶冶萬物大通混冥
 深闊廣大不可為外析毫剖芒不可為內
 無環堵之宇而生有無之根

"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:

有未始有夫未始有有無者天地未剖陰陽未判四時未分
 萬物未生汪然平靜寂然清澄莫見其形

"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.

³⁵ Ibid., 2/10/25–26.

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:

若光耀之閒於無有退而自失也

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哉

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

³⁶ Ibid., 2/10/26–27.

³⁷ Ibid., 2/10/27. I have translated to keep *Zhuangzi*'s pun on Something and Nothing (*you* and *wu*)—perhaps at the risk of straining the intelligibility of the passage. A more straightforward translation would simply give the verbal usages of *you* and *wu* as “to possess” and “to discard” respectively: “I am able to have Nothing (*you wu*), but I have not be able to discard Nothing (*wu wu*). When it comes to discarding Nothing (*wu wu*)—how could I obtain this?” But then we have lost the pun.

Because of the quotation, several commentators to the *Huainanzi* chapter have recommended an emendation in the above line—changing *jian* (閒) 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:

光曜問乎無有曰夫子有乎其無有乎
光曜不得問而孰視其狀貌窅然空然
終日視之而不見聽之而不聞搏之而不得也
光曜曰至矣其孰能至此乎
予能有無矣而未能無也
及為無有矣何從至此哉

Brightlight asked Nothing-Something (*wu you* 无有), “Sir, are you Something (*you*), or have you made Nothing of Something (*wu you*)? Receiving no answer, Brightlight stared at his countenance. It was blank and empty. He stared at it all day but could not see; listened to it but could not hear; reached for it but could not obtain it. Brightlight said, “The utmost! Who could attain this? 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 Something (*wu you*)—how could I obtain this?”³⁸

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.”³⁹ 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:

若光曜之閒於無有退而自失也
曰予能有無而未能無無也及其為無無至妙何從及此哉

It was like Brightlight alternating between Nothing and Something (*wu you*), retreating and becoming lost. He said, “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?”⁴⁰

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 six⁴¹:

³⁸ *Zhuangzi*, HY 60/22/65–69.

³⁹ Chan, *Sourcebook*, 307, n. 8.

⁴⁰ *Huainanzi*, “Chuzhen,” ICS, 2/10/26–27.

⁴¹ *Zhuangzi*, HY 16/6/24–25.

夫大塊載我以形勞我以生逸我以老休我以死
善我生者乃所以善我死也

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

⁴² *Huainanzi*, “Chuzhen,” ICS, 2/10/29–2/11/1. My translation has been helped by Watson, *Chuang Tzu*, 80.

⁴³ *Zhuangzi*, HY 16/6/25–26.

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

若劉氏之書觀天地之象
通古今之事
權事而立制度形而施宜...
故置之尋常而不塞
(市)[布]之天下而不窳

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.

⁴⁴ Charles Le Blanc, “Reinterpretation of Traditional Chinese Thought in the *Huai-Nan-Tzu*: A Case of Source Study,” *Asian Thought and Society* 3.9 (December 1978): 268. See also the excellent discussion in Kanaya Osamu, *Rôsô teki sekai: Enanji no shisô* (Kyoto: Heirakuji shoden, 1959).

⁴⁵ For a fuller discussion of this point, see Puett, *The Ambivalence of Creation: Debates Concerning Innovation and Artifice in Early China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 159–60. See also the excellent discussion in Griet Vankeerberghen, *The Huainanzi and Liu An's Claim to Moral Authority* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).

⁴⁶ *Huainanzi*, “Yaolüe,” ICS, 21/228/28–31.

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.⁴⁷ 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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