

Paradoxes in the School of Names¹

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Introduction

Paradoxes are statements that run contrary to common sense yet seem to be supported by reasons and in some cases may turn out to be true. Paradoxes may be, or may entail, explicit contradictions, or they may simply be perplexing statements that run beyond or against what seems obviously correct. They may be proposed for various reasons, such as to overturn purportedly mistaken views, to illustrate problematic logical or conceptual relations, to reveal aspects of reality not reflected by received opinion, or simply to entertain.

In the Western philosophical tradition, the earliest recognized paradoxes are attributed to Zeno of Elea (ca. 490–430 B.C.E.) and to Eubulides of Miletus (fl. 4th century B.C.E.). In the Chinese tradition, the earliest and most well-known paradoxes are ascribed to figures associated with the “School of Names” (*ming jia* 名家), a diverse group of Warring States (479–221 B.C.E.) thinkers who shared an interest in language, logic, and metaphysics. Their investigations led some of these thinkers to propound puzzling, paradoxical statements such as “Today go to Yue but arrive yesterday,” “White horses are not horses,” and “Mountains and gorges are level.” Such paradoxes seem to have been intended to highlight fundamental features of reality or subtleties in semantic relations between words and things.

Why were thinkers who advanced paradoxes categorized as a school of “names”? In ancient China, philosophical inquiry concerning language and logic focused on the use of “names” (*ming* 名, also terms, labels, or reputation) and their semantic relations to “stuff” (*shi* 實, also objects, features, events, or situations). Hence for classificatory purposes, second-century B.C.E. Han-dynasty archivists grouped together assorted pre-Han figures whose most prominent ideas seemed to concern the relation between names and stuff—or at least strange, unorthodox uses of names—and dubbed them a school or lineage (*jia* 家) devoted to the study of names. Unfortunately, both the label and the grouping are misleading. Historically, the school was a retrospective, taxonomical fiction. The figures classified under the “School of Names” never formed a distinct circle, movement, tradition, or line of influence devoted to any particular doctrine, theme, method, or way of life. Their intellectual interests overlapped at most only partly, while also overlapping extensively with those of texts associated with other schools or traditions, such as the Mohist “Dialectics” 墨辯, the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, the *Xunzi* 荀子, and the *Annals of Lü Buwei* 呂氏春秋. What perhaps does set the School of Names apart is that some (though not all) of the figures associated with it apparently delighted in propounding paradoxical or preposterous sayings, while the other texts just mentioned generally (though not exclusively) seek to explain and debunk such utterances.

Early texts such as the *Han History* 漢書 associate some eight figures with the School of Names, but records remain of the doctrines of only four of these: Deng Xi 鄧析, Yin Wen 尹文, Hui Shi 惠施, and Gongsun Long 公孫龍. With the exception of a few brief texts attributed to Gongsun Long, there is little or no first-hand evidence of these men’s thought, since none of the writings attributed to them by Han-dynasty

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bibliographers survive.² Everything we know about them comes from quotations or anecdotes in other texts. These second-hand accounts typically date from long after the lifetime of the figures they describe and may be embellished, biased, or even fictional.

Deng Xi (d. 501 B.C.E.) was China's earliest renowned lawyer and rhetorician and may have served as an official in the state of Zheng. Information about him is limited and entirely second-hand, comprising a one-line entry in the *Zuo Commentary* 左傳, curt attacks on him in the *Xunzi*, several anecdotes in the *Annals of Lü Buwei*, and a few stories in texts of later date. According to the “Bibliographical Record” of the *Han History* 漢書藝文志, he was the author of two scrolls of writings, neither of which has come down to us. The grounds for associating him with paradoxical statements are several passages in the *Xunzi*, which may or may not accurately reflect the views of the historical Deng Xi.

Little is known of Yin Wen (fl. late 4th century B.C.E.), and it is not clear why the *Han History* associates him with the School of Names, since no source credits him with views on language or logic. What little information we have about him comes mainly from two sources composed long after his death, the *Zhuangzi* “Under Heaven” essay (*Zhuangzi* book 33) and the *Annals of Lü Buwei*. “Under Heaven” pairs him with a colleague named Song Xing 宋鉞, with whom he shared several salient ethical and psychological doctrines. *Xunzi* includes two of Song Xing's doctrines among the paradoxes and sophistries he rebuts. This connection may help explain why Han-dynasty scholars classified Yin Wen as belonging to the School of Names.

A variety of early sources mention Hui Shi (fl. 313 B.C.E.), some depicting him as a statesman and political advisor to King Hui of Wei (370–319 B.C.), some as a friend and intellectual sparring partner of the Daoist Zhuangzi, and some as a clever but confused thinker who propounded sophistries and paradoxes. Only two, the *Xunzi* and “Under Heaven,” give much information about his philosophical views. Both are hostile to him, however, and both merely attribute a series of theses to him without presenting his arguments.

Gongsun Long (c. 320–250 B.C.E.) was a retainer to the Lord of Pingyuan (d. 252 B.C.E.) in the state of Zhao. Anecdotes about him are found in the *Zhuangzi* and the *Annals of Lü Buwei*, and “Under Heaven” mentions him as a prominent intellectual figure. The *Xunzi* does not criticize him by name but may cite a version of his white horse sophism in a list of improper uses of names (22/32).³ Similarly, without mentioning him by name, the *Zhuangzi* “Discourse on Evening Things Out” alludes to his paradoxical claims that white horses are not horses and that pointing is not pointing (2/31–32).⁴ Because at least two pre-Han writings attributable to Gongsun Long survive,⁵ his are the only paradoxes associated with the School of Names for which we have first-hand presentations of the arguments.

In their own day, thinkers such as Hui Shi and Gongsun Long were not associated with the School of Names—since historically no such school existed—but were considered members of a diverse class of intellectuals known as the *bian zhe* 辯者, or “dialecticians.” The dialecticians engaged in “distinction-drawing” (*bian* 辯), a

² *Han History* 30, “Bibliographical Record,” records two scrolls of writings attributed to Deng Xi, one to Yin Wen, one to Hui Shi, and fourteen to Gongsun Long. None of the writings attributed to Deng Xi, Yin Wen, or Hui Shi survives. Two short texts called *Dengxizi* and *Yinwenzi* exist, but the majority scholarly opinion is that these are much later forgeries, not genuine Warring States texts. The extant version of the *Gongsunlongzi* contains only six scrolls, not fourteen, one of which is a collection of anecdotes cobbled together from other early sources. For further discussion, see Harbsmeier (1998).

³ Citations to the *Xunzi* give chapter and line numbers in *Xunzi* (1966).

⁴ Citations to the *Zhuangzi* give chapter and line numbers in *Zhuangzi* (1956).

⁵ Of the five discourses in the extant *Gongsunlongzi*, the authenticity of two and a half is disputed. Graham (1990: 125–215) argues that the second half of the third discourse and both of the last two are post-Han forgeries, pieced together partly from misunderstood bits of the Mohist Canons. For an opposing view of the text's status, see Fung (2000). For brevity, since the first two discourses present Gongsun's two most prominent paradoxes, I will discuss only those two.

form of dialectical, sometimes competitive inquiry, debate, and persuasion aimed at distinguishing the proper semantic relations between names (*ming*) and stuff (*shi*), typically on the basis of similarity relations between the things that constitute a kind. For example, individual horses were considered to count as horses by virtue of their similarity to paradigmatic exemplars of horses and in aggregate were regarded as constituting the kind *horse*. Since the label “dialecticians” refers primarily to participation in an activity, not a doctrinal stance, its scope is broad and its boundaries somewhat vague. Besides figures associated with the School of Names, in some contexts the term could have applied to the later Mohist dialecticians, some of the contributors to the *Zhuangzi*, and even Xunzi, who engaged in court debates. The dialecticians were typically employed as guest scholars, teachers, or political advisors, counseling rulers throughout the many cities and states that made up the world of preimperial China. Some dialecticians may have become interested in paradoxes through their investigations of the basis for kind distinctions, through their exploration of rhetorical techniques, or simply for amusement in witty public debates. Some of their paradoxical sayings seem frivolous, but others were likely the outcome of serious philosophical inquiry or motivated by sincere ethical concerns. Nevertheless, ancient sources that report the paradoxes are overwhelmingly dismissive of their value and hostile to those who propounded them. The early Chinese intellectual mainstream seems to have considered the sort of conceptual explorations reflected by paradoxes to be a fatuous distraction from teaching and practicing the proper *dao* 道 (way).

Any discussion of early Chinese paradoxes must acknowledge a pair of important caveats. First, since the extant sources provide little or no context for most of the paradoxes, interpretation is often partly conjectural and in some cases highly speculative. Accordingly, I will try to make explicit which aspects of the interpretations presented here seem well grounded and which are open to doubt. Second, unsurprisingly, given the obscurity of the texts, for any one paradox a plurality of divergent interpretations can be found in the literature. Indeed, in the case of Gongsun Long, scholars disagree not only about how to interpret the texts but also about which texts to interpret, some researchers accepting all five discourses attributed to Gongsun Long as authentic pre-Han writings, some rejecting half as apocryphal. This brief survey cannot attempt to do justice to every significant interpretation of each paradox. Instead, I will try to present a coherent set of reasonably plausible interpretations while using the notes and bibliography to call readers’ attention to other important readings.

Early texts regularly associate the dialecticians with the themes of “same and different” (*tong yi* 同異), “hard and white” (*jian bai* 堅白), and the “dimensionless” (無厚).⁶ As we will see, many of the paradoxes associated with the School of Names twist commonsense distinctions of sameness or difference, contending that things normally deemed the same are actually different or that things normally deemed different are in fact the same. Often these paradoxes underscore how judgments of similarity or difference are sensitive to changes in scale or perspective—things considered similar from one standpoint may be significantly different from another and vice versa. In some cases, the paradoxes “separate hard from white,” or treat different, compresent features of things as separate entities, as if we were to treat the hardness and whiteness of a white stone as two distinct objects. Several paradoxes seem to follow from properties of the “dimensionless,” a pre-Han term referring to a geometric point.

Although these general motifs are common, overall pre-Han paradoxes and sophisms are thematically diverse, and some are so obscure as to defy easy categorization. Rather than attempting to organize them by topic, then, this chapter groups the paradoxes and sophisms according to the source texts in which they have been preserved. I will focus on three sources: the *Xunzi*, which mentions paradoxes attributed to Deng Xi, Hui Shi, and others; “Under Heaven,” which presents a list of

⁶ See, for example, *Zhuangzi* 17/66; *Xunzi* 2/30, 8/34; *Annals* 17.2. Citations to the *Annals of Lü Buwei* give section numbers in Knoblock and Riegel (2000).

theses ascribed to Hui Shi and a second list of miscellaneous paradoxes and sophisms; and the first two discourses of the *Gongsunlongzi* 公孫龍子, which nearly all scholars take to be genuine pre-Han texts presenting arguments for two paradoxes ascribed to Gongsun Long. Along the way, I will also draw on material from the Mohist “Dialectics” (*Mozi* books 40–45) and the *Annals of Lü Buwei*.

Paradoxes in the *Xunzi*

The *Xunzi* (third century B.C.E.) attacks Hui Shi and Deng Xi in three passages, dismissing them as “fond of managing strange doctrines and playing with bizarre expressions, deeply investigating things without attending to practical matters, drawing distinctions without any use, and having much to do but few accomplishments” (6/9). Their doctrines cannot be applied in government, yet the reasons for their views and the seemingly coherent organization of their statements are “enough to mislead the foolish multitudes” (6/10). Since there is no actual historical connection between Deng Xi and Hui Shi—the two were from different states and lived two centuries apart—the *Xunzi* is likely using them as figureheads for a sophistical, logic-chopping style of inquiry associated with some dialecticians. The paradoxes ascribed to them are intended to represent this sort of intellectual activity and may or may not actually be their invention.

The *Xunzi* attributes six paradoxes to Hui Shi and Deng Xi (3/2–3):

1. Mountains and gorges are level.
2. Heaven and earth are alongside each other.
3. Qi and Qin are adjoining.
4. Enter through the ear, exit through the mouth.
5. Elderly women have whiskers.
6. Eggs have feathers.

The first two of these are alternate versions of paradoxes also attributed to Hui Shi in “Under Heaven,” where they appear as “mountains are level with marshes” and “Heaven is as low as earth” (33/71). Along with the third, they fall among a class of paradoxes concerning spatial relations, which seem to illustrate the relative or perspectival nature of spatial distinctions. By everyday standards, mountains and abysses or the sky and the earth are different in height, but from some sufficiently distant standpoint or by some sufficiently vast standard, the difference between them may be insignificant, such that they count as level or beside each other. Similarly, Qi, on the east coast, and Qin, in the far west, are normally considered far apart, but from some perspective they could be considered to adjoin each other, either because the distance between them is insignificant or because they are both parts of a conjoining landmass.

It is unclear why the fourth statement is included, as it does not seem to be a paradox. It may be an interpolation or a garbled, miscopied version of what were originally two three-word paradoxes, like the other five. The sentence “Enter through the ear, exit through the mouth” also appears in book 1 of the *Xunzi*, where it refers to a shallow level of learning—merely repeating what one has heard, rather than absorbing it in one’s heart and embodying it in one’s conduct (1/31). The fifth paradox is obscure. Literally, it reads “hooks have whiskers,” but commentators suggest the graph for “hooks” is a loan-word for a homonym referring to elderly women. The sixth also appears in “Under Heaven,” although it is not attributed to Hui Shi there. A speculative

explanation is that both the fifth and sixth statements belong to a group of paradoxes based on temporal relations and potentiality. Women can give birth to sons who later grow whiskers, so women “have whiskers.” From eggs hatch chicks, which have feathers, so “eggs have feathers.”

Xunzi’s fundamental complaint about Hui Shi and Deng Xi is that their “frivolous investigations” (*Xunzi* 3/1) are no part of ritual propriety and righteousness (3/3–4), an unsurprising criticism given his Ruist commitment to training in ritual norms, including conventional standards for the correct use of names, along with his general disdain for intellectual curiosity (12/25). Moreover, they have “no regard for the facts about right and wrong, so and not-so” (8/28). Xunzi’s intense hostility toward those who propound paradoxes is motivated partly because they are talented scholars who waste their energy on pointless sophistry, rather than devoting themselves to proper ethical training and political administration, and partly because their theses threaten to disrupt the correct use of names, which is necessary to clarify social ranks, distinguish similar from different things, communicate intentions, and carry out tasks (22/14–15).

To Xunzi, effective regulation of the use of names is pivotal to maintaining social and political order. Paradoxical sayings endanger good order by potentially confusing the community about how to draw the distinctions that ground the use of names and thus how to use names properly. Propounding paradoxes that muddle the correct use of names is a “great depravity,” a crime comparable to tampering with tallies and measures (22/8). To help eliminate this depravity, Xunzi develops a sophisticated theory covering the purpose of names, the basis for distinguishing the kinds they refer to, and the key points for regulating their use, three points he claims clarify all of the errors that underlie paradoxical sayings.⁷ In the course of this discussion, he cites three further sets of paradoxes associated with the School of Names.

The first set are “being insulted is not disgraceful,” “sages do not care about themselves,” and “killing robbers is not killing people” (22/29–30). Xunzi claims that these statements must be rejected because they interfere with the purpose of having names—namely, to distinguish different things and social statuses, communicate intentions, and thus complete tasks. The first of these sayings was a doctrine of Song Xing and Yin Wen, who advocated it as part of their campaign against war and aggression.⁸ A widespread cultural expectation seems to have been that gentlemen should defend their honor by answering an insult with aggression or else be disgraced. To eliminate this motive for belligerence, Song Xing and Yin Wen taught that a gentleman could be insulted yet turn the other cheek without disgrace. Honor or disgrace rest in one’s conduct, not in whether one responds to insults with violence. Xunzi seems to hold that this saying muddles the normal use of the names “honor” and “disgrace” and so confuses social statuses. In a separate discussion, he contends that the saying diverges from the sage-kings’ model for the correct use of these names (18/102–112). The sage-kings, he claims, distinguished between moral honor and disgrace, which are qualities of one’s conduct, and social honor and disgrace, which are a matter of social circumstances. A gentleman can accept social disgrace but never moral disgrace. Although Xunzi takes himself to be refuting Song Xing, his discussion is arguably a refinement, not a rebuttal, of Song and Yin’s stance, which is not fundamentally paradoxical.

The provenance and significance of the second saying are obscure. One possibility is to attribute it to the Mohists, since they held that sages “care about others,” and thus, one might mistakenly infer, not about themselves. However, the phrase *ai ren* 愛人 (care about others) can also be read as “care about people,” and in

⁷ For a detailed discussion, see Fraser (2016).

⁸ For details, see *Annals* 16.8 and *Zhuangzi* 33/33–41.

fact the Mohists stipulate that in “caring about people,” one also cares about oneself—the scope of “people” includes not only others but oneself.⁹

The third saying, “killing robbers is not killing people,” is defended by the Mohist dialecticians. The Mohists prohibited “killing people” (that is, murder) but enforced capital punishment against marauding robbers. Apparently, critics contended that this stance on capital punishment was inconsistent with prohibiting killing and, more important, with the core Mohist ethical doctrine of inclusive moral care for all. The Mohists responded with an analogical argument: just as “disliking there being many robbers is not disliking there being many people,” and “desiring there be no robbers is not desiring there be no people,” so too “caring about robbers is not caring about people, not-caring about robbers is not not-caring about people, and killing robber-people is not killing people” (*Mozi* 45/16–17). In effect, the Mohists assert that since the extensions of “killing robber-people” (capital punishment) and “killing people” (murder) are different, the two referring to distinct kinds of actions, the term “killing people” should not be predicated of actions of the kind denoted by “killing robbers.” Once we understand the Mohists’ argument, their view is not wildly implausible. Nevertheless, their formulation is needlessly paradoxical and confusing, and Xunzi may well be justified in criticizing it for interfering with the purpose of having names. Arguably, the Mohist “robber paradox” conflates predication with identity in the same way as Gongsun Long’s white horse paradox, discussed below.

Xunzi’s second set of examples are “mountains and gorges are level,” “the inherent desires are few,” and “fine meats do not add sweetness, great bells do not add enjoyment” (22/31). He contends that these sayings are plainly contrary to how our sense organs discriminate similar from different objects. The first saying is another variant of the paradox about the relativity of height and depth attributed to Hui Shi and Deng Xi above. The second Xunzi elsewhere attributes to Song Xing (18/114–115). According to “Under Heaven,” Song Xing and Yin Wen contended that people’s inherent, genuine desires are few, shallow, and easily satisfied, and thus a gentleman should not “put his person in hock for things” or contend with others for goods (*Zhuangzi* 33/40). Xunzi rejoins that people desire as much sensory pleasure as they can get, and indeed this is why the sage-kings rewarded good conduct with wealth and punished bad conduct with deprivation. Regarding the use of names, his implicit claim seems to be that Song and Yin’s doctrine contradicts the normal perceptual basis for using the terms “few” and “many,” since we plainly observe that people have many desires. Arguably, this trivializes Song and Yin’s position, however. Xunzi interprets their slogan as “people’s constitution is that their desires are few” (18/114–115), a statement that may indeed seem paradoxically contrary to observed facts. According to “Under Heaven,” however, Song and Yin actually advocated that people’s “genuine” or “inherent” desires are few (*Zhuangzi* 33/41).¹⁰ They might agree that people typically have many desires but contend that only a few are indispensable, inherent features of human life. The rest we can live without. The third saying is of uncertain origin and significance. It could be related to Song Xing’s views, insofar as Song and Yin also contended that “five pints of rice are enough” to live on (*Zhuangzi* 33/38–39). Again, Xunzi’s stance seems to be that normal use of the senses shows that fine foods and musical instruments obviously enhance enjoyment.

Xunzi’s final group of paradoxes cannot be interpreted with assurance, as the text appears corrupt. If the text is again presenting three sayings, these seem to be “visiting when it is not the case” [?], “the pillar has oxen” [?], and “horses are not horses” (22/32). Alternatively, perhaps there are only two sayings, of which the first is corrupt and the second is either “having oxen-and-horses is not horses” or “oxen-and-

⁹ See *Mozi* 44/17. Citations to *Mozi* give section and line numbers in *Mozi* (1956).

¹⁰ The two construals hinge on different interpretations of the word *qing* 情. Xunzi takes it to refer to people’s constitution or actual feelings. Song and Yin seem to take it to refer to what is genuine or inherent. Both construals reflect common uses of the word.

horses are not horses.” Given the textual problems, only the final saying is open to plausible interpretation. If read as “horses are not horses,” it could be an abbreviated reference to the white horse paradox (see below). If read as “oxen-and-horses are not horses,” it could be a variant of a claim discussed in Mohist Canon B67.¹¹ The Mohists consider how compound names such as “oxen-and-horses” should be handled in distinction-drawing debates. They suggest that the same grounds can be offered for deeming the assertion “oxen-and-horses are not oxen” impermissible as can be offered for deeming it permissible. The compound name refers to the aggregate of all oxen and horses. Suppose someone deems it permissible to distinguish this aggregate as “not oxen” on the grounds that some of the aggregated animals are not oxen. Then, the Mohists point out, analogous grounds support deeming it *impermissible* to distinguish the aggregate as “not oxen,” since some of the aggregated animals *are* oxen. The implicit point seems to be that such compound names are not a fit subject for distinction-drawing (*bian*).¹² However, in the course of their explanation, the Mohists state that, without asserting that oxen are not oxen or horses are not horses, there is no problem with asserting “oxen-and-horses are not oxen and not horses,” since some animals included in the aggregate of oxen and horses are not oxen and some are not horses. Xunzi’s response, whether to this paradoxical-sounding Mohist assertion or to Gongsun Long’s “white horses are not horses,” is that such sayings violate basic conventions for the use of names. Checking against naming conventions, we find that everyone, even proponents of these sayings, conventionally uses the name “horse” of all horses, for example. So the paradoxical claims contradict what even their authors accept in everyday practice.

The Paradoxes of Hui Shi

“Under Heaven,” the final book in the 33-book edition of the *Zhuangzi*, is a retrospective survey of major schools of thought of previous eras probably from the hand of a Qin or Han dynasty writer. Appended to the end of the book is a critical discussion of Hui Shi and his sayings, along with a list of miscellaneous paradoxes and sophisms attributed to unnamed dialecticians. Along with the *Gongsunlongzi*, these two lists are the most important early records of the pre-Han dialecticians’ paradoxes.

The text ascribes ten theses to Hui Shi:

1. The ultimately great has no outside, call it the Great One. The ultimately small has no inside, call it the Small One.
2. The dimensionless cannot be accumulated, its size is a thousand miles.
3. Heaven is as low as earth, mountains are level with marshes.
4. Just as the sun is at noon, it is declining. Just as things are alive, they are dying.
5. The same on a large scale but different from what is the same on a small scale, this is called “same and different on a small scale.” The myriad things all being the same or all being different, this is called “same and different on a large scale.”
6. The south has no limit yet has a limit.
7. Today go to Yue but arrive yesterday.

¹¹ References to the Mohist Canons (the first four of the Mohist dialectical books) follow the numbering system in Graham (1978).

¹² For details, see Fraser (2007).

8. Linked rings can be disconnected.
9. I know the center of the world. It is north of Yan [the northernmost state] and south of Yue [the southernmost].
10. Universally care for the myriad things. Heaven and earth are one body.

“Under Heaven” does not record Hui Shi’s arguments for the theses. Some are reasonably clear or open to educated conjecture, but without the original arguments close interpretation is speculative. With the possible exception of theses 1, 5, and 10, there is insufficient contextual information to offer an authoritative argument for any interpretation, although some readings can be ruled out for failing to pertain to any recognized issues or theories in early Chinese philosophical discourse.

As a group, the theses seem to revolve largely around the theme that distinctions are not inherently fixed but relative to a standpoint and thus can be redrawn or collapsed by shifting one’s standpoint. Several turn on negating commonsense distinctions, in particular spatial and temporal ones, partly by appeal to the relativity of comparisons and partly by appeal to indexicality. (A high mountain is not high when seen from space; if I move southward, a spot south of me now will become north of me.) The fifth thesis, on “same” and “different,” offers a key to several of the others. It indicates that on some scale or another, anything can be deemed “the same” or “different.”

The theses divide fairly naturally into four groups. The first comprises theses 1, 5, and 10, which state philosophical doctrines about ontology and ethics, are relatively clear, and are not obviously paradoxical. All three deal with the plurality of possible ways to distinguish things, either as “the same” or “different” or as parts of a whole, ranging from the smallest possible part—the infinitesimal—to the largest possible whole, the “Great One,” which includes everything in the cosmos. How we distinguish things is relative to the scale or perspective we adopt. Thesis 5 seems to describe the relative or perspectival nature of relations of similarity and difference. Two things can be the same on a large scale, or in some general respect, while at the same time being different on a smaller scale, or in some more specific respect. Two animals can be the same in being of the kind *horse*, yet be different in color. If we distinguish finely, every individual horse is different; if we distinguish coarsely, horses are no different from other animals or even from all other things. Because the same/different relation comprises both kind relations and part-whole relations, Thesis 5 can also be taken to include part-whole relations. Deeming all things “the same” is deeming them all parts of the same whole. Deeming them “different” can be understood as separating them off as individual parts of that whole or as something else entirely. To the extent that the other theses are based on relations of sameness versus difference and part versus whole, then, thesis 5 helps to explain the others.

Thesis 1 is nearly self-explanatory. How we distinguish things—in this case, how we even count “one”—is relative to some standard of division. The thesis concerns aggregating and dividing. The whole cosmos can be aggregated into a whole to form the Great One, or it can be divided down to the smallest possible unit, the Small One, probably a geometric point.

Thesis 10 presents an ethical principle tied together with an ontological one, which presumably is meant to justify it. Since everything can be summed into a whole—the Great One—heaven and earth and the myriad things contained therein can be considered a single “body” or “unit.” (The expression “heaven and earth” refers to the cosmos, including not only the sky and earth but the entire natural world.) Hui Shi’s ethical conclusion, then, is that if everything is one unit, then any care (*ai* 愛) we have for ourselves should also be directed at all of the other myriad things (*wu* 物, also “creatures”), since we and they are all parts of the same vast “body.”

The second group are paradoxes concerning infinitesimals and part-whole relations. Thesis 2 concerns geometrical points, the “dimensionless” (*wu hou* 無厚). The sum of two points is a point, and so points cannot be accumulated to form an object with thickness or length. Yet anything with dimensions, such as a length of a thousand miles, is somehow constituted by points and divisible into them. Thesis 8 also may pertain to infinitesimals, although interpretation is speculative, since it is the most obscure of the ten.¹³ If the linked rings are thought of as circles, formed by points on a plane, then they have no thickness. They appear linked when viewed from above, but on the surface of the plane nothing blocks them from being pulled apart. Alternatively, if, as thesis 2 suggests, two three-dimensional rings are constituted by dimensionless points, then they can be pulled apart: since each point takes up no space, there is nothing preventing the rings from passing through each other.

The third group are based on spatial relations, including comparisons of size. Thesis 3, also attributed to Hui Shi in the *Xunzi*, can be interpreted as illustrating how things deemed different on one scale can be deemed the same on another. By the scale of the infinitely vast Great One, the difference between the height of the sky and the earth or mountains and marshes may be insignificant. The differences between mountains and marshes may be only what thesis 5 calls “differences on a small scale,” while the two count as “the same” on a large scale.

Thesis 6 is especially obscure, and interpretation is speculative. One plausible conjecture is that, like theses 7 and 9, it trades on the properties of indexicals.¹⁴ Since the referents of indexicals shift with speaker, time, and standpoint, they vividly illustrate how distinctions are relative to perspective. The cardinal directions were thought to have no limit, in that one could continue traveling in any direction without end. However, since the directions are indexical, relative to our point of reference, south always also has a limit, namely the point at which we stand. Thesis 9 also involves indexicals and is equally obscure. One reasonable guess is that if space is infinitely large, then anywhere one stands can be considered the center, whether in the far north or the far south of the known world.¹⁵

The fourth group deal with temporal relations. Thesis 4 is paradoxical but easily intelligible. Just as, from one perspective, the sun is at its highest, from another perspective, it is beginning to set. Just as things are living and growing, they are also coming closer to death. Again, the availability of different perspectives threatens to collapse the distinction between two apparent opposites, living and dying. Thesis 7 is more difficult. One proposed interpretation is that if I cross the border into Yue at precisely the instant when today turns into tomorrow, then I simultaneously leave one state today and arrive in the other tomorrow.¹⁶ Another possibility is that, since the word *xi* 昔 can refer to either “yesterday” or “the past,” thesis 7 can be read as “today I go to Yue, but I arrive in the past.” The point could then be that by completing any action we take up a standpoint that locates it in the past. Whenever we arrive somewhere, our journey is completed, or “past.” Thesis 7 is quoted—without attribution to Hui Shi—in the *Zhuangzi* “Discourse on Evening Things Out” as an example of “taking what does not exist to exist,” which “Evening Things Out” dismisses as absurd.¹⁷

One common interpretation of Hui Shi’s theses is that thesis 10 articulates their overarching significance.¹⁸ The theses attempt to show that the similarities and differences by which we distinguish things can be identified in indefinitely many ways, depending on one’s standpoint. Apart from the standpoints we take up, there are no

¹³ For discussion, see Harbsmeier (1998: 296) and Graham (1989: 79).

¹⁴ See Hansen (1992: 262).

¹⁵ See Graham (1989: 79).

¹⁶ See Harbsmeier (1998: 298) and Graham (1989: 79).

¹⁷ *Zhuangzi* 2/22. This part of the *Zhuangzi* also cites paradoxes suggestive of theses 3 and 10 (2/51–53) and uses phrasing similar to thesis 4 (2/28), but without attributing these to Hui Shi.

¹⁸ Hu (1922) may have been the first to advance this view.

independent, preexisting standards by which to identify a scheme of privileged, correct distinctions. The world in itself fixes no particular way of drawing distinctions as correct. The neutral or objective standpoint—that of the world in itself—is monistic, drawing no distinctions at all. Hence, as Thesis 10 states, nature in itself forms a unified whole, of which we are parts, and as parts of this whole, we should care for all things. If this is indeed Hui Shi’s position, the move from perspectivalism about distinctions to a form of ontological monism seems questionable. On the basis of Thesis 5, Hui Shi should hold that any scheme of distinctions may be deemed permissible or impermissible, by some standard or other, yet no scheme is privileged, including a scheme that consists in drawing no distinctions at all. Instead, if the monistic interpretation is correct, he mistakenly takes the “Great One” or “one body” view to be an exception to this rule, a privileged or authoritative perspective. The mistake is understandable, since drawing no distinctions at all might seem to be a way of circumventing the perspectival nature of distinctions. It is not, however, since strictly speaking it remains one among other ways of drawing distinctions.¹⁹

Miscellaneous Paradoxes in the *Zhuangzi*

“Under Heaven” lists twenty-one more paradoxes (*Zhuangzi* 33/74–78), “with which the dialecticians responded to Hui Shi for their whole lives without end.” All lack explanations, leaving some impenetrably obscure. This section presents interpretations of several of the relatively tractable ones, along with speculations about some of the others.²⁰

One of these paradoxes is nearly self-explanatory, a version of Zeno’s racetrack paradox:

A one-foot stick, every day take away half of it, in a myriad generations it will not be exhausted.

If we remove half of a stick each day, the stick will never be completely used up, since at each stage half its length remains. Mohist Canon B60 presents an alternate version of this paradox and suggests a solution. (The text of the canon is obscure, so the following interpretation is tentative.) The canon states that, seeking to move a particular distance, if one cannot cut a portion other than half, one cannot move. The explanation is that if one tries to move forward cutting half at a time, one never succeeds even in reaching halfway, as at each stage what was originally the center no longer marks half but instead becomes a new starting point. If cutting must be by halves, then since in every case some portion remains that constitutes half, it is impossible to reach the end. The implied solution is that in moving a measured distance, we do not necessarily first move one fraction of the distance and then another. It is possible to move the whole distance in one stage.

Several of the other paradoxes can also be tentatively explained by considering passages in the Mohist Canons.

Dogs are not hounds.

In the Mohist Canons, “dog” and “hound” (or “pup” and “dog”) are stock examples of coextensive terms, of which a speaker might know one without knowing the other. A

¹⁹ For further discussion, see Fraser (2015). For alternative interpretations of Hui Shi’s paradoxes, see Lange (1988), Stevenson (1991), Lucas (1993), Xu (1997), Solomon (2013), and Fung (2014).

²⁰ This account is indebted to Hansen (1992), Graham (1989), and a range of Chinese commentators cited in the Qing dynasty *Zhuangzi Jishi* 莊子集釋 of Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩 and the modern editions of Chen (2000) and Wang (1988).

speaker unaware that the two terms are coextensive could know about dogs and yet say without error that he didn't know about hounds (Canon B40). For related reasons, in some contexts, the Mohists hold, it is permissible to say "killing dogs is not killing hounds" (B54). The paradox may be twisting or extending this point.

Fire is not hot.

The point of this paradox could be that when we feel the heat of the fire, the heat is in us, not the fire. If this speculation is correct, Mohist Canon B47 appears to present a rebuttal. It reads: "Fire is hot." "We call the fire hot, we don't deem the heat of the fire to belong to us." The argument is unclear, but it may be that heat is among the distinguishing criteria for the kind *fire*, so simply to call something "fire" is to deem it "hot." Alternatively, the paradox could be based on conflating predication with identity, such as in Gongsun Long's "White Horse Discourse." Since the extension of "fire" is different from that of "hot," "fire is not [identical to] hot," for some hot things are not fire.

The eyes do not see.

The Mohists concur with this paradoxical-sounding claim. "The knower sees by means of the eyes and the eyes see by means of the fire but the fire does not see. . . . Seeing by means of the eyes is like seeing by means of the fire" (B46). Like the fire, the eyes themselves do not see but are the means by which we see.

The shadow of a flying bird has never moved.

Again, the Mohists agree with this seemingly paradoxical statement. Canon B17 states, "The shadow does not move. Explained by: Being made over again." "When light arrives, the shadow disappears." The shadow itself does not move across the ground. Instead, as the bird moves, the area it blocks from the light changes as well, causing one shadow to vanish and a new shadow to form over and over again.

Interpretation of the remaining paradoxes and puzzling sayings is largely guesswork. Some readings can be excluded as implausible, particularly those that construe them as dealing with concepts or topics which had no role in the context of early Chinese philosophy of language, epistemology, or ontology, such as the dichotomy between appearance and reality or relations between universals and particulars. However, it is difficult to find compelling arguments to justify one or another interpretation as best explaining a particular paradox. The interpretations below are strictly conjectural.

Eggs have feathers.

As we saw above, the *Xunzi* attributes this paradox to Hui Shi and Deng Xi. The point may be that the future, potential feathers of the chick are already possessed by the egg.

Chickens have three feet.

A common, conjectural interpretation of the argument for this sophism is that one can assert that chickens have feet and also that they have left feet and right feet. Therefore they have a total of three feet. Another version of the same sophism appears in *Annals of Lü Buwei* (18.5), where Gongsun Long is reported to have cleverly argued that a man

has three ears. In response, Kong Chuan, his opponent, comments to the Lord of Pingyuan, “Asserting that a man has three ears is extremely difficult and in reality is wrong; asserting that a man has two ears is extremely easy and in reality is right. I wonder, will my Lord follow what is easy and right or what is difficult and wrong?”

The city of Ying possesses the world.

Perhaps each part of the whole “possesses” the whole (?).

Hounds can be deemed sheep.

Mohist Canon B8 addresses cases of “borrowed” names, as when a name for one kind of thing is temporarily used to refer to another kind of thing, and of using a general term for one kind of thing as a proper name for another, as when a person is surnamed “Bird.” Perhaps, for such reasons, hounds can be deemed sheep. Alternatively, perhaps the paradox refers to how the criteria or distinctions by which we name things can be changed arbitrarily.

Frogs have tails.

A frog was once a tadpole, which has a tail (?).

Wheels do not touch the ground.

The point may be that the wheel as a whole does not touch. Only a single point touches at each instant, and the point of contact is dimensionless.

Pointing does not reach, reaching does not detach.

Perhaps the claim is that referring to something by a name, or pointing to it physically, is never enough to ensure that one’s audience picks out the correct referent. To actually “reach” something, one must touch it and cannot let go (?).

Tortoises are longer than snakes.

Mohist Canon B6 explains that fundamentally different kinds of things cannot properly be compared. For instance, we cannot ask which is longer, a piece of wood or the night. The gist of the paradox might be that a snake’s body has a longer length, but a tortoise has a longer life.

The set square is not square, the compass cannot make a circle.

The carpenter’s set square and wheelwright’s compass were standard examples of models (*fa* 法) used to guide action and check whether it conforms to norms. The paradox implies that the models themselves fail to conform to the relevant norms. Perhaps the point is that the set square and compass themselves are not actually square or circular. Perhaps it is that since they are models, rather than the geometric figures themselves, they fall short of being square or circular.

The barbed arrow at its swiftest, there is a time when it neither moves nor stops.

The time referred to might be the instant the string is released, before the arrow moves. This paradox is distinct from Zeno's arrow paradox, which is that the flying arrow is at rest in every instant of time and so does not move. Here the paradox is that the arrow is neither in motion nor at rest.

A brown horse and a black ox are three.

Possibly the three are the horse, the ox, and color, which both animals have. The white horse paradox (see below) treats the shape of the horse as distinct from its color.

White dogs are black.

Mohist Canon A96 discusses how, in determining the application of a compound name such as "black person," one must fix what part of a person is the criterion for deeming the person "black." Presumably it is the person's skin color, not hair color, for example. If one chooses an unorthodox criterion for deeming a dog black, such as the dog's nose, dogs with white fur might be deemed "black."

An orphan colt has never had a mother.

Since the criterion for being an orphan is that one's parents have died, the point may be that there has never been a colt deemed an orphan that had a mother at the time it was deemed an orphan.

Horses have eggs. (?)

Mountains emerge from mouths. (?)

The chisel does not surround the handle. (?)

These three puzzling sayings defy educated conjecture.

Gongsun Long's Paradoxes

Gongsun Long is famously associated with the paradoxical claim that white horses are not horses. The brief extant dialogue defending this claim has attracted a plethora of interpretations, with no consensus in sight as to the significance and theoretical basis of the text's arguments.²¹ Hence the discussion here must be considered just one of several potentially defensible approaches to the text.

²¹ One early, influential interpretation took its theme to be denying the identity of the universals "horse" and "white horse" (Feng 1958, Cheng 1983). Other interpretations have taken it to deal with kind and identity relations (Cikoski 1975, Harbsmeier 1998), part-whole relations (Hansen 1983, Graham 1989), how the extensions of phrases vary from those of their constituent terms (Hansen 1992), and even the use/mention distinction (Thompson 1995). For recent discussions, see Fung (2007), Im (2007), Mou (2007), Lucas (2012), Solomon (2013), and Fraser (2015). For overviews of competing interpretations, see Hansen (2007), Cheng (2007), and Fung (2014). For interpretations which, like that presented here, question the enterprise of interpreting "white horse" as a serious piece of philosophical inquiry, see Harbsmeier (1998) and Trauzettel (1999).

This approach stems from two hypotheses. The first is that the likely theme of the “White Horse Discourse” is reflected in an ancient anecdote about Gongsun Long included in the introductory chapter of the *Gongsun Longzi*.²² Hoping to study with Gongsun Long, Kong Chuan asks him to first abandon the thesis that white horses are not horses, which Kong Chuan cannot accept. In response, Gongsun Long contends that Confucius himself—Kong Chuan’s ancestor—accepted the same view. He cites a well-known story about the King of Chu losing his bow.

The King’s attendants asked to search for it. The King said, “Stop. A Chu person lost a bow. A Chu person will find it. Why bother to look for it?” Confucius heard about it and said, “The King of Chu is benevolent and righteous but hasn’t yet followed all the way through. He should simply have said, ‘A person lost a bow, a person will find it,’ that’s all. Why must it be ‘Chu?’” In this way, Confucius took Chu people to be different from what’s called “people.” Now to approve of Confucius’s taking Chu people to be different from what’s called “people” but disapprove of my taking white horses to be different from what’s called “horses” is contradictory.²³ (1.1/1/14–18)

The king did not discriminate between recovering the bow himself and letting another person of Chu find it. Confucius suggests the king could reach an even greater degree of benevolent impartiality by ceasing to discriminate between the people of Chu and everyone else. According to Gongsun Long, since Confucius distinguishes Chu people from people in general, he implicitly holds that Chu people are different from what we call “people” and so are not people. In an alternate version of the anecdote found in the *Kong Congzi*, Kong Chuan rejoins that when Confucius omits the word “Chu,” he is not implying that Chu people are not people, but simply broadening the reference of the noun phrase.

Whenever we say “people,” we refer to people in general, just as whenever we say “horses,” we refer to horses in general. “Chu” by itself is the state; “white” by itself is the color. Wishing to broaden the referent of “people,” it’s appropriate to omit the “Chu”; wishing to fix the name of the color, it’s not appropriate to omit the “white.”²⁴

The anecdote suggests that to an ancient audience, the theme of the white horse paradox was how the scope of a general term such as “people” or “horses” changes when modified by an adjective such as “Chu” or “white.” The commonsense understanding is that the adjective restricts the scope and not, as Gongsun Long insists, that it yields a noun phrase referring to an entirely different kind of thing. As Xunzi points out in his discussion of naming (22/21–22), sometimes we refer to things by a single, general name, such as “horses,” and sometimes, to communicate more precisely, we use what he calls a “compound” name, such as “white horses.” Provided one of the two kinds of names is more general, we can use both without their interfering with each other. Gongsun Long puckishly refuses to acknowledge that terms can refer to things at different levels of generality.

The second hypothesis concerns Gongsun Long’s intellectual orientation, as implied by the anecdote cited previously about his ingenious argument that a man has three ears. As Kong Chuan puts it, Gongsun Long’s case is extremely difficult to make and plainly does not fit reality. His arguments are exercises in cleverness, a sort of trick performance devoted to defending claims obviously at odds with the facts. If this

²² I adopt this view from Harbsmeier (1998: 302).

²³ Citations to the *Gongsunlongzi* give index numbers in Lau et al. (1998).

²⁴ From *Kong Congzi*, Book 12. See Graham (1989: 84).

characterization is accurate, there is little reason to expect the grounds for his assertions to embody convincing reasoning based on a cogent semantic or logical theory, as their original aim may have been to provide whimsical entertainment.²⁵

The “White Horse Discourse” consists of a series of exchanges between a sophist, who presents five arguments that the statement “white horses are not horses” is “permissible” (*ke* 可), and an objector, who defends the commonsense view that white horses are horses. The first argument runs as follows:

“Horse” is that by which we name the shape. “White” is that by which we name the color. Naming the color is not naming the shape. So I say, white horses are not horses. (1.2/3/1–2)

The argument seems an obvious non sequitur. One plausible explanation is that “white horses” names both the color and the shape of white horses, not only the shape. So “white horses” names something different from what “horses” names. Since the two name different things, Gongsun contends, white horses are not horses. He disallows the possibility that the difference between white horses and horses could be that the former are a subset of the latter. The argument can also be understood as “separating hard and white,” in that the shape and color of white horses, two compresent features, are treated as if they were two separate things, such that naming one is not naming the other. Of course, referring to the color is different from referring to the shape. But the object that has the color is the same object that has the shape. Hence we should challenge the third premise and insist that naming the object that has the color is also naming the object that has the shape.

The objector responds that there being white horses, one cannot claim there are no horses. How does white horses’ being white make them not horses? The sophist replies by presenting his second argument.

If someone seeks horses, brown or black horses can comply. If someone seeks white horses, brown or black horses cannot comply. Supposing white horses were indeed horses, in these cases what is sought would be one and the same. What is sought being one and the same is white ones not being different from horses. If what is sought is not different, then how is it that brown or black horses in the one case can comply and in the other cannot? Can and cannot, that they contradict each other is clear. So brown and black horses are one and the same in that they can respond to “having horses” but not to “having white horses.” This confirms that white horses are not horses. (1.2/3/7–11)

The sophist construes “white horses are horses” as “white horses are identical to horses.” In Chinese, as in English, the sentence “white horses are horses” can be interpreted as predicating the term “horses” of white horses, thus making the true assertion that white horses are among the things picked out by “horses,” or it can be interpreted as expressing an identity, thus making the false assertion that the things picked out by “white horse” are identical to those picked out by “horse.” The argument trades on this ambiguity. Because we know that modifying a noun restricts the scope of its extension, when we hear “white horses are horses,” we charitably assume the speaker is not saying something patently false and so interpret the sentence as predicating “horses” of white horses, not stating an identity. By contrast, the sophist insists on interpreting the sentence as an identity. He applies a principle roughly like Leibniz’s law of indiscernibility of identicals, assuming that if two things are identical, they share all their features and are intersubstitutable in any context. In his view, any

²⁵ This approach to Gongsun Long’s arguments follows Harbsmeier (1998: 300–301).

difference between white horses and horses shows that white horses are not horses. Again, he glibly ignores the possibility that white horses fall within, without being identical to, the extension of “horses.”

The objector rejoins that if having a color renders a horse not a horse, then since there are no colorless horses, would the sophist allow that there are no horses? The third argument responds as follows:

Horses indeed have color; thus there are white horses. Supposing horses had no color, such that there were simply horses and that’s all, how could we pick out white horses? So white is not horse. White horses are horses combined with white. Are horses combined with white the same as horses?²⁶ So I say, white horses are not horses. (1.2/3/15–16)

White is not horse because the name “horse” alone does not pick out the white horses. Only “white” does. The sophist assumes that “horses” combined with “white” are not simply “horses.” Here he is “separating hard and white,” in that he explicitly treats “white” (the animals’ color) and “horse” (their shape) as two distinct things that are combined to form something different from mere horses. The argument again turns on construing “white horses are horses” as the claim that the kind *white horses* is identical to the kind *horses*.

In the next exchange, the objector sees the problem behind the previous argument and accuses the sophist of illegitimately naming compresent things—the horses’ shape and color—as if they were separate. Sidestepping this criticism, the sophist’s fourth argument seeks to trick the objector into agreeing that brown horses are not horses, a claim pragmatically inconsistent with maintaining that white horses are horses.

“Since you take having white horses to be having horses, can we assert that having horses²⁷ is having brown horses?” “Not permissible.” “Taking having horses to be different from having brown horses, this is taking brown horses to be different from horses. Taking brown horses to be different from horses, this is taking brown horses not to be horses.” (1.2/3/21–25)

Here the sophist explicitly indicates that he construes “brown horses are horses” as an identity claim, since he states that acknowledging a difference between brown horses and horses is denying that brown horses are horses. He also fallaciously treats predication as symmetric: if having brown horses is having horses, he holds, then having horses is having brown horses.

The objector now explicitly accuses the sophist of “separating” the color white from the horse, this being the reason he denies that white horses are horses. The sophist’s response is his fifth and final argument.

“White” does not fix what is white; we can forget about it. “White horse” speaks of white and fixes what is white. That which fixes what is white is not white. “Horses” excludes no colors, so brown or black horses are all what can respond. “White horses” excludes some colors; brown and black horses are all excluded on the basis of color, and so only white horses alone can respond. Excluding none is not excluding some. So I say, white horses are not horses. (1.2/4/1–3)

²⁶ The text appears faulty here. I have followed Harbsmeier’s proposed emendation (1998: 307, n2).

²⁷ “White horses” has been emended to “horses” here to cohere with the first clause in the sophist’s next sentence.

The sophist first “separates hard and white.” The color alone does not fix the location that is white; saying “white horse” does. Therefore horse, the shape, is not white, the color. Indeed, “horses” specifies no color at all. “White horses,” on the other hand, does specify a color. So again the sophist claims to have shown that white horses and horses have distinct features and are not identical. Therefore white horses are not horses.

To sum up, the arguments of “White Horse” repeatedly equivocate between statements of identity and statements that predicate a more general term of objects denoted by a less general term. The sophist refuses to distinguish the true claim that the extension of “white horses” is not identical to that of “horses” from the false claim that white horses are not part of the extension of “horses.”

A second well-known paradox attributed to Gongsun Long is expounded in the brief, enigmatic “Discourse on Pointing at Things.” This text opens with the puzzling, apparently self-contradictory statement that “no things are not pointed out, yet pointing is not pointing.” Although the significance of this statement and the details of the text’s arguments for it have been the subject of intensive interpretive effort, “Pointing at Things” remains profoundly obscure.²⁸ The key term, *zhi* 指, roughly “pointing,” can be interpreted as “to point,” “to refer,” “what is pointed out,” or “referent,” each of which yields plausible explanations in some but not all contexts. The text slides playfully between verbal and nominal uses of *zhi*, embedding them in complex strings of quantifiers and negations of vague scope. The following excerpt gives a taste of the discussion:

There being no pointing out the world, things cannot be called the pointed out. Not being able to be called the pointed out is not the pointed out. Not the pointed out is no thing is not the pointed out. There being no pointing out the world and things not being able to be called the pointed out is it not being the case that there is not the pointed out. It not being the case that there is not the pointed out is no thing is not the pointed out. No thing is not the pointed out yet pointing is not pointing. (2.1/4/14–16)

One interpretation consistent with key themes and assumptions in pre-Han philosophy of language and ontology is that the discussion concerns a paradoxical feature of unrestricted, maximally general terms such as “things” or “the world.” The extension of such terms includes everything, so “no thing is not pointed to.” Because their scope includes everything, however, they do not distinguish their referents from anything else. So “pointing out is not pointing out,” since by referring to everything, such terms fail to point anything out from anything else. Graham among others develops an interpretation along roughly these lines (1989: 91ff.). He proposes that the text concerns how the word “world” (*tian xia* 天下) functions as a name. According to pre-Han theories of language, names designate things by distinguishing them from other things. But since “world” refers to the whole comprising everything, it does not distinguish anything from other things. The gist of the paradox might be that when we refer to the world, we refer to everything: no thing is not pointed to. Yet the world cannot be pointed out from other things, because it is not a thing in itself distinct from the things that constitute it. In referring to the world, we do not point it out from anything, so pointing to it is not pointing out anything.

On this interpretation, the text may also include a rebuttal of the paradox (2.1/4/18–21). Although no thing in the world is deemed or named “the world”—no one specific thing or kind of thing is pointed out by the name “the world”—nevertheless, “the world” refers to all things. We aggregate into a whole all things in the world and

²⁸ For a broad sample of interpretations, see Cheng and Swain (1970), Kao and Obenchai (1975), Hearne (1976, 1985), Rieman (1970), Graham (1989), Stevenson (1991a), Hansen (1992), Schleichert (1993), Lai (1997), Reding (2002), Fung (2014), and Fraser (2015).

use the phrase “the world” to refer to them jointly. So there are things referred to by “the world” even though they are not specifically deemed “the world.” Moreover, although “the world” does not point out something distinct from other things, we cannot say there is no pointing out things, since “the world” points out the sum of all things. So the paradox is mistaken to claim that “pointing is not pointing.”

Nevertheless, on this interpretation—or most others—the steps in the reasoning remain confusing, the justification for them murky. The text is so rife with apparent contradictions, circularities, and logical gaps that no interpretation inspires much confidence in its superiority over plausible rivals. Indeed, one intriguing conjecture is that the very purpose of “Pointing at Things” was to generate endless perplexity. Given Gongsun Long’s mischievous literary persona, the text could well be an ancient practical joke, one that has successfully bewildered audiences for millennia.

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