

# ■ SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT ■

## GONGSUN LONGZI

### “On the White Horse”

#### Introduction

In the late fourth century B.C.E., Chinese philosophy underwent a “language crisis” in which thinkers called into question the adequacy of language to consistently describe the world and guide behavior. One of the leading figures in this crisis was Huizi 惠子, who defended paradoxes such as “Heaven is as low as earth, the mountains are level with the marshes,” and “I go to Yue today yet arrived yesterday.” Huizi apparently saw the same line of reasoning that led to these paradoxes as having important ethical consequences, for he also said, “Let concern spread to all the myriad things; heaven and earth count as one unit.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, in Huizi’s thought we find argumentation used to establish conclusions that are contrary to common sense but have ethical implications. (This is reminiscent of much of Western philosophy, from the ancient Greeks Parmenides and Plato up through Derek Parfit among recent English-speaking philosophers.)

Unfortunately, none of Huizi’s arguments for his conclusions survive. However, “On the White Horse,” by Gongsun Longzi 公孙龙子 (fl. 300 B.C.E.), gives us a sense of what kind of arguments may have spurred the language crisis. “On the White Horse” is a debate over whether it could be true that “a white horse is not a horse.” This dialogue is notoriously difficult to interpret, for a variety of historical, textual, and philosophical reasons. However, here is a hint to one possible interpretation. The expression “X is not Y” (like the Chinese X 非 Y 也,) is ambiguous. It could mean “X is not a member of the group Y” or it could mean that “X is not identical with Y.”<sup>2</sup> Which sense of is not does the Advocate in the dialogue use? Which sense does the Objector have in mind?<sup>3</sup>

In response to the “language crisis,” the later Mohists and the Confucian Xunzi tried to use careful reasoning to protect language from what they saw as the sophistries of thinkers like Gongsun Longzi. On the other hand, texts like the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* embrace paradox, and evince much less confidence in the power of rational argumentation than Huizi apparently did.<sup>4</sup>

A

Can it be that a white horse is not a horse?<sup>5</sup>

Advocate: It can.

Objector: How?

Advocate: “Horse” is that by means of which one names the shape. “White” is that by means of which one names the color. What names the color is not what names the shape. Hence, I say that a

white horse is not a horse.

*B*

Objector: If there are white horses, one cannot say that there are no horses. If one cannot say that there are no horses, doesn't that mean that there are horses? For there to be white horses is for there to be horses. How could it be that the white ones are not horses?

Advocate: If one wants a horse, that extends to a yellow or black horse. But if one wants a white horse, that does not extend to a yellow or black horse. Suppose that a white horse were a horse. Then what one wants [in the two cases] would be the same. If what one wants were the same, then a white [horse] would not differ from a horse. If what one wants does not differ, then how is it that a yellow or black horse is sometimes acceptable and sometimes unacceptable? It is clear that acceptable and unacceptable are mutually contrary. Hence, yellow and black horses are the same [in that, if there are yellow or black horses], one can respond that there are horses, but one cannot respond that there are white horses. Thus, it is evident that a white horse is not a horse.

*C*

Objector: You think that horses that are colored are not horses. In the world, it is not the case that there are horses with no color. Can it be that there are no horses in the world?

Advocate: Horses certainly have color. Hence, there are white horses. If it were the case that horses had no color, there would simply be horses, and then how could one select a white horse?<sup>6</sup> A white horse is a horse and white. A horse and a white horse [are different]. Hence, I say that a white horse is not a horse.

*D*

Objector: "Horse" not yet combined with "white" is horse. "White" not yet combined with "horse" is white. If one combines "horse" and "white," one uses the compound phrase "white horse." This is to take what is not combined and combine them as a phrase.<sup>7</sup> Hence, I say that it cannot be that a white horse is not a horse.<sup>8</sup>

Advocate: You think that there being white horses is there being horses. Is it acceptable to say that there being white horses is there being yellow horses?

Objector: It is not acceptable.

Advocate: If you think that there being horses is different from there being yellow horses, this is for yellow horses to be different from horses. If you differentiate yellow horses from horses, this is to think that yellow horses are not horses. To think that yellow horses are not horses, yet to think that white horses are horses—this is to turn things upside down and inside out!<sup>9</sup> This is the most incoherent doctrine and confused discourse in the world!

*E*

Objector: If there are white horses, one cannot say that there are no horses, because of what is called “the separability of white.”<sup>10</sup> Only according to those people who do not separate can having a white horse not be said to be having a horse.<sup>11</sup> Hence, the reason we think there are horses is only that we think that “horse” is “there are horses.” It is not that we think “there are white horses” is “there are horses.” Hence, because of the reason that there are horses, one cannot say that a [white] horse [is not] a horse.

Advocate: “White” does not fix that which is white. It ignores that. The expression “white horse” fixes that which is white. That which fixes what is white is not white. “Horse” is indifferent to color. Hence, [if you were only looking for a horse,] a yellow or black horse would each be appropriate. “White horse” does select for color. So [if you were looking for a white horse,] a yellow or black horse would be rejected on account of its color. Hence, only a white horse alone would be appropriate. That which does not reject is not what does reject. Hence, I say that a white horse is not a horse.

## SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY

Graham, A. C.

1989 *Disputers of the Tao*. Chicago: Open Court Press. (Excellent nontechnical discussion of Huizi, Gongsun Longzi, and their general intellectual context on pp. 75–95. However, note that Graham radically rearranges the received text of “On the White Horse” whereas the translation above follows the received text as closely as possible.)

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<sup>1</sup>Translations from Huizi by A. C. Graham (1989), p. 78. For more on Huizi, see *Important Figures*.

<sup>2</sup>We see both uses in the dialogue between Zhuangzi and Huizi at the bridge over the Hao River (*Zhuangzi*, chapter 17), where we find both “You are not a fish” and “You are not me.”

<sup>3</sup>The two speakers in the dialogue are not named. Here they are labeled “Advocate,” who defends the thesis that a white horse is not a horse, and “Objector,” who argues against this thesis. The section headings (“A,” “B,” etc.) are also not in the original.

<sup>4</sup>Xunzi’s “On Correct Naming” (in Chapter 6, *Xunzi*, pp. 278–84) is in part a reaction to the language crisis. Zhuangzi debated Huizi on several occasions (e.g., Chapter 5, *Zhuangzi*, pp. 212–13, 234–35, and 247); note also Zhuangzi’s apparent reference to Gongsun Longzi, Chapter 5, *Zhuangzi*, p. 218.

<sup>5</sup>As the translation suggests, it is possible that the issue is not whether the statement “a white horse is not a horse” is *always* true, but whether it is *possible* for it to be true.

<sup>6</sup>Following this sentence in the original Chinese, there is a sentence that reads, “Hence, white is not horse.” This does not seem to make any sense in context, so it has been omitted.

<sup>7</sup>This sentence is a *defense* of saying that “a white horse is a horse.” (See the next note for an interpretation.) However, following this sentence in the original Chinese, there is a sentence that reads, “That is not acceptable.” This does not seem to make any sense in context, so that sentence has been omitted. However, many translators retain that sentence, which would mean that the sentence immediately prior to this note is an *objection* to saying that “a white horse is not a horse.”

<sup>8</sup>The argument may be that, since “horse” refers to horse when it is used as a simple expression, it must continue to refer to horse when it becomes part of a compound expression. Since we can obviously say that “a horse is a horse,” we can also say that “a white horse is a horse.”

<sup>9</sup>Literally, “this is for flying things to enter the water, and for the inner and outer coffins to be in different places!”

<sup>10</sup>“Separability” seems to have been a technical term in ancient Chinese philosophy of language. It apparently referred to the possibility of discussing separately two terms that were used in a compound expression. For example, one Chinese commentator observes that “There must be a shape corresponding to a name, and the best way to examine the shape is to distinguish the colour from it.” (Translation from A. C. Graham, *Later Mohist Logic Ethics and Science* [London: University of London, 1978], p. 175.)

<sup>11</sup>Translation of this line follows the *Dao zang* version of the text.