**Happiness for a Fish: Zhuangzi and Huizi at the Hao River, by Zhuangzi**

Zhuangzi and Huizi were strolling on the bridge over the River Hao.

Zhuangzi said, “These minnows are out and playing so freely and easily, that is the happiness of fish!”

Huizi said, “You, sir, are not a fish. How would you know what makes fish happy?”

Zhuangzi replied “You, sir, are not me. How would you know that I do not know what makes fish happy?”

Huizi conceded “True, I’m not you. Though I don’t pretend to know you fully, you certainly are not a fish. So, I can definitely say that you don’t know what makes fish happy.”

Zhuangzi replied “Shall we stick to your original question? You asked me ‘How do you know what makes fish happy?', and yet, you knew that I knew it, and still you asked me. I knew it from up above the Hao.”

Source of the thought experiment: Ziropyn, B. (trans). *Zhuangzi*, chapter 17. Indianapolis: Hackett.

Zhuangzi and Huizi were very close friends, and like many good friends, they disagreed with one another about all sorts of things. They often light-heartedly debated very high-minded philosophical issues. Indeed, after Huizi’s death, Zhuangzi sadly remarked that there was “no longer anyone I can really talk to.” What he lost was an intellectual companion, a very special sort of friend who offered intimate philosophical company bound up with genuine affection.

Notice three features of the ‘happy fish’ passage. First, the setting is totally ordinary – two friends enjoying a walk, strolling along a river, quiet and mellow. None of the formality of a seminar room, no public audience to impress, no clashing of egos. Just a pair of friends walking and talking at ease. Second, their attention is caught by the fishes in the river. This reflects an attractive feature of the loose group of figures – ‘Daoists’ – with whom Zhuangzi is grouped. They enjoyed nature and animals, for sure, but also thought they offered deep philosophical lessons. Notice the fish as admired for their “free and easy” behaviour: these are features of the good life for human beings who manage to overcome the oppressive demands and pressures of the artificial human world.

A third feature is the use of very *personal* ways the two philosophers interact. There is teasing and provocation – they’re obviously enjoying the philosophical banter. Zhuangzi provokes Huizi with a bold claim about knowing what happiness is for fish. Huizi takes the bait but in the processes teases his friend – while Zhuangzi can’t *know* what happiness means for fish, Huizi *definitely* knows that his friend is not a fish! Such features might make the story seem just a bit of fun. Provocation, teasing, and two friends enjoying each other’s company. But there’s more going on. I see the happy fish story a little masterclass in how serious thinking can be done *lightly*. Deeper issues are being explored. But what?

One popular reading is that the happy fish story is about *relativism*. Daoists usually challenged claims to objective knowledge or certainty. Judgements and experiences always reflect certain presuppositions, needs, and values. (What’s attractive to a fish or frog won’t be so for a human being, which is why we don’t live in ponds and rivers). Sometimes, this is called *perspectivism*. Zhuangzi confidently claims to have knowledge of the perspective of fish, which Huizi sees as quite radical. Let’s construct some of the philosophical back-and-forth:

1. Zhuangzi knows what happiness is for fish.

Huizi questions whether Zhuangzi knows what happiness is for fish, because he thinks that you have to be a fish – to inhabit its perspective on the world – to know what happiness means for them.

1. Huizi knows that Zhuangzi is not a fish.

Zhuangzi accepts this, of course! But then turns the point back. How does Huizi *know* that Zhuangzi doesn’t know what happiness means for fish? After all, even though they are both humans, Huizi doesn’t share his *friend’s* perspective on the world, and on those fish in the River Hao.

1. Huizi knows all along that Zhuangzi knows what happiness is for fish, since his initial question was ‘How do you know that’ – or, better, ‘How did you come to get that knowledge?’

We can puzzle over all of these claims. Is it true, for instance, that one must *be* a fish to gain knowledge of what makes fish happy? Zhuangzi seems unsure – when watching the minnows swimming about, “playing so freely and easily”, perhaps he recognises them as continuous with other creatures, humans included. Fish, dogs, young babies and even old friends all enjoy playfulness, freedom, and ease of movement.

Sat on that bridge, looking at the fish, perhaps what Zhuangzi knew came not from sophisticated theorising and chains of argument. His knowledge comes from attentiveness, exercises of the imagination, and a sense of empathy for other creatures. Maybe he notices commonalities across different species, appreciating that creatures naturally take pleasure in *using their bodies* – swimming, flying, galloping, running. Maybe he sadly remembers the ways that animals always suffer when their movements are limited – when they’re cruelly caged, penned, chained. Such knowledge doesn’t require Zhuangzi to actually be a fish, or to possess any magical, Dr Doolittle-style abilities. It requires our virtues and imagination, not our powers of reason.

Perhaps Zhuangzi called attention to the fish to gently teach his friend an important lesson—that when it comes to understanding other creatures, our powers of reason are of only limited value. Sometimes, we need to attend imaginatively and sensitively to the other creatures following their own ways of life. Maybe that’s what was clear from up above that bridge that afternoon over the River Hao.

**References**

Cantor, Lea (2020) ‘Zhuangzi on ‘happy fish’ and the limits of human knowledge’, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 28:2: 216-230.

Hansen, Chad (2003) ‘The relatively happy fish’, *Asian Philosophy* 13:2-3: 145-164.

Thompson, Kirill O. (2016) ‘Philosophical reflections on the “fish happiness” anecdote’, *Philosophy East and West* 66.4: 1307-1318.