

1 *On the Chirping of Birds*

A large issue, which it will take the compass of this book to thoroughly clarify, is whether or not the *Chuang-Tzu* is an exercise in relativism.¹ It is a vital issue with which to begin, as the wrong initial assumption with regard to this question will seriously impede the proper understanding of all that follows.² At the outset, I would like to stake my claim that the *Chuang-Tzu* is not an exercise in relativism *simpliciter*.³ While there is indeed a place for relativism in the *Chuang-Tzu*, I will argue that it is but a provisional place; relativism is specifically employed as a strategy for breaking down other views rather than representing a final point of view of its own.

One of the main lines of argument I will be advancing is logical; the other is textual. The logical argument is based on the argument from self-consistency. The *Chuang-Tzu* cannot be an exercise in relativism because to say so would be to imply that it could not present any view at all, including the relativistic one. The problem is that one cannot make sense of relativism put forward as a philosophical position. If all views are of only relative worth, then on what grounds can one commend one's own view if it be that of the relativist? Relativism is ultimately self-defeating; as Spinoza once put it, the consistent skeptics must remain dumb.

We could, nonetheless, argue that coherent or not, the *Chuang-Tzu* is an exercise in relativism. If relativism is philosophically incoherent, then so much the worse for the *Chuang-Tzu*. The problem with this approach is that it makes the *Chuang-Tzu* out to be the product of a third class mind. While this is logically possible, the richness of the text and the high regard in which the *Chuang-Tzu* has been held by both Chinese and Western scholars argues strongly against the possibility. Kuang-ming Wu, in his superb commentary, *Chuang-Tzu: World Philosopher at Play*, cites Fung Yu Lan's statement that, "It is only in Chuang Tzu's book that we have a well-developed philosophy [of Taoism]."⁴ He also recounts the well known praise of H. G. Creel, who stated, "The *Chuang-Tzu* is in my estimation the finest philosophical

work known to me, in any language. Its authors included some of the keenest minds the world has known."⁵

In the course of what follows, I hope to offer sufficient logical and textual grounds to convince the reader that the *Chuang-Tzu* is not a relativistic text. With respect to logical grounds, I will argue that Chuang-Tzu cannot extend the relativistic thesis to language without leaving himself without any means of communicating whatsoever. With respect to textual grounds, I will offer both indirect and direct textual evidence to support my claim that the *Chuang-Tzu* is not an exercise in relativism.

I would like to commence my discussion of relativism by focusing on the question of linguistic meaningfulness or meaninglessness. If language is relativistic with regard to meaning, then any word can mean anything at all, which means that all language is infinitely equivocal. Equivocity extended infinitely in all directions is in no way distinct from utter unintelligibility. The existence of some meaning is dependent upon the fixity of the medium of communication. We could not even state the thesis of relativism comprehensibly unless the words we employed possessed some significance. Significance in language is dependent upon some degree of fixity of meaning. In fine, no form of relativism can even be advanced unless language itself is, to some extent, non-relative.

In the famous second chapter of the *Chuang-Tzu*, "*Ch'i Wu Lun*," "A Discussion on the Equality of Things,"⁶ the question of the meaningfulness or the meaninglessness of speech, whether oral or written, is raised in a highly poetic form:

Words are not just wind. Words have something to say. But if what they have to say is not fixed, then do they really say something? Or do they say nothing? People suppose that words are different from the peeps of baby birds, but is there any difference or isn't there?⁷

The question which is being raised is, is there a difference between speech and the chirping of birds, or is there no difference at all? Simply understood, the analogy would appear to be forcing a choice between all or some language being meaningful and all language being meaningless. All that is required for language to be unlike the chirping of birds is that some language would be meaningful, not that all language would have to be meaningful.

If we presuppose for the moment that the *Chuang-Tzu* is an intelligible text, then on logical grounds there must be a difference between human language and bird chirping or else there would not even be a *Chuang-Tzu*. What after all is the status of the *Chuang-Tzu*? It cannot

be a songbook for birds as it would be completely useless. Chuang Tzu, we have argued, is surely aware that his entire text makes no sense unless words possess significance. The only other option is that Chuang Tzu is sociopathically perverse and has written an entire book to torment us. The same arguments of the richness and the historical importance of the text that applied against assuming that Chuang Tzu was unaware of the inconsistency of the relativistic thesis apply here against assuming that Chuang Tzu was a perversely minded sociopath.⁸

However, in the translation of the same passage which is offered by A. C. Graham, there would seem to be the implication that there is no difference between human speech and the sound of birds:

Saying is not blowing breath, saying says something; the only trouble is that what it says is *never* fixed. Do we really say something? Or have we never said anything? If you think it different from the twitter of fledglings, is there *proof* of the distinction? Or isn't there proof?⁹

The difference between Watson's version and Graham's version is subtle but important. In Watson's version, the question is raised as to whether or not the meaning of words is fixed. It is not taken for granted that it is not fixed. It is simply stated that *if* it is not fixed, then we may raise the question if words really say something or if they do not. In Graham's version, it is stated outright that the meaning of words is never fixed. What is hypothetical in Watson becomes categorical in Graham. From the categorical non-fixity of language in Graham's version, we are much more easily led to the probable conclusion that language is meaningless. In Watson's version, the conclusion is left more up in the air. In addition, by inserting the word 'proof' in his translation, Graham creates the impression that in order for us to believe that words are meaningful, we would require proof. This would further strengthen us in our skepticism (and/or the belief that Chuang Tzu is provoking us towards adopting a skeptical attitude), because it is more difficult to supply proof than merely to question, as Watson translates. The original Chinese is compatible with either version, so it is impossible to make a decision on strictly philological grounds.¹⁰

On logical grounds, it is *per impossibile* for the correct interpretation to be that there is no difference between bird sounds and speech or we could not even understand what quandary was being raised in the first place. The very existence of the question as a question and not a string of nonsense syllables presupposes that the question is intelligible. The statement of the question as meaningful or, if you like, the statement of the two options as a meaningful choice, requires that the language of its formulation be significant. This *eo ipso* rules out one of the alternatives as logically possible. If the *Chuang-Tzu* is saying some-

thing else, as Graham's translation and commentary seems to suggest, then Chuang Chou must be speaking absolute nonsense; at the very least, his position is reducible to something as elementary and self-refuting as early Greek sophism.¹¹

One could point as a defense of the skeptical thesis, to the passage which refers to the antinomial irresolution of the debates between the Confucians and the Mohists. However, in Watson's rendition, this passage would appear to be a reference to words which are not used substantively, and hence it would support the thesis that words, if used properly, do have a substance to them. In any event, the passage cannot be reduced simply to this historical reference. This traditional style of understanding much of the *Chuang-Tzu* as expounding historically existent philosophical debates has become *de rigueur* in existing commentaries on the *Chuang-Tzu*.¹² But the historical reference is incidental, as the solution posed is unworkable even in its own terms if considered as a mere historical reference. In Chuang Tzu's terms, if all language is relativistic then the attempt to conceive this as a description of the futility of debates between Mohists and Confucians is equally absurd. One cannot understand this as a depiction of the futility of arguments (whether historical or contemporary) unless the language that frames the question is something other than pure nonsense. We may now turn to the remaining section of the chirping of birds passage:

What does the Way depend upon, that we have true and false? What do words rely upon, that we have right and wrong? How can the Way go away and not exist? How can words exist and not be acceptable? When the Way relies on little accomplishments and words rely on vain show, then we have the rights and wrongs of the Confucians and Mo-ists. What the one calls right the other calls wrong; what one calls wrong the other calls right. But if we want to right their wrongs and wrong their rights, then the best thing to use is clarity.¹³

If both Confucianists and Mohists are wrong, then speech must be significant in order to make sense out of the term 'wrongly'. If, as Graham argues, the *Chuang-Tzu* is asserting the position that "there is neither right nor wrong," then this is unstatable and incomprehensible; the words 'wrong' and 'right' would lose all of their meaning if words are truly no different from bird sounds.

So far, I have been arguing that there is strong logical proof that language cannot be identical to the chirping of birds. The question remains, can we find textual evidence to support my thesis that Chuang Tzu is saying that speech differs from birds sounds? In the remainder of this chapter, I would like to show that there is both indirect and

direct evidence to suggest that Chuang Tzu intends a difference to be taken between words and wind.

The argument which I will call the argument from indirect textual evidence is based upon the general linguistic formulation of the question. While this argument is not by itself strongly convincing, it bears consideration. The general formulation of the question is rhetorical. A rhetorical question is one which we normally employ when we consider that the answer to our question is obvious and in the affirmative. For example, if I ask, "Am I Robert or not?" I expect that the answer to this question is that obviously I am. From the general formulation of the questions that Chuang Tzu poses, we can assume that he takes the answer to be both obvious and affirmative—that language does possess a meaning.

The argument which I will call the argument from direct textual evidence is stronger than the argument from indirect textual evidence. The strongest piece of direct textual evidence is exactly that, namely, any unqualified assertion of what one claims the author is asserting. The second strongest piece of direct textual evidence is what I call the appeal to general textual coherency. This is the appeal to attend to the beginning and ending phrases in a passage which contains phrases that seemingly contradict the direct textual evidence. The beginning phrases in a passage are taken to reflect the general intention of the author. The ending phrases in a passage are taken to reflect the general conclusion of the author. The test of textual coherency will be satisfied when the beginning and the ending phrases of a passage cohere in meaning with each other. The *Chuang-Tzu* satisfies the test of general textual coherency when it is applied either internally to the passage in question or externally with regard to the previous and subsequent passages to the passage in question. The seeming contradictoriness of phrases which do not cohere with the direct textual evidence or the intention or the conclusion of a passage in the text will be fully explained in later chapters in this volume.

It is not difficult to find a case of direct textual evidence in the case of the chirping of birds. The very first sentence in the passage in question will suffice:

Words are not just wind.¹⁴

The second sentence supplies us with another piece of direct textual evidence:

They have something to say.¹⁵

In Graham's version, the first two sentences also provide us with two pieces of direct textual evidence:

Saying is not blowing breath;
saying says something.¹⁶

I take it that here we possess two unqualified assertions that language is significant. This is direct textual evidence. It is all the more significant because these two cases of direct textual evidence also qualify as cases of indirect textual evidence and form part of an argument of general textual coherency. With respect to indirect textual evidence, I find it highly significant that within the chirping of the birds section these are the only two sentences that are formulated in the declarative mode. In other words, these are in fact the only two statements that are direct in the sense of being univocal and declarative. All the other sentences in the chirping of birds passage are formulated in the interrogative mode. From a sentence formulated interrogatively we cannot claim to have a univocal understanding of the beliefs held by the utterer of the question. However, from a sentence uttered in a declarative mode we can claim to have a univocal understanding of what the utterer is asserting. The two cases of direct textual evidence also qualify as indirect textual evidence in that their linguistic formulation counts as evidence of their intention.

In addition, these two leading sentences form a part of a general argument of textual coherency. We can read the beginning and the ending of the passage taken together (excepting the middle section):

Words are not just wind. They have something to say. . . . If we want to right their wrongs and wrong their rights, then the best thing to use is clarity.¹⁷

There is a congruence here between the initial assertion, which we are taking to reflect the general intention of the author, and the last assertion, which we are taking to reflect the conclusion of the author. The conclusion affirms the intention. If words have something to say, then clarity can penetrate to their meaning. (I am for the moment conflating the Mohist-Confucian controversy with the issue of linguistic significance for the sake of the discussion.) This holds true regardless of the particulars of the translation. We may also apply Wing-tsit Chan's translation:

But if we are to decide on their several affirmations and denials, there is nothing better than to employ the light of reason.¹⁸

The main point is that the beginning and the end of the passage cohere with each other. If speech is intelligible, then there is some purpose to be gained by relying upon rationality. If words were wind, there would be little point in turning to the light of reason to attempt to resolve whatever controversies seemed to crop up.

To broaden the argument from textual coherency, we may bring in textual evidence from the immediately preceding and the immediately following passages. In the preceding passage, it is claimed that one does have a teacher (one's own mind). Following Watson:

If a man follows the mind given him and makes it his teacher, then who can be without a teacher?¹⁹

That one can have a teacher implies that there is something that can be taught and hence some kind of intelligible message. This is an outright rejection of the skeptical conclusion of a thoroughgoing relativism. Clearly, there must be a meaningful inner dialogue if one is able to learn from oneself. That there is something meaningful is the substance of the passage that immediately precedes the chirping of the birds passage. This predisposes the reader to anticipate that the next passage will carry on with the presupposition of intelligibility. We move immediately from the concept that there can be a teaching to the first sentence of the chirping of the birds section:

Words are not just wind.²⁰

And next to:

They have something to say.²¹

The only subsequent demurral (following Watson) is that *if* what they have to say is not fixed, *then* they may say something or nothing. All that we can logically derive from the discussion thus far is that if words did have a fixed meaning, then the question of whether or not they possessed significance would not have arisen. It is the fact that words are used in different senses that gives rise to conflicts. If we examine the passage immediately subsequent to the passage in question we find that the sage sees what is worthwhile in each point of view.²² From this we may gather that each point of view is a partial understanding of the truth. It cannot be that all points of view are false or else he could not see what is true in each of them. If we can see how in certain cases both views can be seen as right or even how both can be seen as wrong, then the views seen must possess intelligibility. This is not the same as saying that both views are right or that both are wrong. It is only to say that both can be seen as right or wrong depending upon the standpoint that we take. Neither does this imply that all standpoints are equally valid, as the thoroughgoing relativist must maintain. For him all standpoints are equally valid, for he has no grounds to recommend one standpoint as over against another. But

the sage can and does see the truth. In Watson's formulation, the subsequent passage clarifies this attribute of the sage:

Where there is recognition of right there must be recognition of wrong; where there is recognition of wrong there must be recognition of right. Therefore, the sage does not proceed in such a way, but illuminates all in the light of Heaven.²³

A relativism that applies to all things cannot have recourse to any sort of an alternative since relativism *ex hypothesi* relativizes all choices. If there is something that can be illumined, then *ipso facto* there is something that is of value. But this passage contains no sort of relativism that equalizes and hence reduces all values to each other.

The co-recognition of right and wrong is not the same thing as a statement that all points of view are equally wrong. It also does not follow from the co-recognition of right and wrong that there is no such thing as right. What is being said is that we must go beyond conventional standards of right and wrong, but what we go to is a higher right. We are not transcending to nowhere, where all points of view including the transcendent one are on an equal plane. If this were the case, there would be no transcendence or going beyond. The metaphor of Heaven implies that one is utilizing some frame of reference that transcends the ordinary; in order to arrive at this frame of reference I take it that one transcends or goes beyond one's ordinary way of thinking. In any event, there must be some transcendence or going beyond. This is the case whether one chooses to employ the language of transcendence or "the light of Heaven." It comes to the same thing. If the light of Heaven were not a better thing, then Chuang Tzu could have easily chosen the expression, 'The Darkness of Earth' instead. It is plain that Chuang Tzu considers the way of the sage to be a better way. And this is not the standpoint of a consistent relativist.

The immediately prior and the immediately subsequent passages meet the test of textual coherency. The passage immediately prior concerns itself primarily with the concept of the teacher. The passage in question concerns itself primarily with the concept of the meaning of the message (or the possibility of there being a teaching). The immediately subsequent passage refers primarily to the mode in which the sage finds the right way. All three passages have to do with the possibility of right understanding: the possibility of there being a teacher, something that is taught, and the way of understanding. All three passages cohere with each other and presuppose the significance of speech.

In conclusion, there is strong textual evidence, of both indirect and direct kinds, that supports the general conclusion that language is significant. There is no direct statement from Chuang Tzu that lan-

guage is different from the chirping of birds, but when he asserted that language is different from wind (or hot air in the contemporary parlance) he took it for granted that we would be able to infer that language was also different from the chirping of birds. I intend to enlarge upon that difference in subsequent chapters. Here I would argue both on logical grounds and on the basis of textual evidence that the thrust of his meaning is that words *are* different from the chirping of birds.