LOGIC AND LANGUAGE IN THE CHUANG TZU

1. Artisans and Sophists

The Chuang Tzu [1] contains some fascinating accounts of artisans in which wheelwrights, carpenters, butchers and the like are described exercising their skills. Each demonstrates incomparable technique in the practice of his art, but is unable to say how it is done. Chuang Tzu (c. 355-275 B.C.) leaves unspoken any conclusion to be drawn from these cases. One implication is that one's grasp of the principles of an art can best be demonstrated, not through the spoken or written word, but by its consummate practice. Consider wheelwright Pien [2].

His wheels work! Sets of them have identical diameters, are crafted from similar materials, by the use of similar tools, following sequences of well-ordered steps. Pien naively equates his art with his knack for using a chisel. He can put it into practice, but cannot pass it along to his son. Hence, he laments that when he dies he will take his knack with him, and complains that words alone cannot express what is of paramount importance in the lives of men.

By his words Pien demonstrates that he can reason logically. But his words are useless for passing along his art. Yet if he himself failed to understand certain principles, would he be able to pursue his line of work? Indeed, could anyone fashion a wheel who failed to understand basic principles of reason, for example, the principle of non-contradiction?

For a wheel to work it must be round, and to be round the length of its radii must fall within a narrow range of tolerances. A given radius either measures up to specification or it does not. One cannot have it both ways! A wheelwright must be able to sort out and distinguish mutually exclusive alternatives. Hence, even if Pien could not state the principle of non-contradiction, and surely he could not, his wheels show that he understood it perfectly.

In contradistinction to artisans like Pien, Chuang Tzu describes the likes of Hui Shih and Kung-sun Lung. Both were masters of sophistical word play; both challenged principles fundamental to the arts, and both attempted through disputation to establish reputations as sages.

In the 'T'ien Ti' chapter Confucius describes to Lao Tan men who make "... acceptable (what is) not acceptable, so (what is) not so" [3]. He then inquires of Lao Tan whether such men can be called sages. In the 'Ch'i Wu Lun' chapter the sophist is clearly distinguished from the sage:

*Therefore the sophistries that dazzle (people) are rejected by the sage.* [4]

Yet Lao Tan answers Confucius in a way that seems to evade his question. For he advises Confucius to forget himself:

*It is the man who forgets self who may be said to enter Heaven.* [5]
Lao Tan's advice is explained by another passage from the 'Ch'i Wu Lun' chapter:

_The sage embraces things. The vulgar dispute them to prove (themselves) to each other. So I say, 'To dispute is to fail to see something'._ [6]

The "vulgar" argue for their own views and attack those of others. By "embracing things" the sage presumably sees them as they are. Debaters fail to see the truth because they only seek reputation. Hence, the winning proposition in a dispute is rarely a statement of the truth:

_Suppose you and I have had a dispute. If you beat me instead of my beating you, then are you really right, and am I really wrong?_ [7]

The author of the 'T'ien Hsia' chapter describes Hui Shih as one whose writings filled up five carts, but:

... _his Way was eccentric, and his words were off the mark._ [8]

In a seminal paper A. C. Graham remarks that:

_Chuang Tzu contains many anecdotes of meetings between Hui Shih and Chuang Tzu, in most of which the Taoist laughs at the sophist's logic._ [9]

Chuang Tzu's critiques of the sophist's logical tricks are as witty as they are profound. But most of them express his conviction that the challenge sophism presented to the arts was no laughing matter.

A. C. Graham has argued that the 'Ch'i Wu Lun' chapter employs technical terminology from the Mohist canons [10]. One concern of the canons was to develop a systematic semantic theory of indexical, evaluative, and descriptive terms. Chuang Tzu was also keenly interested in such terms. He used his semantic insights into them to debunk the ethical theories of the Confucians and the Mohists, and to defuse the metaphysical theories of thinkers like Hui Shih.

Chuang Tzu never systematized as a competing theoretical position his critiques of the theories of his contemporaries. For he believed that the sage has no use for learned theories:

_Breadth of learning is not necessarily knowledge. Disputation is not necessarily wisdom. The sage cuts himself off from these things._ [11]

But being a philosopher, Chuang Tzu could not resist the challenge of reducing to absurdity the metaphysical speculations of men like Hui Shih and the ethical theories of men like Confucius and Mo Ti. His critiques of their theories had profound implications for difficult questions of both meta-ethics and metaphysics. Yet few philosophers have been more widely misunderstood than Chuang Tzu.

In our own century three renowned interpreters of Chinese thought have each insisted, for different reasons, that Chuang Tzu is a mystic. Fung Yu-Lan thinks that the mysticism of Chuang Tzu is best explained in terms of "sitting and forgetting", a method of meditation described in the 'Great Teacher' chapter. According to Fung, Chuang Tzu thinks that by a "... process of forgetting ... one reaches a sudden mystical enlightenment in which one sees the unity of all things" [12]. Wing-tsit Chan also
affirms Chuang Tzu's mysticism, but claims that "... at the same time he follows reason as the leading light" [13]. In this regard, Chan is at odds with A. C. Graham who claims that Chuang Tzu rests his mysticism on a rejection of reason.

It is difficult to deny that there are passages in Chuang Tzu that seem to suggest mystical themes. Yet it cannot be denied that many, if not most, of the passages from this work, have nothing to do with mysticism. By attending to some of these passages, I will argue for an alternative interpretation of Chuang Tzu. My alternative runs contrary to the predominant mystical interpretation. Instead of discussing transcendental unities, it emphasizes the efforts of thoughtful men to understand the ways of the world in which they live, and to enrich their daily lives by perfecting the practice of the arts.

One of Chuang Tzu's major concerns was to unravel and expose the fallacies of the learned, especially those whose conclusions threatened to undermine principles requisite for the practice of the arts. To discredit the theories of men like Hui Tzu required that Chuang Tzu develop remarkably sophisticated methods of reasoning and analysis. As such, he has frequently been misunderstood, even by twentieth century commentators, as drawing conclusions which refer to a dimension that transcends ordinary human understanding. Indeed, since his antagonists sometimes disregarded the constraints of normal discourse and challenged fundamental principles of reason and good sense, Chuang Tzu's philosophical critiques themselves sometimes appear to transcend these limits. A. C. Graham has even argued that Chuang Tzu "abandoned reason" and "rejected logic".

2. Was Chuang Tzu an enemy of reason?

In each of his major works on the subject A. C. Graham describes Chuang Tzu as an "anti-rationalist" [14]. In his most recent work Graham devotes a section to Chuang Tzu's "Assault on Reason", and in his book on the Inner Chapters a section is given over to Chuang Tzu's "Rejection of Logic".

Now, rationality or the ability to reason should be clearly distinguished from logic and sophistry. Reasoning is a mental process which includes activities like sorting out and comparing alternatives as well as making inferences. Logic is the normative study of reasoning. It deals with standards for correct reasoning, and with methods for verifying truth by using logical patterns of argument. Sophistry is a deviation from logic. The sophist presents what is false and fallacious as though it were true and logical. Psychologically, sophistical reasoning can be persuasive; logically however, it disregards truth and correct reasoning, and should be rejected.

Chuang Tzu was no champion of logic, especially the formal logic which the authors of the Mohist canon were trying to develop. Yet he recognized that sound reasoning is as much a part of life as observation, action, feeling, and imagination. It is no accident that the artisans Chuang Tzu contrasts to the sophists, men like wheelwright Pien, for example, not only exhibit in the practice of their art an understanding of the principles of reason; they are themselves capable of arguing logically.

Reasoning includes the ability to discriminate alternatives, and discrimination is part and parcel of the artisan's skill. We can scarcely imagine what Pien's wheels would look like if he could not distinguish
measurements which fit specification from those which do not. It comes as a surprise, therefore, to find A. C. Graham asserting that for Chuang Tzu "distinguishing alternatives" undermines the exercise of skill:

... according to Chuang-tzu it is precisely when we distinguish alternatives (that we) ... lose the capacity of the angler, the carpenter and the swimmer to heed his total situation with undivided attention and respond with the immediacy of a shadow to a shape and an echo to a sound. [15]

Two points, one psychological the other philological, need to be made about this claim. Graham seems to be confusing the ability to distinguish alternatives with conscious reflection or thought. For in another place he says:

Chuang-tzu is deeply interested in types of ordinary behavior which thinking inhibits and types of knowledge which cannot be verbally expressed. A player winning while the stakes were low pauses to think when the stakes are raised, and loses his knack; a woman discovers she is beautiful and ceases to be beautiful. [16]

It is common knowledge that thinking about what you are doing while you are doing it can interfere with performance. That kind of thinking, however, is not the same as the ability to distinguish alternatives while performing a task. Driving an automobile, for example, requires making precise discriminations. Usually we make them while thinking about matters totally unrelated to driving. Moreover, if called upon to describe how we do it we would be at a loss for words. The ability to drive a car, or in Pien's case to make wheels, can and perhaps should be carried out in a way that requires minimal conscious reflection on the process. If one could not make the discriminations necessary to carry out these activities, however, the result would be disastrous.

Discrimination happens 'automatically'. We can judge correctly and instantaneously which of two lines is longer, which of two weights is heavier, which of two pitches is higher, without recourse to standards and procedures of measurement. Moreover, the psychologist Julian Jaynes has argued convincingly that for, "... natural reasoning to occur, consciousness is not necessary" [17]. Jaynes points out that the ability to arrive at correct conclusions is faster than the ability consciously to reflect on how they were drawn. Thus, we can often generalize correctly and instantaneously about current or future cases. A good craftsman, for example, can select materials at a glance. He need not consciously sort through past experiences, glean from them generalizations, and apply them to new cases. Carpenter Shih, for example, amazed others with such insights.

In the 'Jen Chien Shih' chapter Shih walks by an enormous oak without giving it so much as a glance. His incredulous apprentice exclaims that he has never seen such fine timber, and asks Shih why he is ignoring it:

'Forget it--say no more!' said the carpenter. 'It's a worthless tree! Make boats out of it and they'd sink; make coffins and they'd rot in no time; make vessels and they'd break at once. Use it for doors and it would sweat sap like pine; use it for posts and the worms would eat them up. It's not a timber tree--there's nothing it can be used for. That's how it got to be that old!' [18]
The psychological point is three-fold. First, consciousness is not necessary for reasoning construed as the ability to distinguish alternatives and make inferences. Second, the ability to reason is necessary for the consummate exercise of skill. Finally, exactly how we distinguish alternatives defies description.

Graham might grant each of these points, but object that an important matter is being overlooked. For he thinks that in Chuang Tzu the notion of distinguishing alternatives is related to "disputation", which is his gloss into English of the technical term pien. This brings us to the philological point.

Graham defines pien or "disputation" as:

... literally 'distinguishing, discriminating' (between proposed alternatives). [19]

He notes that disputation in ancient China was a kind of "arguing out" of mutually exclusive alternatives. Among other things, it seems to have been a method for rectifying names, for it involved two parties arguing over the suitability of a given name to some object or situation:

One party affirms and the other denies that the name fits, by [employing] expressions most conveniently translated by 'That's it' [viz. shih] and 'That's not' [viz. fei]. [20]

The purpose of disputation was to establish whether or not certain claims are 'allowable' k'e. For example, a well-known dispute was over the acceptability of the sentence Bai ma fei ma "A white horse is not a horse". The sophist Kung-sun Lung was renowned for his arguments that this sentence is acceptable. We need not pursue his arguments here, but must note that formal disputation in ancient China was a vehicle of sophistry.

Chuang Tzu was an enemy of sophistry and by association of disputation, the format of sophistical argumentation. Graham agrees that Chuang Tzu 'mocked' the logic of the sophists, but thinks his opposition to disputation did not derive from logical considerations. Rather, he suggests that Chuang Tzu's opposition relates to the observation that when "we distinguish alternatives" or "dispute" things we lose the capacity to exercise the skill necessary for the consummate practice of an art. Surely, if carpenter Shih had to "argue out" whether or not each of his measurements fit specification, he would be unable even to fashion a post, let alone a coffin, or a boat!

Graham fails to see that Chuang Tzu opposed sophistry on logical grounds for he thinks that Chuang Tzu "rejected logic". Reasoning, we have seen, can be distinguished from logic and sophistry. Graham pays lip service to these distinctions, but applies them in bold and surprising ways. For example, Hui Shih, who argued that it is possible:

To go to Yueh today, but arrive (there) yesterday [21]

is described by Graham as "rational" and "logical". Chuang Tzu, on the other hand, who tried to expose sophistries like this, is said by Graham to "assault reason" and to "reject logic". Graham even claims that, "Chuang Tzu has plenty of reasons for denying reason..." and moreover that "... what logic there is in Chuang Tzu is directed against reason itself" [22]. Was Chuang Tzu, after all, an enemy of reason?
The sophist Hui Shih is known for ten 'paradoxical' theses. The seventh of these theses has just been cited. Hui Shih's 10 theses might be compared to Zeno's paradoxes in so far as they seem directed toward showing that space and time cannot be analysed without contradiction. According to Graham, Hui Shih's attempt:

to prove that one cannot make spatial and temporal divisions without contradiction... [23]

lead him to the brink of discrediting analytic reason. Graham says:

But it is clear that if he is taking this position Hui Shih has come dangerously close to discrediting his own tool, analytic reason. He wishes to discredit only spatial and temporal divisions, but it will take only one more step to observe that all reasoning depends on making distinctions, and to reach the conclusion that we should abandon reason for the immediate experience of an undifferentiated world, transforming 'All are one' from a moral into a mystical affirmation. It is in [chapter two] that Chuang-tzu takes this step. [24]

Now Graham cannot be suggesting that from the premise:

(1) All reasoning depends on making distinctions, we may legitimately arrive at the conclusion that:

(c) Reasoning should be abandoned.

For although (1) is undeniably true, it does not entail (c). If Graham is trying to show that Chuang Tzu reached the conclusion (c), some premise in addition to (1) is needed. But there is no textual support for Graham’s claim that Chuang Tzu accepted Hui Shih's alleged proof that spatial-temporal divisions are contradictory. Moreover, Graham suggests that in a crucial passage in the 'Ch'i Wu Lun' chapter Chuang Tzu steps beyond Hui Shih's spatial-temporal limitations:

Here he [Chuang Tzu] declares that the possibility of proving contradictory theses which so delights sophists arises as soon as we make the distinction which is basic to analytic thought, that between the 'it' which a thing is and the 'other' which it is not. [25]

Now a distinction is made when a word, for example "it", is used to single out a subject of discourse from a range of other possibilities. Identifying "it" as a subject is contingent upon distinguishing the reference of "it" from any item referred to by "other". For an intended distinction between items referred to as "it" and "other" to succeed, the items must be different. If not, the intended distinction will be self-contradictory.

The notion of a 'self-contradictory distinction' may be explained as follows. Suppose a statement is made the intent of which is to distinguish two different people. For example:

(S) The man walking the brown dog is not the chairman.

If the terms of (S) 'the man walking the brown dog' and 'the chairman' are in fact one and the same man, (S) will be self-contradictory. For if these terms are co-referential, each can be substituted for the other without altering its truth-value of (S). Since:
The chairman is not the chairman

is obviously self-contradictory; (S) must also be self-contradictory. So, let’s say that whenever a statement intended to distinguish two items is false, the statement is 'self-contradictory'.

Graham claims that according to Chuang Tzu whenever we distinguish among things as "it" and "other" the possibility of proving contradictory theses arises. One way for that possibility to arise is when the distinction intended by these terms turns out to be self-contradictory; that is, when the terms "it" and "other" refer to one and the same thing.

Graham's translation of a crucial sentence from the 'Chi'i Wu Lun' chapter shows without question that he commits Chuang Tzu to the view that all distinctions are self-contradictory:

What is It is also Other, what is Other is also It. [26]

For if "It" and "Other" (whatever they turn out to be) are one and the same, the statement that they are different will be self-contradictory. So if Graham's translation of the crucial sentence is correct, Chuang Tzu must have held that:

(2) All distinctions are self-contradictory, Given (2) Graham's claim that Chuang Tzu concluded that:

(c) Reasoning should be abandoned, can easily be established. For (1) and (2) entail:

(3) All reasoning is self-contradictory.

But if (3) is true, then all reasoning is unreliable, and in that case we may conclude that ((2).

By attributing to Chuang Tzu the view that reason should be abandoned, Graham prepares the ground for two further claims, namely, Chuang Tzu is a mystic, and his mysticism grows out of his 'anti-rationalism'. For Graham thinks Chuang Tzu held that:

... it is in the wordless illumination which discredits all distinctions that the whole world is open to the light. [27]

Clearly, there is something untoward, if not downright paradoxical, about the above argument. For if (3) is true, we are not bound by reason to accept it. For if a piece of reasoning, say a stretch of deductive reasoning, is self-contradictory, any argument which correctly formalizes it must also be self-contradictory. Hence, the argument from (1) and (2) to (3) must be self-contradictory. But an argument is 'self-contradictory' when at least two of its premises contradict each other, or when its conclusion contradicts one of its premises. In either case the argument cannot be sound. Therefore, this argument cannot be sound, which is to say, we are not bound by the canons of logic to accept its conclusion.
3. An Alternative Interpretation

In what follows, I argue for an alternative to Graham's anti-rationalist interpretation of the Chuang Tzu. Rather than shackling Chuang Tzu with the embarrassing aspiration of trying to reason reason out of existence, my alternative credits him with some modest insights into the semantics of coordinate indexical, evaluative, and descriptive terms.

Graham renders shih into English as 'It', and pi as 'Other'. He translates the crucial sentence as, “What is It is also Other; what is Other is also It.”

In another place, however, he allows that shih and pi might be rendered as 'this' and as 'that':

Disputation therefore assumes agreement as to what is shih, ‘this, the one in question’, in contrast to what is pi, ‘that, other’. [28]

The crucial sentence could then be translated as, “This is also that; that is also this.”

This translation does not support premise (2). Moreover, it is the basis for another interpretation of Chuang Tzu which does not lead to anti-rationalism. We need not insist on calling this alternative interpretation rationalism, but only that textually it is eminently plausible, and philosophically much more interesting than anti-rationalism.

Coordinate Indexical Terms

My translation of the crucial sentence may be construed as an affirmation by Chuang Tzu that different speakers with different standpoints vis a vis one and the same item can nevertheless use different terms to refer to that item. For Chuang Tzu this was not a trivial insight for two reasons.

First, the insight is at odds with one of the precepts constituting the doctrine of the 'rectification of names' cheng ming. Originated by Confucius, disputed by the Mohists and the sophists, modified by the Legalists, and most clearly formulated by Hsun Tzu (c. 310-220 B.C.) the precept states that there should be a one to one correspondence between 'names' ming and 'objects' shih. After noting that the ability to judge things as the same or different depends on the five senses, Hsun Tzu says:

Then in accordance with (the five senses) names are given to things. When things are alike, they are named alike; when different, they are named differently. [29]

Second, the insight has important ramifications for the metaethical and metaphysical doctrines disputed during Chuang Tzu's time. Among those ramifications, the most important in Chuang Tzu's mind, is the way words can baffle our intellects. For example, even if a terminological dispute is purely verbal we sometimes act as if the terms in question mark real differences.

The use by different speakers of shih and pi, as well as shih and fei, is conditioned by the different point of view of each. If a distinction made through the use of coordinate terms marks no important factual difference other than the differing standpoints of those using the terms, the distinction is 'purely verbal'. 
Chuang Tzu noted that some of the philosophical disputes of his day involved purely verbal disagreements. He tried to defuse such disputes by showing how verbal distinctions were being mistaken for factual differences.

His fundamental views about coordinate indexical and evaluative terms are buried in a series of interconnected passages in the 'Chi'i Wu Lun' chapter. Below I translate some of those passages, and endeavor to explain the ideas Chuang Tzu was struggling to express. Although Chuang Tzu himself had no words corresponding to notions like 'indexical term', 'coordinate term', and so on, his examples can be neatly gathered and clarified under these rubrics. Explaining Chuang Tzu's examples in these terms serves simply to sharpen insights in the text that are imprecisely stated or obscured by unrelated tangential themes.

Chuang Tzu's basic insight, namely, that people with different viewpoints, using different indexical terms, can nevertheless refer to one and the same item, is clearly expressed in the following passage:

*No thing is not that; no thing is not this. From that (another's standpoint), (it) is not seen; from this (one's own standpoint), (it) is known.* [30]

Any item is such that from the viewpoints of different speakers it can be pi (that) or shih (this). Yet one who calls something 'this' cannot see things from the standpoint of one who calls it 'that'. So, one can know things only from one's own viewpoint.

Now the above passage precedes a crucial passage wherein, according to Graham, Chuang Tzu declares the possibility of proving contradictory theses. Graham translates the passage:

*Therefore it is said: 'Other comes out from It, It too adapts to Other', the opinion that It and Other are born simultaneously.* [31]

But in line with the fact that pi and shih can be rendered into English as 'that' and 'this', the passage can easily be interpreted in a way that entails no contradiction:

*Therefore it is said: 'That comes out of this; and this goes along with that', which is to say, 'That and this are born simultaneously'.

*Shih and pi go hand in hand; they are coordinate indexical terms. Two terms are 'coordinate' when the use of one compliments and is conditioned by the use of the other. Your calling something 'that' conditions my calling it 'this'. Hence, our uses of these terms compliment and 'go along with' each other. As soon as I call something shih, from my perspective, you can call it pi, which is to say that the differing points of view implicit in our terminology occur “simultaneously.”*
Evaluative Terms

Chuang Tzu also used the term *shih* and *fei* as evaluative terms, like our terms: 'right' and 'wrong':

*Going along with (what is) right is going along with (what is) wrong. Going along with (what is) wrong is going along with (what is) right. Therefore, the sage does not accord (with either right or wrong), but illuminates all in the light of Heaven, (which) is also going along with (what is) right.* [32]

Suppose people disagree about whether to call something right or wrong. If one goes along with those who call it right, one thereby goes along with something that others call wrong. If one goes along with those who call it wrong, however, one must go along with something others call right. A sage tries to avoid these inconsistencies by taking a stand beyond what people commonly call right and wrong. Rather than argue about what to call things, he tries to clarify the issues about which people disagree, and aims to get them to see things in fresh and unbiased ways. Paradoxically, by not going along with ordinary assessments of right and wrong, the sage is said to go along with what is right, for he tries to enlighten people by getting them to look at things clearly and carefully.

Graham does not approve of rendering *shih* and *fei* as 'right' and 'wrong'. He prefers 'that's it' and 'that's not' arguing that:

*Ordinarily we translate them by 'right' and 'wrong', and are not worried by the fact that shih is basically a demonstrative...* [33]

But if we should be worried that *shih* is "basically a demonstrative" should we not also be worried that *fei* is basically not a demonstrative? I suggest that we not worry about what these terms "basically" are. For how we render them into English depends in large measure on the context in which they occur. In the context of Mohist disputation, *shih* can be rendered as: 'that's it, yes, correct, right, or suitable, and *fei* can be glossed as: that's not it, no, incorrect, wrong, or unsuitable.

Graham, however, says he hopes to avoid "... such inconsistencies as translating *shih* and *pi* by 'this' and 'that' but *shih* and *fei* by 'right' and 'wrong'". [34] However, taking *shih* as 'this' in some contexts and as 'right' in other contests entails no inconsistency. Moreover, treating *pi* as 'that' and *fei* 'wrong' is not inconsistent either. How we understand *shih* and *fei* depends on the context of their use. For example, D.C. Lau translates Mencius' phrase *shih fei chih hsin* as "the heart of right and wrong" [35]. The translation fits the context since Mencius is discussing ethics, not disputation. Context is similarly important in the Chuang Tzu. For example, Chuang Tzu complains:

*The way I see things, the principles of humanity and righteousness, as well as the paths of shih and fei, are disorderly and confused. How could I possibly know the difference between them?* [36]

Rendering *shih* and *fei* as 'right' and 'wrong' fits the context since Chuang Tzu is making a meta-ethical remark here about commonly discussed evaluative terms. But 'that's it' and 'that's not' simply do not fit the context.
Indexical terms like *shih* and *pi* are speaker-relative in the sense that the location of the speaker in relation to some third item determines who uses which term, when, and how. Evaluative uses of the terms *shih* and *fei* are also relative to a speaker's standpoint in the sense that their use is conditioned by the speaker's biases: namely, his or her perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and feelings. Since one speaker's use of *shih* and another's of *fei* are both subjectively conditioned, the distinction marked by the use of these coordinate terms has no basis in fact. The distinction, in other words, is a purely verbal one.

A humorous illustration of a purely verbal distinction is given by Chuang Tzu in the parable of the monkey trainer. The trainer's suggestion that the monkeys get three acorns in the morning and four at night is angrily rejected by them. But the proposal that they get four in the morning and three at night delights the monkeys. The distinction between 'three in the morning and four at night' and 'four in the morning and three at night' is a distinction that makes no difference. Yet, although the distinction is purely verbal, the monkeys behaved as though it really mattered. Chuang Tzu says:

*There was no change in the reality behind the words, and yet the monkeys responded with joy and anger.*[37]

Chuang Tzu thinks that people, like the monkeys he describes, sometimes mistake their verbal squabbles for matters of fact. In commenting on the disputes over *shih* and *fei* that engaged the Confucians and Mohists of his day, he remarks:

*There are the rights and wrongs of the Confucians and the Mohists. What one takes as right the other considers wrong, and what one takes as wrong the other considers right. [But] if you want to right what is considered wrong and wrong what is considered right, there is nothing better than ming 'illumination'.* [38]

'To right what is considered wrong and wrong what is considered right...' is to try to see the things one believes to be wrong from the standpoint of one who believes them to be right, and vice versa. The sage recognizes that calling things 'right' or 'wrong' is conditioned by the biases of standpoint subjectivity. Hence, he defends no standpoint except the one that transcends all standpoints. He tries, in other words, to stand on neutral ground:

*Therefore the sage harmonizes with what is taken as right and as wrong. He rests in the equality of Heaven. This is called walking two roads.* [39]

Rather than argue about what to call things, Chuang Tzu prescribes that we try instead to see them for what they are. Everything is what it is, which just is '... the equality of Heaven'. To see things as they are is to transcend all judgments of right and wrong. But to argue endlessly about what to call them is to be in danger of failing to see them. When we look at things, study them, and try to see them from another's point of view, we gather important information about them. Thus, even if we do not know how to evaluate them in terms of 'right' or 'wrong', if we are forced to act with respect to them we can at least do so in a reasonably well informed and unbiased way.
Coordinate Descriptive Terms

Some distinctions made by the use of coordinate terms are based on the way things are, namely, factual differences. Let us call coordinate terms which mark distinctions that are based at least in part on factual differences 'descriptive coordinate terms'. Chuang Tzu's use and discussion of descriptive coordinate terms is rich and varied.

In the 'Autumn Floods' chapter it is claimed that nothing can harm a man who knows how to distinguish between 'safety' and 'danger', and who knows how to accept with equanimity 'calamity' and 'fortune'. Attempts are made to sharpen the boundaries between 'man' and 'heaven' as well as 'will' and 'fate'. Moreover, it is claimed that 'Tao has no end and no beginning', but that 'things have death and life'. All of these pairs of terms are coordinate in the sense that the use of any one conditions the use of its partner. Since how these terms are used by speakers is based in part on the way things are, the state of affairs designated by one term can obtain only if the corresponding state of things designated by its partner can obtain.

Chuang Tzu recognized that a speaker's use of coordinate indexical and evaluative terms is influenced, not by the state of things, but by the speaker's standpoint. In the first case, the spatial location of speakers in relation to one another and some third item determines who calls it shih and who calls it pi. In the second case, the biases of speakers influence their valuations of things as shih and fei. Chuang Tzu noticed further that some descriptive coordinate terms, 'three in the morning and four at night' and 'four in the morning and three at night', for example, make a distinction that marks no real factual difference. The distinction made is purely verbal. Finally, he noted that some coordinate descriptive terms mark purely verbal distinctions, not because they are co-referential, but because they fail to designate anything at all. Chuang Tzu identifies and discusses one such pair of terms.

In setting out his first thesis Hui Tzu employs a pair of coordinate descriptive terms as though they mark a real factual distinction. Graham translates this thesis as:

*The ultimately great has nothing outside it,*  
call it 'the greatest one'.  
*The ultimately small has nothing inside it,*  
call it 'the smallest one'. [40]

Graham's rendering of *ta i* and *hsiao i* into English as 'the greatest one' and 'the smallest one' is excellent since it focuses attention on a logical point which Chuang Tzu was struggling to express. In English usage definite descriptions either assert or presuppose existence claims. If Graham's translations of *ta i* and *hsiao i* are accurate, therefore, both of these terms must have involved similar claims.

Suppose we parse 'the greatest one' as 'There is a thing is such that no other thing is greater than it' and 'the smallest one' as 'There is a thing such that no other thing is smaller than it'. Are these descriptions true or false? How would we know? We simply can’t decide, a priori.
Chuang Tzu required that the use of descriptive coordinate terms be based on 'things'; otherwise, the
distinction marked by the use of these terms is purely verbal. In the 'Autumn Floods' chapter he claims
that just as the 'Great Man' knows that right and wrong cannot be distinguished, so too he knows that
the minute and the large have no real boundary:

_The Great man . . . knows that right cannot be distinguished from wrong, and no boundary can be drawn
between the minute and the large._ [41]

We have looked at Chuang Tzu's explanation of why right cannot be distinguished from wrong. But
what explains the Great man's alleged knowledge that there is no difference between the minute and
the large, or what amounts to the same, the greatest one, and the smallest one?

In the 'Tse Yang' chapter Great Impartial Accord remarks:

_The processes of dividing and doubling some quantity
must have limits; otherwise, things will be 'exceeded'. Great Impartial Accord further notes that if things
are exceeded, one cannot 'adequately describe' the transgression:

_That to which words extend, that after which knowledge aspires, reaches to things alone._ [43]

If you try to conceive of the greatest one as a thing, your conception will not stand still, since for
anything you imagine, you can always imagine something larger. On the other hand, if you do not
conceive of the greatest one as a thing, then if Great Impartial Accord is right, the words 'the greatest
one' do not extend to anything. In either case, the term 'the greatest one' does not 'adequately describe' anything since it does not 'reach' or refer to something. By parity of reasoning the same can be
said of 'the smallest one'. Hence, the distinction drawn by Hui Shih's use of _ta i_ and _hsiao i_ marks no
factual difference. The distinction, in other words, is purely verbal.

It is important to note that the distinction drawn by the use of these terms is purely verbal because both
terms are empty, that is, they fail 'to reach to things'. Chuang Tzu might have appealed to the emptiness
of these terms to defuse Hui Shih's claims that spatial distinctions are contradictory. For example, the
third paradox attributed to Hui Shih in the 'T'ien Hsia' chapter reads:

_The heavens are as low as the earth; mountains are on the same level as marshes._ [44]

Now imagine four concentric circles. The inner circle represents sea level; the next, the level of a marsh;
the one after that, the level of a mountain peak; the outside circle, the 'infinite boundary' or 'the
greatest one'. So, the distance from sea level to the level of the marsh is one _li_, from marsh level to
mountain peak, another _li_; and from the mountain peak to the 'infinite boundary' or 'the greatest one',
the number of _li_ is infinite. Thus, relative to sea level, the level of the marsh and the mountain are
different. If these distances are calculated relative to the 'the greatest one', however, they are both
zero, or one divided by infinity and two divided by infinity. Thus, relative to 'the greatest one',

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'mountains are on the same level as marshes'. Moreover, if it is assumed that the center point of these circles is dimensionless (having 'nothing within itself), then the distance from the center to sea level, to marsh level and mountain peak will also be infinite, or one divided by zero, two divided by zero, and so on. Hence, relative to 'the smallest one', it is also the case that 'mountains are on the same level as marshes'. On the other hand, if it is false that something is such that nothing is greater (or smaller than) it, then the terms: *ta i* and *hsiao l*, fail to refer to anything or "to reach to things." And since both are empty, the distinction between them is purely verbal, and makes no real difference. So, the deduction that mountains and valleys are on the 'same level' can once again be drawn.

4. Conclusion

Twenty years have elapsed since the redoubtable A. C. Graham introduced his 'anti-rationalist' interpretation of Chuang Tzu. Frequently rehashed in subsequent works, his position has remained unaltered, unquestioned, and unintelligible. The present essay challenges it by exposing some of its confusions and inconsistencies, and by arguing that Chuang Tzu lends himself to another level of interpretation far richer in its philosophical implications.

The assumption upon which Graham builds his interpretation is the claim that for Chuang Tzu the artisan's exercise of skill is undermined when he begins to distinguish alternatives. Graham falls into this mistake by confusing, on the one hand, the ability to distinguish alternatives -- an unconscious process that usually cannot be verbalized-- with conscious reflection-- a mental activity that can interfere with performance. Moreover, he seems to equivocate between two legitimate senses of *pien*. In classical Chinese, *pien* can mean, as Graham notes, "to argue out alternatives", as one would do when engaged in a dispute or debate. But it also means to "distinguish" or "discriminate", as a wheelwright might do when measuring a spoke. Clearly, a wheelwright would never finish his task if he had to 'argue out' his measurements. From this it should not be concluded, however, that he could excel at his craft if he never distinguished among alternative lengths.

The Chuang Tzu is replete with stories of artisans who practice their craft with effortless and consummate skill. Chuang Tzu clearly admired such artisans, and he warred against the sophists of his day who tried to undermine principles essential to the practice of their crafts. Were people to believe that mountains are on the same level as marshes, for example, the veracity of measurement would be brought into question. Confidence in the deft discriminations of the artisan in measuring, for example, the distance from axle to rim would be undermined. And the practice and perfection of craftsmanship would be impeded.

Sophists like Hui Shih and Kung-sun Lung enjoyed reputations as men of great profundity and knowledge. Unlike wheelwright Pien who was skilled in his art but could not explain it to his son, Hui Shih was skilled with words but practiced no real craft. Chuang Tzu took the words of men like Hui Shih as the material for his own art. His art consisted in unraveling the fallacies which derive from confusions related to certain philosophical uses of words. This is not to say that he rejected language, denied logic, or assaulted reason. But he did believe that words have subtle ways of gumming up our thoughts.
Graham mistakenly portrays Chuang Tzu as an enemy of reason. His argument pivots on his translation of a crucial sentence from the second chapter, "What is It is also Other, what is Other is also It". Whatever 'It' and 'Other' turn out to be, if they are one and the same, any effort to distinguish them can only result in contradiction. Thus, through translation, Graham attributes to Chuang Tzu the idea that all distinctions are self-contradictory. And since all reasoning obviously requires that distinctions be made, given the above idea, it follows that reasoning is self-contradictory, and should therefore be abandoned.

I have argued that the crucial sentence has an alternative translation, namely: "This is also that, and that is also this." This translation suggests a revolutionary insight by Chuang Tzu, namely: more than one word can be used to designate one and the same thing. The insight is revolutionary because it contradicts a prevailing dogma of the doctrine of the rectification of names. Chuang Tzu brilliantly developed this insight in a number of directions.

He warred against those who assumed that evaluative coordinate terms such as shih and fei function like descriptive coordinate terms, the uses of which are based on the recognition of factual differences. According to Chuang Tzu, shih and fei function more like the coordinate indexical terms shih and pi. The use by different speakers of these terms can designate one and the same object. But in such cases, the terms mark only the different points of view of the speakers who use them. So the distinction made by their use is purely verbal, not factual. Hence, it is pointless to argue about what to call right and wrong, since that depends on the point of view of the speaker.

According to Chuang Tzu, words are like rabbit snares and fish traps in so far as they are tools which facilitate the tasks of daily life. A fish trap is for catching fish. A rabbit snare is for catching rabbits. Words are for catching ideas. But Pien discovered that even if one has certain ideas they cannot always be captured by words. And Great Impartial Accord noticed that some words which appear to capture an idea do not 'adequately describe' anything. He submits that words "adequately describe" only if they "reach to things". Chuang Tzu concludes that since words like ta i and hsiao i fail to "reach to things" they do not adequately describe anything. Thus, Chuang Tzu provides us with the wherewithal to disarm several of Hui Shih's paradoxes, especially the third paradox.

No distances can be considered relative to the alleged references of ta i and hsiao i since both terms are empty. Yet, because of Hui Shih's reputation for learning, his metaphysical speculations threatened to undermine the confidence of artisans in the principles required for the consummate practice of their arts. Among other things, Chuang Tzu may be credited with attempting to show that Hui Shih's speculations amounted to nothing more than 'wild' words.

When Old Lung died his student Shen Nung complained that he left without ever giving him any 'wild words' to open up his mind. Yen Kang-tiao, hearing of this, praised Lung saying:

As far as the Way goes, Old Lung hadn't gotten hold of a piece as big as the tip of an autumn hair, hadn't found his way into one ten-thousandth of it--but even he knew enough to keep his wild words stored away and to die with them unspoken. [45]
NOTES

[1] I skirt the issue of authorship of the Chuang Tzu by adopting a position taken by Mair:

My relatively uncritical approach to the text is to consider it as an anthology of Taoist writings in which the dominant impress derives from the corporate personality that I shall, for the sake of simplicity, refer to as 'Chuang Tzu'.


[2] The parable of wheelwright Pien is in the last section of the 'T'ien Tao' chapter. Among other things, the chapter consists of a delightful conversation between Yao and Shun, and one between Lao Tzu and Confucius. Just prior to the parable of wheelwright Pien, the master (Lao Tzu) discourses on the 'value of words'. The passage includes a paradoxical quote from the Tao-Te Ching: "He who knows does not speak, he who speaks does not know".

[3] [30/41]. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own. Translations are based on the text as presented in the Harvard-Yenching Index for the Chuang Tzu. I give the page and line numbers according to the following format: [page no./line no.].

[4] [5/47]. I translate hua i as 'sophistries' based on the explanation of Yen Shih-ku:

(What is) said to be right is made to seem wrong; (what is) said to be wrong is also made to seem to be right; (what is) the same and different can be confused. That which is so is called hua i 'sophistry'.

See Huang Chin-hung, Chuang Tzu Reader, p. 69.

[5] [30/45].

[6] [5/58].

[7] [7/84-85].

[8] [93/70].


[10] Ibid., p. 139.

[11] [58/33-34].


[21] [93/73].


[24] Ibid.


[28] Ibid., p. 142.


[30] [4/27]. Wang Shu-min is rightly troubled by the first occurrence of *chih*, 'to know', in *tzu chih tse chih chih*. [See his Chuang Tzu Chiao Ch’uan, vol. I, p. 59.] For it renders the second occurrence superfluous. The first occurrence, therefore, is probably an interpolation. Wang suggests *yu* 'to illustrate, to liken to, to explain' for it, and notes that this emendation coheres with the use of *yu* several lines later. But the sentence, so emended, does not fit into the structural parallelism between the terms.
shih and pi of the sentences which immediately precede and follow it. That requirement can be satisfied only by substituting shih for chih. The resulting sentence not only parallels the immediately preceding and following sentences, like Wang's yu -emendation it coheres with the text that follows. It is hard to believe that no one in the commentarial tradition reviewed by Wang emends chih by shih.


[32] [4/28-29].


[34] Ibid.


[36] [6/70].


[38] [4/26-27].

[39] [5/39-40].

[40] [93/70-71].

[41] [43/27].

[42] [72/75-76].

[43] [72/72-73].


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