



On the Question of Relativism in the Chuang-tzu

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It is commonplace among commentators to take Chuang-tzu to be some sort of relativist. I believe that if we construe Chuang-tzu as some sort of relativist, we will have to accept that the text of the *Chuang-tzu* is either self-contradictory or ultimately unintelligible. If one takes the thesis of thoroughgoing relativism seriously, one must be a skeptic. One is therefore not even in a position to advocate one's relativism. As Spinoza has put it, the consistent skeptic must remain dumb.

In this article, I would like to show more specifically what is problematic with interpreting the *Chuang-tzu* as an exposition in relativism. To this end, I have classified some of the attempts to interpret the *Chuang-tzu* as a relativistic tract into four main types. I would like to show that each of these types of interpretation suffers from serious pitfalls. Finally, I will put forth a fifth model of relativism which proposes that the relativism that one finds in the *Chuang-tzu* is of a penultimate nature and that this model possesses the virtue of saving the text from triviality, self-contradictoriness, and unintelligibility and allows Chuang-tzu some posture of valuation.

The four groups into which I have placed the differing interpretations on the question of relativism in the *Chuang-tzu* are somewhat arbitrary; in some cases they overlap and are not meant to be wholly faithful to each interpreter. They do, however, represent the different possibilities of relativistic styles and in this respect enable the reader to see more specifically what is problematic in trying to understand the text as relativistic in an ultimate sense. Since I have utilized some traditional interpretations to represent these different classifications, I would like both to beg these interpreters' indulgence and at the same time to remind the reader that the interpreters do not always adhere to the rubrics under which I have classified them. The use of these classifications is meant primarily as a model for the possibilities of relativistic interpretation and is not designed as a strictly accurate representation of the interpreters' own positions. Otherwise, these commentators, who, in many instances do not identify themselves directly as relativists, might justifiably complain that I am setting up a straw man and then knocking it down. But my main point is to illustrate the difficulties which attend logically possible options for interpreting the *Chuang-tzu* in some form of relativistic terms, and not to be wholly fair to the authors in question. I am, in fact, much indebted to them for displaying how rich and manifold is the way of interpreting the *Chuang-tzu*.

The five models (including my own), which I shall set out here are: (1) Hard Relativism (HR); (2) Soft Relativism (SR); (3) Neither Relativism nor Non-Relativism (N/N); (4) Both Relativism and Non-Relativism (B/A); and

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(5) Asymmetrical Relativism (AR), which I also refer to as Either Relativism And Non-Relativism (E/A).

Hard Relativism is a position which makes Chuang-tzu out to be a skeptic in the strongest possible sense: all values are to be taken as equivalent to all other values. The virtue of this position is its univocity. The interpretative outlook of this interpretative stance is clear and unmistakable. Hard Relativists include among their number such figures as H. G. Creel, Chad Hansen, Lars Hansen, Livia Knaul, and, to some extent, even Wing-tsit Chan. Of all of these, Creel's view is perhaps the most extreme because he seems to recognize fully the logical implications of a thoroughly consistent relativism. For Creel, the relativist cannot stand for any one set of values as superior to any other set of values. The logical consequence of this is that the relativist may turn into a kind of moral monster:

. . . the enlightened Taoist is beyond good and evil; for him these are merely words used by the ignorant and foolish. If it suits his whim, he may destroy a city and massacre its inhabitants with the concentrated fury of a typhoon, and feel no more qualms of conscience than the majestic sun that shines upon the scene of desolations after the storm.¹

It is evident to me that this cannot be what Chuang-tzu had in mind. To me, this is a travesty of the concept of enlightenment. But the important thing to remember is that if we understand Chuang-tzu to be a Hard Relativist, we seem to be ineluctably drawn to Creel's conclusions.

In the more academically removed language of Lars Hansen, we can find a similar endorsement of the point of view of Hard Relativism as illustrating the final outcome of following the *Chuang-tzu* to its logical conclusions:

The conduct of the wise man is actively neither good nor bad but eludes approbation or disapprobation in relation to a specifically chosen set of values. His supreme knowledge consists in the recognition of the impossibility of distinguishing right (shi) and wrong (fei). . . . There exists no standard accessible to our minds, at least of great and small, of what is valuable and what valueless.²

Again, if Chuang-tzu is a Hard Relativist, then he cannot consistently embrace any values. Thus, there is no difference between right and wrong. While this is certainly an inevitable conclusion if one accepts that Chuang-tzu is a Hard Relativist, to me this virtually constitutes a *reductio ad absurdum* of the viability of construing Chuang-tzu as a Hard Relativist.

In a more recent essay by Chad Hansen, we can find the following HR statements reechoed:

For Chuang-tzu . . . all ways are equally valid—no one has any special status or warrant from the point of view of the universe.³

And in the conclusion to his essay, "A Tao of Tao in Chuang-tzu," Hansen states:

. . . the *Inner Chapters*, in particular the “Ch’i/equalize Wu/thing-kind Lun/discourse,” can be more coherently understood as a whole if we regard Chuang-tzu as a relativist and a skeptic.⁴

Hansen’s view has the merit of clarity and consistency. However, one cannot simultaneously argue, as I would like to, that the reader of the *Chuang-tzu* is being led in a higher or more positive direction.

That this point of view of HR is still being argued as typifying the thought of Chuang-tzu can be seen from an even more recent essay by Livia Knaul, “Kuo Hsiang and the *Chuang-tzu*,” in which she argues that “Chuang-tzu pleads for a much more radical sweep, for a “chaotification” of all.”⁵ Indeed, if the logical consequence of HR is chaotification, it is not at all clear what direction the reader is given, if any. In any case, “chaotification” can be seen as a form of relativism in the following way: if there is total chaos, then no position can be compared with any other position. All positions are incommensurable. If all positions are incommensurable then there are no grounds to argue that any one position is better than another. Relativism is a logical consequence of incommensurability.

Even the august commentator Wing-tsit Chan seems to commit himself, at least partially, to the uncompromising HR interpretation:

In this unceasing transfiguration, things appear and disappear. . . . They seem to be different, some large and some small, some beautiful and some ugly, but Tao equalizes them as one. This is Chuang-tzu’s famous doctrine of the “equality of all things”. According to it, reality and unreality, right and wrong, life and death, beauty and ugliness, and all conceivable opposites are reduced to an underlying unity.⁶

In all fairness, Chan also does seem to want to maintain that there is an objective in the *Chuang-tzu* of spiritual freedom and peace. But to attempt to maintain the existence of such an objective is to lack logical rigor. If all values are truly equivalent to all other values, then why should one pursue the objective of spiritual freedom and peace?

The strength of the HR interpretation is that it gives ample recognition to the relativistic statements that one finds in the *Chuang-tzu*. It is, for most of its adherents, an inescapable conclusion which one is forced to reach if one accepts that the relativistic statements that one finds in the *Chuang-tzu* are meant to be understood in some ultimate sense.

The weakness of HR is that it does not allow for any valued direction to be taken as an objective of reading the *Chuang-tzu*. In addition, the non-relativistic statements or implications that are to be found within the *Chuang-tzu* are left unaccounted for. The text, in my opinion, when viewed from the standpoint of HR, becomes self-contradictory at many points and ultimately unintelligible. What sense, after all, can we make out of a total relativism? We are left without any justification for turning to a higher state of mind if the relativization of all values is complete. What is the point then of reading the

text in the first place? It cannot even be for the sake of finding out that all inquiry is useless, for this is to grant some legitimacy to argument. But a thoroughgoing relativist cannot even aver that his position possesses any legitimacy.

Soft Relativism (SR) is a view which has found favor with such scholars as Anthony Cua, the later Angus Graham, and David Wong. With scholars of such distinction advocating SR, one must take this possibility very seriously. *None of these scholars, needless to say, labels his position in this fashion.* And I trust that they will forgive me for employing their words as exemplifying this model of interpretation. But I think that in doing so it will help to illustrate to the reader the rich possibilities in trying to understand Chuang-tzu as some kind of relativist. SR, as I define it, consists in understanding Chuang-tzu to be a relativist but not a thoroughgoing one. When it comes down to the point of taking ethical action, the relativistic side of Chuang-tzu becomes deemphasized. SR possesses the advantage of taking some account of relativism while at the same time attempting to make some sense out of Chuang-tzu's exhortations to act in ways which we would normally consider to be good or wise. The problem with SR is that it leaves us without a sharp understanding of the meaning of relativism, since it is to be disregarded in certain special circumstances. While it saves Chuang-tzu from the bizarre conclusions that one is left with if one embraces HR, it is not at all clear upon what justification one can soften the boundaries of a relativist point of view without dropping relativism altogether. In order to grant some positive values to Chuang-tzu, one takes the risk of making it very difficult to understand what is meant by relativism in the first place. Cua, if I understand him correctly, endeavors to state that one can care in a valuing sense while at the same time be unmindful of caring for distinctions:

. . . ceasing to care for distinctions in certain ways is to be construed as being free from certain ways of caring and this freedom from care is not a denial of care in the sense of not caring or indifference.⁷

One is very much drawn to the effect of attempting to save Chuang-tzu from amorality while at the same time attempting to preserve his disdain for distinctions. The problem with this attempt, however brilliant, is that it leaves us without a very clear idea of what is meant by Chuang-tzu's relativism.

David Wong states the thesis of SR in very similar terms at the end of his book, *Moral Relativity*. However, in his account of SR, we are left without any clear justification as to why we should leave the relativistic posture at certain crucial junctures:

In evaluating my use of Taoism here, it is essential for the reader to remember that I am not advocating that we simply forsake evaluative categories. To "forget" morality is not to lose the ability to see self and others in terms of these categories, but it is to acquire the ability to suspend the use of these categories at the appropriate times.⁸

While one sympathizes with Wong for his desire to attribute some form of valuation to Chuang-tzu, it is not clear to me why a relativist should have the ability to become a non-relativist at certain times and not at others. SR seems to cut into the concept of relativism too much and leaves it in too ambiguous a state.

In his recent work, A. C. Graham seems to add his considerable weight as a scholar to the cause of SR. In so doing, Graham has departed from his early adherence to N/N, which I will discuss below. My best understanding of Graham's interpretation is that he appears to be saying that while the sage needs no moral rules (and in fact is not obliged to follow any), he does follow a general standard which Graham refers to as "Respond with awareness." Now, why this standard should be chosen when all other standards have been waved away is inconsistent with a standpoint of relativism but consistent with the standpoint of SR:

. . . if like Chuang-tzu we sweep away all moral and prudential standards, certainly "Respond with awareness" will remain in force. Nothing is involved after all but preferring intelligence to stupidity, reality to illusion; of the traditional Western values, Truth, Good, and Beauty, only the first is assumed.⁹

But why should the injunction "Respond with awareness" stay in force? It seems that if we are to be enjoined to follow some rule, however general, we have left the path of relativism behind. And if we can leave the path of relativism in one instance, then on what grounds should we be relativistic in another instance? Why should we have preferential grounds for Truth if we have swept away all moral standards? The Soft Relativist wants to have his cake and eat it, too. But if he does so, it seems it is at the price of calling his relativism very much into question.

If we follow Graham's argument further, it becomes more and more difficult to know what could be meant by relativism when one is permitted, as it were, to deviate from it in a seemingly arbitrary way. For example:

One can pronounce absolutely that a particular man in a particular situation did or did not accord with the Way. There is no contradiction here; as stock examples of the good ruler or the bad, Yao would be conceived as Taoist as responding in awareness of the conditions of his time, Chieh as not.¹⁰

But how does one pronounce absolutely in a situation if one has already dispensed with all standards? And on what grounds can we argue that it is good or right to respond in awareness? And, further, how can we interpret that Yao (who was noble) responded in awareness, and Chieh (who was base) did not? Goodness is not referred to as a standard, and yet a ruler is referred to as good. The problem with Graham's Soft Relativism is that it is not really a relativism at all. Unlike Hard Relativism, it does make sense out of there being a moral hierarchy in the *Chuang-tzu*. But in so doing it removes from itself the privilege of calling itself relativism. The term relativism, it seems to

me, loses its meaning when it is so diluted as to allow certain grounds of valuation to enter, albeit even very general ones such as preferring aware responses to unaware ones.

N/N, Neither Relativism nor Non-Relativism, is, in certain ways, one of the most intriguing of interpretative standpoints to adopt. The position taken in N/N is an attempt to avoid the dilemma of classifying Chuang-tzu as a relativist or an absolutist by arguing that he is neither one nor the other. The problem with this position is that we do find a great number of statements which are relativistic in tenor and a number of statements which are not, and this position takes account of neither group of statements. The basic problem with N/N applied in a blanket sense to Chuang-tzu is that it leaves us with a very high unintelligibility quotient. The seeming advantage of N/N is that it rescues us from the difficulty of having to identify Chuang-tzu as a relativist or an absolutist of sorts. While it succeeds in rescuing us from this dilemma, it leaves us without knowing what Chuang-tzu is at all.

The N/N posture can be represented both by Graham Parkes and by the early A. C. Graham. Of course, neither party makes any explicit avowal of an N/N approach as this classification system is, as far as I know, of my own invention and possesses only heuristic value.

Parkes's position can be found in an essay he has written comparing Chuang-tzu and Nietzsche, entitled "The Wandering Dance: Chuang Tzu and Nietzsche." He does not label his approach one of N/N, of course, but describes it as radical perspectivism. While this, at first glance, might appear to be another case of HR, the view is more subtle than it first appears. Parkes does allow for some kind of awakening that would appear to run counter to HR. On the other hand, the awakening that is possible is to the realization that we are always bound by some perspective. If we are to awaken, then this cannot be a case of HR. HR would not allow that a higher or better state of mind could exist, as all values, according to HR, must be on the same axiological plane. On the other hand, if we awaken to perspectivalism, this is also relativism all over again. However, since it is an awakened relativism, it is a different form of relativism, at least in name. At the risk of appearing perverse, I have chosen to refer to this as Neither Relativism nor Non-Relativism. In Parkes's own words:

Like Nietzsche, who emphasizes that experience is always necessarily perspectival, Chuang Tzu does not believe that we could ever attain a kind of "perspectiveless seeing." What we wake up to is the realization that we are always bound by *some* perspective: this awakening is itself a perspective. . . .¹¹

Parkes does not want to say that there is no awakening at all—which would be the standpoint to which the Hard Relativist would be committed. An awakening implies a higher set of values to which one awakens. But the type

of awakening he has in mind is to the ultimacy of perspectivism. That there is an awakening is granted, but its penultimacy is final. By granting the possibility of an awakening of some kind, Parkes escapes from the relativistic thesis. On the other hand, by limiting the awakening to the realization that one cannot go beyond relativism, Parkes calls relativism back into being. Since relativism is at first transcended and then called back into being, it appears as if it has cancelled itself out. I have therefore chosen to call this Neither Relativism nor Non-Relativism, as I am not sure how we have transcended if we are bound by some limitation.

My best understanding of what Parkes is saying is that one becomes aware of one's being bound only after one has transcended, but it is difficult to see how this has constituted some kind of transcendence. If one is bound in a state of transcendence, it is difficult to understand how this constitutes freedom. Parkes goes on to explain what he means by transcendence:

The story of the dream [the butterfly dream] makes the further point, relevant to Nietzsche's perspectivism, that when one is in a certain perspective it is impossible to see it *as a perspective*. Only when we are placed in a different perspective can we appreciate the limitations of our former standpoint.¹²

But if we are similarly bound in our transcendent perspective, in what sense can we appreciate our limitations? If this is freedom, it is the freedom of the turnspit. We are bound and yet we are aware of our bonds. This is not relativism, as we have risen above relativism so that we see it from some higher standpoint. But the higher standpoint is none other than relativism itself. I cannot make this out to be relativism *simpliciter* since it allows for a higher standpoint. On the other hand, the higher standpoint does not really seem to be any higher, so it seems to be relativism all over again. It is not relativism and yet it is relativism. Hence, I have labeled this stance Neither Relativism nor Non-Relativism.

The case of the early A. C. Graham appears to be of a very similar kind. One may well raise the question why one should consider the early position of Graham when he himself seems to have abandoned it in his most recent writings. I think that, given Graham's stature as an interpreter of Chuang-tzu, his early position has a historical value of its own if for no other reason than that it shows how difficult it is to settle upon an interpretive stance for the *Chuang-tzu*—so much so that even such a renowned interpreter as Graham finds himself changing positions. He seems to wish to avoid classifying Chuang-tzu as either a relativist or a nonrelativist. In an early essay of his, entitled "Chuang-tzu's Essay on Seeing Things as Equal," Graham points out:

Throughout the chapter we frequently find Chuang-tzu formulating an idea and then revising it or attacking it. Sometimes perhaps he is criticizing a provisional formulation of his own, often certainly he is attacking an idea already current.¹³

By seeing Chuang-tzu as not taking up any clear position at all, Graham relieves himself of the obligation to classify Chuang-tzu as a relativist or as a non-relativist. It appears as if Chuang-tzu has no position of his own. The problem with refusing the classification altogether is that we are left without any clear notion of what Chuang-tzu is.¹⁴

If we examine A. C. Graham's version of the dream metaphor, found in chapter two of the *Chuang-tzu*, it seems that he comes around to adopting a position which is very much like that of Parkes. I am not suggesting that this is the source of the concept, since Graham's argument appears much earlier than that of Parkes, but only that there is a similarity in the leap beyond relativism which turns out to be a leap to relativism:

Another metaphor rounds off the chapter, the dream in which we suppose ourselves to be awake. (18,20). This is not, as a Western reader easily supposes, an intimation that life is an illusion from which we wake to the reality behind it, but an illustration of the relativity of all knowledge; it reminds us that what we think we know while dreaming contradicts what we think we know while awake, and suggests that like the opposite opinions of philosophers, these have equal status.¹⁵

Here is a relativism that is the result of awakening—just as in Parkes's account. It seems like a form of relativism, but if we are bound to relativism, then we can know nothing for certain, not even that we have awakened to a kind of relativism. We have here a possibility of awakening, which would appear to entail that there is the possibility of attaining a higher form of knowledge. This would seem to transcend simple relativism. But the knowledge we obtain is a purely relativistic knowledge. It is not relativism because it provides for a transcendence. On the other hand, it is not non-relativism since it introduces us to a relativism all over again. It is not at all clear what great advantage is gained in learning that all is relative. It is also highly problematic how one could attain to even this knowledge, since within a relativistic point of view all points of view would be suspect, including the point of view that all points of view are relativistic. It is not clear then how one could even enjoy the limited satisfaction of knowing that all knowledge is corrigible, since even this act of knowledge is in turn corrigible and therefore uncertain.

The fourth possible point of view that one can maintain within the relativistic standpoint is that of B/A, both Relativism and Non-Relativism. Both/And possesses the advantage of being the most fully developed position articulated so far, as it is the most faithful to the text. It takes full account of both the relativizing statements and the non-relativizing statements and does not attempt to reduce one of the sets of statements to the other. It possesses the advantage of doing the most justice to the text by not attempting to minimize or discount either type of statement. By the very same token, however, it provides us with the most paradoxical interpretation, as it makes abundantly

clear the self-contradictory nature of maintaining both positions simultaneously without attempting to ameliorate the ensuing paradox.

I have been able to discover only one representative of this point of view, Russell Goodman, but he presents his case very ably. While he does not label his position B/A, I think that B/A nicely captures his depiction of Chuang-tzu. In his own words, Goodman states:

. . . I turn to the supremely balanced position set out in the *Chuang Tzu*, which, as Chan notes and I shall show in some detail, embraces both a thoroughgoing skepticism and a carefully measured response to the commonsense world.¹⁶

And again:

Chuang Tzu is not just provisionally interested in the world revealed by his senses, as many skeptics maintain themselves to be; he relishes that world.¹⁷

However, as I have suggested, B/A is not a problem-free standpoint. Even Goodman, to his credit, seems to recognize the difficulties this position poses:

In trying to form a complete picture of Chuang Tzu's position, it is difficult to reconcile this lively interest in the world's operations with his mocking and skeptical flights.¹⁸

Goodman has put his finger on the prime difficulty with the B/A interpretation. While it is refreshing in its acknowledgment of both the relativism and the non-relativism that is to be found in the text, it suffers, as it were, from leaving the text too much the way it is. By forcing no interpretation on the text at all, it leaves the text too much alone. As a consequence, the apparent self-contradictions between advocating relativism on the one hand and demonstrating a positive attitude towards life on the other are left to rankle and disturb the reader. In a brief moment, as if aware of this quandary, Goodman slips into N/N when he says of Chuang-tzu:

Note that he does not say "this" and "that" have no opposites, but rather than they do not find them. To some this will seem an avoidance of an answer, to others a wink in the direction of an answer that cannot be stated definitively in any one formulation.¹⁹

But this is not in keeping with the bolder spirit of his generally B/A approach. All in all, B/A is more characteristic of Goodman's view. B/A has the merit of not hiding what Chuang-tzu has to say and thus creates no distortion of interpretation. But its very lack of interpretation is also its downfall. It does not go far enough. An interpretation cannot simply repeat the text; it must suggest how we can solve or in some way reconcile apparent contradictions that arise in the text. B/A suffers from creating the most paradoxical interpretation by allowing apparent contradictions to stand just the way they are. HR suffers from making the claim of relativism too hard and thus

leading us to the most perverse possible inferences. SR suffers from making the claim of relativism too soft and thus not accounting for its status at all. N/N leaves us with no concrete idea at all of what Chuang-tzu's message might be. B/A leaves us with a clear idea of Chuang-tzu's message but in a highly paradoxical form. A clear, but self-contradictory, message is no better than no message at all.

It is time to attempt to portray what I take to be the most satisfactory model of explanation of the *Chuang-tzu*, which I call Asymmetrical Relativism or AR. I also entitle this standpoint Either Relativism And Non-Relativism, or E/A. To the best of my knowledge, I am the sole proponent of this point of view. While I believe that it is the most comprehensive model of explanation of the *Chuang-tzu*, its limitation lies in the complexity of its explanation form.

The seemingly strange appellation of E/A stems from the attempt to take advantage of the faithfulness of B/A while making one very important distinction. Like B/A, this interpretation is committed to doing as little violence to the text as possible and thus admitting that both relativistic and non-relativistic statements and non-relativistic implications are to be found within the text. But this is where the similarity with B/A ends. Unlike B/A, E/A proposes that the relativistic and the non-relativistic statements are not axiologically equivalent. E/A takes the view that the class of non-relativistic statements and implications referring honorifically to the awakened state or to the possessor of the awakened state, the sage, exist on a higher axiological plane. There is a difference in the two states of consciousness to which the different classes of statements make reference. The class of relativistic statements refers to the unawakened or dreaming consciousness. On this level of consciousness, all values are of equivalent value because this is the level of unawakened opinion and argument. The relativity of all values holds and thus we save the truth of the many statements showing the relativity of all values, but it applies only to the dreaming or unawakened consciousness. It would be an egregious blunder to apply the relativity of all values to the state of the awakened consciousness, for then the sage would be no better than the ignorant man, and we would have no justification for endorsing the pursuit of the ideals of the sage. It must be the case, then, that the relativity of all values applies only within the world of the opinions and arguments of the unenlightened mind, or, as Plato would put it, within the realm of *doxa* or opinion. The relativity of values exists, but only on one side of consciousness: through the veil of ignorance. This accounts for the validity of such adjectives as the perfect man or the true man or the sage (one who possesses knowledge) when applied to the realm of wakefulness. This also accounts for the seemingly perverse label, E/A. In the realm of ignorance, all values are on the same axiological plane. The Either cuts a line between the realms of ignorance and knowledge. Within the realm of ignorance, Chuang-tzu cannot be said to be a relativist.

What then of the And? The And refers to the state of knowledge where Chuang-tzu is not a relativist. It is better to be a sage than an ignorant man. But it is not the case that Chuang-tzu is Both a Relativist and a Non-Relativist. He is only a relativist within the realm of ignorance, and what is most important, both of these states cannot exist within the same time frame within the same individual. There is a transition between ignorance and knowledge; this transition is what we refer to when we speak of awakening. What we awaken to is the state of knowledge; what we awaken from is the state of ignorance.

The And makes reference to the fact that the concept of relativism makes sense when we refer to the state of ignorance. The Either makes sense when we refer to the state of knowledge. The paradoxical aspect is that even this designation of the Either makes sense only when there is a dialogue from the state of knowledge to the state of ignorance. Once awakened, the awakened mind does not refer to itself as awakened; it does not even refer to itself as non-relativist. This mode of classification is purely for pedagogical purposes. In the state of enlightenment, the Either does not refer to itself at all. Even the concept of awakening is not its own self-designation. While this might appear to be paradoxical, the concept of awakening is designed as an explanatory concept for the one who is in a state of ignorance. It is thus a pedagogical concept and not a descriptive concept.

One might well ask: How can one speak in terms of value if value language per se is designed for exclusively pedagogical purposes? The point is that, for the one who exists in a state of ignorance, value language possesses a certain level of legitimacy. When one achieves a state of enlightenment, one understands the limitations of such a language. It is not that such value language is totally illegitimate. It possesses a certain pedagogical legitimacy in that it is necessary to communicate between levels. This is the sense of the concept of Asymmetrical Relativism. Relativism exists only in the dialogical situation of the sage speaking to the aspirant. Once one has achieved the understanding of the sage, the concept of relativism can be understood as having had only a heuristic value.

The one who claims that the awakened state possesses a higher value than the unawakened state is not the sage per se; it is the sage speaking as the philosopher. The philosopher is the one who exists in the twilight zone between ignorance and knowledge; he has a foot in each realm. The philosopher is also dreaming, but his dreaming is a higher form of dreaming than the dream *simpliciter*; it is the interpretation of the dream. We may recall in the Great Awakening dream how the philosopher may be taken as the one who interprets the dream while he is dreaming: "While he is dreaming he does not know it is a dream, and in his dream he may even try to interpret a dream. . . . Confucius and you are both dreaming! And when I say you are dreaming, I am dreaming, too."²⁰ We may take the use of Confucius in this

anecdote to stand for the philosopher. In fact, the author himself also suggests that he is playing the role of the philosopher when he includes himself on the dreaming level. The point of all this is that philosophy is the art of interpreting the dream. It must perforce take place within the dream, but it is not therefore identical to the dream *simpliciter*. It is the dream as interpreted. Therefore, it is at a higher state of consciousness, as it were, than the uninterpreted dream. This is not to say that it is indicative of reality. It, too, is a dream. But it is a higher form of the dream. The words of Chuang-tzu, indeed of the text as a whole, are the words of a philosopher. When he speaks, as a philosopher, of the realm of ignorance: "And when I say you are dreaming, . . ." he is also existing within the realm of ignorance: "I am dreaming, too." But his level of awareness, though still within the dream, is higher than the realm of the dream upon which it reflects as it is aware of the dream while being in the dream.

At the level of the pure sage, however, there is no longer a state of ignorance or a state of knowledge. If the sage is spoken of as one who possesses knowledge, then this is the language of the philosopher. This philosophical language has a dialogical and a pedagogical function only. It serves as a bridge to take us from ignorance to knowledge. But it is still the language of a dream. At the level of the awakened mind there is no relativism and there is no absolutism either. The concepts of relativism and absolutism are philosophical concepts. They exist only on one side of the relationship. This is what is meant by asymmetrical relativism. There is a relativism, but it pertains only to the side of ignorance. From the side of knowledge, however, we cannot talk of absolutism. While the philosopher may speak in terms of the sage as being above relativism, this is only the language of the dream, *albeit* the interpreted dream. The Either of the Either/And is an Either that exists from the one side only. But this is true of the And as well. From the other side—the side of the sage—there is neither Either nor And. But Either/And perfectly describes the vantage point of the philosopher who, in order to communicate with the subject learner, refers to the relative state as one side and the existence of the other side as the other that exists as well. This is the And. But both sides exist only from the relative standpoint.

If we utilized the designation Either/Or, this might lead one into thinking that one or the other state existed or possibly both. But Either/And is an indication that both sides exist only from the perspective of one standpoint. AR grants that there is a relativist standpoint, but it is not committed to the position that this standpoint is the ultimate position of Chuang-tzu. This is the standpoint, in fact, which is to be transcended. If the relativistic statements to be found within the *Chuang-tzu* are designed to have only a provisional validity, then they do not contradict the absolutist statements or implications, or the value-laden directions that are endorsed within the text. Understanding the relativistic perspective as being only of a provisional value enables the text

to retain its logical consistency and the statements to retain their intelligibility. In fact, if the relativistic statements are understood as having only a restricted scope of application, we can also better understand the possibility of positive valuation as being legitimately expressed in the *Chuang-tzu*. If we are not committed to a totally relativistic plane of values, then there is no harm in endorsing some values as being higher than other values. We may, in the end, recognize even this sense of higher as also provisional, but at least in respect to total relativism we can say that there is a perspective of greater value than this.²¹

E/A and AR are both philosophical constructions. One cannot be both unawakened and awakened at the same time. One can be only one or the other; this is the sense of the Either. (We are still within the pedagogical speech of the philosopher.) Retrospectively and prospectively, however, both states do exist. They exist as the state of slumber from which one awakens and the state of wakefulness to which one awakens: this is the sense of the And.

But whether we speak in terms of E/A or AR, we are still within the standpoint of the philosopher. The advantage of E/A is that it allows us to keep both the relativistic and the non-relativistic statements but *they no longer exist simply alongside each other on the same axiological plane*. This philosophical distinction is itself also provisional. The awakened state does not refer to itself as awakened. If there is to be any chatter at all, it must be the philosopher speaking.

I have attempted to lay out in some detail a philosophical construction which enables us to make sense out of some of the seeming paradoxes that occur within the text when we face both highly relativizing statements and statements which seem to imply that there does exist a higher state of values. E/A exists only asymmetrically with respect to the Awakened State. From the philosopher's twilight zone, which is one step higher than the level of pure ignorance, there does exist a stage beyond the Either. This is the And. From the direction of the And, however, there is no Either and no And. Neither is there neither nor nor. This is Assymetrical Relativism, and while it is, in my opinion, the most accurate descriptive designation for the complex set of statements known collectively as the *Chuang-tzu*, the only difficulty with this classification, as I indicated at the outset of discussing AR, lies in the complexity of its form of explanation. But that is not so much the fault of AR as it is the nature of the *explanandum*, as the mode of explanation must suit itself to the complexity of that which it attempts to explain.

Despite everything, philosophers must speak. I have attempted to argue that while relativism proper, in its different forms, is not an adequate interpretation of the text, in that it does not allow for any posture of valuation and makes the text self-contradictory and hence unintelligible, Assymetrical Relativism is free from these defects.

Assymetrical Relativism is the most adequate mode of explicating the

Chuang-tzu while retaining its sense. *Chuang-tzu* was not, after all, silent. Since his speech took on such a complex subtlety, its interpretive model must be equally subtle. The merit of AR is that it allows the various statements of both relativism and non-relativism to stand. What is more, they do not stand in a relationship of contradiction to each other, as they refer to different realms of consciousness. The philosopher, the lover of knowledge, is partly ignorant and partly wise. He exists to take us from the level of ignorance to the level of knowledge. It is in this sense that the words of the *Chuang-tzu* exist. They exist as philosophy.

NOTES

1. H. G. Creel, *Chinese Thought from Confucius to Mao Tse-tung* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 112.
2. Lars Jul Hansen, "An Analysis of Autumn Floods in Chuang Tzu," in *Invitation to Chinese Philosophy*, ed. by Arne Naess and Alastair Hannay (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1972), p. 132.
3. Chad Hansen, "A Tao of Tao in Chuang-tzu," in *Experimental Essays on Chuang-tzu*, ed. by Victor H. Mair (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983), p. 35.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 50–51.
5. *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 12, no. 4 (December 1985): 436.
6. Wing-tsit Chan, article on Chuang Tzu in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), vol. 2, p. 110.
7. Anthony S. Cua, "Forgetting Morality: Reflections on a Theme in *Chuang Tzu*," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 4 (1977): 311.
8. David B. Wong, *Moral Relativity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 214.
9. A. C. Graham, "Taoist Spontaneity and the Dichotomy of 'Is' and 'Ought'," in *Experimental Essays on Chuang-tzu*, p. 12.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
11. Graham Parkes, "The Wandering Dance: Chuang Tzu and Zarathustra," *Philosophy East and West* 33, no. 3 (July 1983): 242–243 (emphasis his).
12. *Ibid.*, p. 242 (emphasis his).
13. A. C. Graham, "Chuang-Tzu's Essay on Seeing Things as Equal," *History of Religions* 9, nos. 2 & 3 (Chicago, November 1969/February 1970): 138.
14. It is worthy of note when one comes to the realization that someone of Graham's stature has, in effect, altered his framework of interpretation for understanding Chuang-tzu, in the course of his intense research on Chuang-tzu. If I am correct in positing at least two different interpretation stances for Graham, then this is a testament to the richness of interpretations to which the text is open and at the same time an illustration of the difficulty in fixing on a choice.
15. Graham, "Chuang-tzu's Essay," p. 149.
16. Russell B. Goodman, "Skepticism and Realism in the *Chuang Tzu*," *Philosophy East and West* 35, no. 3 (July 1985): 231–232.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 234.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*, p. 236.
20. Burton Watson, trans., *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), p. 48.
21. For a fuller discussion of the linguistic issues involved in being committed to relativism in some limited sense while at the same time endorsing non-relativistic values, see my article, "Having Your Cake and Eating It, Too: Evaluation and Trans-Evaluation in Chuang Tzu and Nietzsche," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 13, no. 4 (December 1986): 429–443.