Revealing the Mind of the Sage: The Narrative Rhetoric of the Chuang Tzu

One of the formative texts of Taoism, the *Chuang Tzu* is admirable not only for its philosophical insights, but also for the rhetorical skill with which it delivers them. Crandell writes that portions of the *Chuang Tzu* "bespeak the most commanding authorial presence in early Taoism" (101). In *Early Chinese Literature* Watson concludes, "No single work of any other school of [early Chinese philosophical] thought can approach the *Chuang Tzu* for sheer literary brilliance" (161). Yet ironically, the text frequently deprecates "eloquence, and even speaking in general" (Jensen 221).

Stressing the relativism of language, truth, and values, it mocks the logical argumentation of competing schools of philosophy and advocates the practice of silence and intuition.

One might conclude that the author of the *Chuang Tzu* has little to do with rhetoric beyond condemning it. However, while he stresses the limitations of language and reason, he is also well acquainted with their use. Graham remarks, "Chuang Tzu was an enemy of logic who knew what logic is, while his successors did not" ("How Much" 469). Moreover, Chuang Tzu's knowledge of rhetoric includes not only rarefied philosophical disputes, but also moral and political persuasion. For instance, in chapter four of the *Chuang Tzu*, "In the World of Men," Yen Hui tells Confucius of his intention to visit an unprincipled young ruler and try to persuade him to change his ways (W 54–58). This "Yen Hui" and "Confucius" are not historical figures, but inventions through which Chuang Tzu

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2 Having circulated in its present form since perhaps the 2nd century, B.C.E., the text is popularly attributed to the 4th century, B.C.E. philosopher Chuang Chou. However, it is probably an anthology of writings by various authors, of which only the first seven (or "inner") chapters can be confidently attributed to Chuang himself (Graham, "How Much"). While I will primarily discuss the inner chapters in this essay, at the risk of some imprecision I will hereafter use "Chuang Tzu" to refer to the presumed collective author of the entire work.


4 All references to the *Chuang Tzu* are from Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*. Page references to this translation are cited as "W"; Watson's introductory commentary on the translation is cited as Works. While the problems of working with translations instead of original language editions are well known, in order to use this text to address questions of rhetorical theory, rather than of Chinese literature, I am working from Watson's translation. As for the reliability of this translation, it is used in Mair's *Experimental Essays on Chuang-tzu*, to which noted Chinese studies scholars have contributed.

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expresses his views. Confucius warns that efforts to reform the powerful are often futile and fraught with danger for the reformer, but then he offers Yen Hui useful advice about how to proceed, if he must. Elsewhere in the *Chuang Tzu*, Taoist sages impress rulers with their insights about how to govern (e.g., W 72-73, 93-94), and sometimes they are even asked to assume governmental posts. But when the king of Ch'u asked Chuang Tzu to administer his realm, the latter replied that he would rather be a live turtle "dragging its tail in the mud" than a dead one preserved in an ancestral temple (W 187-188).

Hence Chuang Tzu is well acquainted with the exercise of persuasion, although he insists he is not interested in political affairs. It would be wrong to conclude, however, that he merely dismisses rhetoric as a regrettable necessity "in the world of men." For he also discusses the problems to be overcome in conveying the Taoist way of life to those unacquainted with it. Chuang Tzu's insistence that "the Great Way cannot be named; Great Discriminations cannot be spoken" (W 44) might seem to preclude any role for rhetoric in his mystical philosophy, beyond using it to undermine rhetoric itself. However, Chuang Tzu does more than stress the ineffability of the Tao and the futility of arguments about human values. His text seeks "to create in the reader a certain attitude toward life" (Crandell 102). This "attitude" is nothing less than the state of consciousness of the Taoist sage, a state of mind that allows one to know the Tao and live in accord with it, beyond all names and moral arguments.

Chuang Tzu's discussion of the means by which this state of mind may (or may not) be revealed and his subsequent efforts to reveal it to his readers are worthy of study for two reasons. First, it will clarify elements of his rhetorical theory and method that otherwise might go unnoticed. I will show how Chuang Tzu uses a rhetorical perspective to assess the problems of disclosing the mind of the sage, and how his use of narrative follows from this appraisal. Based on a telling analysis of audience psychology, Chuang Tzu argues that neither direct description nor actual encounters with sages are likely to reveal the mind of the sage to those unacquainted with it. His critique does not mean, however, that this state of mind is incommunicable or unattainable. Rather, having found direct description and encounters with sages unpromising, Chuang Tzu employs other means to accomplish his goals. Chief among these means are the transparently invented stories for which the *Chuang Tzu* is rightly admired.

Second, studying Chuang Tzu's efforts to disclose the mind of the sage will address the broader theoretical question of how storytelling can acquaint people with previously unsuspected possibilities of thought and action. In so doing it will

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5 W 54n. All further references in this article to Confucius or other persons mentioned in the *Chuang Tzu* are to Chuang Tzu's invented characters, not the historical figures.

6 For a discussion of other examples of Chuang Tzu's advice on persuasive speech, see Oliver 246-257.

7 Presumably this episode, like the encounter between Yen Hui and Confucius, is invented.

8 See Kirkwood ("Narrative") for a discussion of how disclosing unfamiliar possibilities is a central task of rhetoric and the role of narrative in this activity.
complement previous work on narrative rhetoric. Fisher's influential work on narrative rhetoric and other scholars' reactions to it have concentrated on how stories express and apply the pre-existing values of a community. However, stories can also serve an ontological function, whereby they disclose unfamiliar possibilities to people (Kirkwood, "Storytelling," "Parables," "Narrative"). This function is even more basic than valuing, since people can hardly value what they have not yet imagined. Studying the stories of the *Chuang Tzu* affords an excellent opportunity to explore this aspect of narrative. For while *Chuang Tzu* advocates (and thus values) a certain way of living, this "Way" (or *Tao*) is so unfamiliar that he must first clear the hurdle of disclosing it as a possibility to readers. *Chuang Tzu*’s critique of description and social perception clarifies the obstacles any rhetor must overcome in disclosing unfamiliar possibilities to people, and his stories illuminate the role of narrative in a rhetoric of possibility.

The remainder of this essay is divided into three main parts. First it shows that revealing the mind of the sage is a central aim of the *Chuang Tzu*. Then it discusses the arguments about why neither direct description nor firsthand encounters with sages are well suited to disclose this possibility. Finally, it examines how the *Chuang Tzu* uses invented narratives to achieve this goal.

**Persuasive Aims of the Text**

Disclosing the state of mind of the sage is a dominant theme of the *Chuang Tzu*. For while some of the tenets of Taoism can be outlined, *Chuang Tzu*’s philosophy is deeply mystical, having psychological freedom as its aim and a way of life, not logical analysis, as its method. Indeed, the Tao can only be known by attaining the sage’s state of being. The *Chuang Tzu* states, "There must be a True Man before there can be true knowledge" (W 77).

Understanding *Chuang Tzu*’s concept of the sage will shed light on his critique of certain rhetorical aims and methods. Consider, first, what is not meant by this term. Sages are not defined by their beliefs or even their code of conduct. The "true person" or "pure person" is not one who intellectually knows the truth (Hansen, "Chinese Language” 503–504), nor one who is morally pure and follows a prescribed ethical code (Waley 74). Hansen argues that in ancient Chinese philosophy, knowledge "is knowing-to, not knowing-that" ("Chinese Language" 515). Whether or not this accurately summarizes all early Chinese thought, it is a fitting description of *Chuang Tzu*’s views. Indeed, for *Chuang Tzu* knowledge of the "right way to live" — even of the Taoist way — makes right living impossible. Graham writes, "The Confucius of the Inner Chapters has an abstract knowledge of the Way but cannot live by it, because it is his nature to live by

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9 See especially Fisher’s *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action*. For responses to his views on values and narrative, see Warnick and Rowland.

10 For a brief outline of Taoist principles, see Wright; on the mysticism of the *Chuang Tzu*, see Waley (15–86) and Yearley; on psychological freedom as its aim, see Watson (Works 3) and Wright (249).

11 Other epithets for the sage include the perfect man, the great man, the complete man, the holy man (W, passim).
rules" ("How Much" 470). Trying to follow rules of conduct is harmful because "to aim purposely at the beneficial, the right alternative, destroys the capacity ... to hit on it spontaneously" ("How Much" 483).

Hence the *Chuang Tzu* rejects efforts to teach "wisdom" and "virtue." In one story, for instance, a madman screams outside the gate of Confucius, "Leave off, leave off — this teaching men virtue!" (W 66) Since such teaching is at best irrelevant and at worst harmful, *Chuang Tzu* follows a different tack — to acquaint readers with the state of mind that spontaneously gives rise to the sage's way of life. He seeks to disclose that quality of awareness which enables a kind of wisdom and virtue that cannot and should not be reduced to lists of philosophical precepts or codes of ethics. Thus Crandell remarks, "Chuang-tzu desires to create in the reader a certain attitude toward life that is intuitively clear at the outset" (102). However, the term "attitude" may be misleading, since it is often associated with intellectual belief, and the *Chuang Tzu* displays precious little regard for beliefs of any sort, even those of sages. It is more helpful, then, to discuss its efforts to reveal the sage's "state of mind."

Before examining these efforts, I will violate the principles just discussed and try to describe the sage's state of mind, in the hope that this will clarify what follows. (Readers who aspire to sagehood had best skip this paragraph.) Most simply stated, the "pure person" or "true person" continually exercises a simple and undivided state of mindfulness. Free from premeditation, self-consciousness, or evaluation of its own contents, this awareness is "pure" as gold is said to be pure (Waley 74). Single-minded and undistracted, it is "true."12 This ongoing state of mind naturally gives rise to the sage's way of life, which includes "a rejection of conventional values" (Watson, *Works* 17), playfulness (Crandell), spontaneity (Graham, "Chuang-tzu's Essay" 144, "How Much" 483), and "a lyrical, almost ecstatic acceptance" of death and every other change in life (Waley 51-54; also Graham, "How Much" 471). The sage's ability to influence life by working with nature instead of resisting it and thus the sage's magical invulnerability to all sorts of natural calamities are also stressed in the *Chuang Tzu* (Waley 76-77; Wright 249-250).

The state of mind just described is assuredly unfamiliar to most people, whether of *Chuang Tzu's* time or our own. If *Chuang Tzu* seeks to help people adopt it, he must first disclose it as a possibility. This entails doing two things, both of which are central to a rhetoric of possibility generally (Kirkwood, "Narrative"). First, he must help people imagine this state of mind. Second, he must show them it is not merely conceivable, but attainable. That is, he must convince readers they are capable of exercising it themselves. Making the mind of the sage imaginable and attainable are formidable rhetorical goals, and *Chuang Tzu* argues they are not easily achieved.

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12 The notion of "truth" as a state of single-minded awareness finds a close parallel in Sankhya-Yoga philosophy, which seeks a state of mind that is "true" in the sense that the lover is true to the beloved — totally undistracted in his attention to her." See Kirkwood, "Truthfulness."
Critique of Description and Perception

Presumably people might encounter the mind of the sage either by hearing accurate descriptions of it or through firsthand encounters with sages. However, Chuang Tzu stresses that neither of these may be very helpful.

Description

Much has been made of the Taoist contention that language cannot describe the Tao — "the Way, the underlying unity that embraces man, Nature, and all that is in the universe" (Watson, Works 6). Nonetheless, occasionally Chuang Tzu does try to describe the sage's state of mind. In the voice of Chang Wu-tzu he writes,

I'm going to try speaking some reckless words and I want you to listen to them recklessly. How will that be? The sage leans on the sun and moon, tucks the universe under his arm, merges himself with things, leaves the confusion and muddle as it is, and looks on slaves as exalted. Ordinary men strain and struggle; the sage is stupid and blockish. He takes part in ten thousand ages and achieves simplicity in oneness. For him, all the ten thousand things are what they are, and thus they enfold each other. (W 47)

Perhaps this passage amply demonstrates that description of the sage's state of mind may not be very enlightening, even when one listens recklessly to it. However, "Free and Easy Wandering," the first essay of the Chuang Tzu, offers a more explicit critique of this rhetorical strategy. The essay does more than lament or celebrate the futility of language; it offers an assessment of audience psychology with important implications for a rhetoric of possibility.

Chuang Tzu begins by describing how the giant mythical bird, P'eng, makes the long journey from "the northern darkness" to "the southern darkness, which is the Lake of Heaven" (W 29). When the cicada and the dove hear about this, they reply: "When we make an effort and fly up, we can get as far as the elm or the sapanwood tree, but sometimes we don't make it and fall to the ground. Now how is anyone going to go ninety thousand li to the south!" (W 30) The quail's reaction is even more telling: "Where does he think he's going? I give a great leap and fly up, but I never get more than ten or twelve yards before I come down fluttering among the weeds and brambles. And that's the best kind of dying anyway! Where does he think he's going?" (W 31)

Similarly, people often dismiss descriptions of sages as impossible or undesirable when they do not fit with their limited experience. As Chuang Tzu puts it, "Little understanding cannot come up to great understanding" (W 30). This is particularly apparent in the story that follows those about the P'eng. Once a man heard about a sage who lived atop a mountain, where he lived on nothing more than wind and dew, rode dragons, and perfected his spirit. The man "thought it was all insane and refused to believe it." But, Chuang Tzu responds, "We can't expect a blind man to appreciate beautiful patterns or a deaf man to listen to bells and drums. And blindness and deafness are not confined to the body alone — the understanding has them too . . ." (W 27) This remark, it may be noted, serves two purposes. It suggests descriptions are inadequate because of auditors' inability to appreciate them, rather than because language is inadequate. Furthermore, it defuses the charge that the sage's way of life is impossible to attain by citing this very criticism as evidence of the critic's own "blindness and deafness."
The *Chuang Tzu* presents other arguments about the inadequacy of description as a means for disclosing the mind of the sage to those unacquainted with it. As noted earlier, Chuang Tzu holds that intellectual knowledge of the Way impedes its performance, much as thinking about the fine points of one's golf swing impedes the swinging or thinking about meditating impedes meditation. Hence, even were accurate descriptions of the sage's state of mind possible, in conveying "knowledge-that" they would impede "knowing-to." Furthermore, they would seriously mislead people if they created the impression that sagehood can be reduced to a set of idealized character traits. Perhaps it is for this reason that Chuang Tzu openly disparages what would otherwise seem to be helpful descriptions of the sage. Following a seemingly clear description by Confucius (who, Graham says, "knows the Way but cannot live by it"), he writes, "Even the Yellow Emperor would be confused if he heard such words" (W 46–47). The "confusion" to which Chuang Tzu refers lies not in the ambiguity of Confucius' words, but, paradoxically, in their very clarity and the implication that the way of the sage can be reduced to intellectual knowledge and practiced as a code of conduct. Indeed, Chuang Tzu observes that "If the Way is made clear, it is not the Way" (W 44). This critique, too, is distinctly rhetorical in spirit, for it hinges on auditors' likely reactions to descriptions of the Way, not on its inherent ineffability.

In the same spirit, Chuang Tzu objects that even passable descriptions of the sage may only upset, not inform, those not yet ready to appreciate them. Once, Chuang Tzu writes, Master Pien chastised Master Sun's efforts to live the life of the sage, then "described to him the virtue of the Perfect Man." Later Pien feared his remarks caused Sun to be "very startled"; he "may end up in a complete muddle" (W 207–08). Pien's disciple objected that either Pien was right and Sun wrong, or the reverse, but either way no harm could come of their exchange. But Pien replied by telling how the ruler of Lu once tried to feed a wild bird rich food unsuitable for it; similarly, descriptions of the mind of the sage may prove unsuitable for some listeners. Hence efforts to express mystical insight must be guided by knowledge of the intended audience.

**Encounters with Sages**

Given the shortcomings of describing the sage's state of mind, it would seem preferable to abandon linguistic means altogether and rely on direct perception to accomplish what language cannot. The latter approach seems more consistent with the experiential nature of mystical knowledge, and it should also overcome people's inability to imagine unsuspected possibilities of thought and action. However, the *Chuang Tzu* suggests that even encounters with sages have serious limitations. First, these encounters are unlikely, because sages prefer anonymity to recognition. Chuang Tzu describes how a sage "has buried himself among the people, hidden himself among the fields. His reputation fades away but his determination knows no end. Though his mouth speaks, his mind has never spoken." (W 285; see also Waley 83–86). Thus encounters with sages are not a readily available means by which people may discover the mind of the sage. Furthermore, whereas many people strive to "speak their minds" and disclose their views to others, the sages avoid doing so. Hence encounters with them, while rare, are also unlikely to yield any insight about their true state of mind.
But more important, those who might encounter sages in an unguarded moment often fail to understand their unorthodox behavior. Confronted with such behavior, they merely interpret it in light of their own expectations. Once, Chuang Tzu writes, Confucius sent a disciple to pay his respects to a Taoist master who had died. He was surprised to find the master's friends weaving frames for silkworms, playing the lute, and singing in the corpse's presence. When the disciple told Confucius he found their behavior offensive, Confucius had to explain to him, "Such men as they ... wander beyond the realm; men like me wander within it. Beyond and within can never meet. It was stupid of me to send you to offer condolences." (W 86–87) Thus the ambiguity of human behavior allows people to assign any number of motives to it — the sages' behavior was perceived as disrespect for the dead, rather than as evidence of a profound acceptance and celebration of death. When people employ familiar concepts to explain unfamiliar behavior, they fail to see the unfamiliar for what it really is. Hence Chuang Tzu's critique of encounters with sages extends his rhetorical perspective, for it, too, concerns people's perceptions and interpretations of such meetings.

To summarize, Chuang Tzu aspires to help people confront an unfamiliar state of mind, but he argues they are unlikely to do so by hearing descriptions of sages or even by meeting them. From his analysis one might conclude that only those already acquainted with the mind of the sage — or any possibility of thought or action — can appreciate descriptions of it or discern it in others' behavior. Perhaps those unacquainted with the mind of the sage are incapable of discovering it, just as "the blind cannot appreciate beautiful patterns" or the "deaf listen to bells and drums." Were this the case, people would be condemned to live within the limits of their moral imagination, and rhetoric would be consigned only to exhort and apply shared beliefs, not confront, challenge, or expand them. Chuang Tzu could do no more than preach to the choir, and his text would be meaningful only to a spiritual elite.

Watson maintains that the Chuang Tzu is written for just such an audience (Works 4–5). However, I think the text is more ambitious and more optimistic than this, for Chuang Tzu's efforts to disclose the mind of the sage are not limited to the methods just discussed. His foremost strategy is the invented story, a strategy he employs in a manner quite different from that described in some contemporary work on narrative rhetoric. Fisher praises people's ability to reject stories that are not "confirmed or validated in [their] personal experience" or that "negate the self-concepts that [they] hold of themselves" (109, 75), but for Chuang Tzu this tendency is precisely the problem. Bruner praises the "relative indeterminacy" of fiction, which requires "a search for meanings from among a spectrum of possible meanings" and must be "rewritten by the reader ... so as to allow for the reader's imagination" (25, 35). However, Chuang Tzu must tell stories that are not easily rewritten, so the "distinct attitude" they are told to convey cannot be misinterpreted. And while Lucaites and Condit acknowledge that "rhetorical stories" must be "univocal" and support a single point of view (98–99), Chuang Tzu's stories must do more than present a tacit claim about a state of mind. They must help people perceive that state, then show them it is attainable.
Chuang Tzu's Narrative Rhetoric

In pursuit of its rhetorical ends the *Chuang Tzu* employs irony, parody, dialogue, metaphor, and occasional exhortation, but it is especially known for its use of brief anecdotes. This device is common to many early Chinese philosophical works, including the Confucian *Analects*, the *Mencius*, the *Han Fei Tzu*, the *Book of Rites*, and the *Lieh Tzu* (Watson, *Literature* 123–198). However, the *Chuang Tzu* makes extensive use of narrative in pursuit of its goal. For instance, "Free and Easy Wandering," the first section of the text, runs seven pages in Watson's translation and features eight stories; section five, "The Sign of Complete Virtue," is devoted almost entirely to telling six stories. Other sections are comparable.

The tales of the *Chuang Tzu* are distinctive in several respects. Not the least of these is their superb literary quality. Their use of humor is also uncharacteristic of other early Chinese philosophical texts. Perhaps most important, Chuang Tzu's stories are wildly imaginative and transparently devised to serve his author's rhetorical purposes. Thus they depart from the historical and pseudo-historical accounts used to authenticate the doctrines of other schools (Watson, *Literature* 161). Viewed as rhetorical devices, the chief interest of the latter stories lies in their alleged factual content and their role as ethical proof. By comparison, because Chuang Tzu's stories are plainly invented, they invite readers to reflect on how their telling itself illustrates a particular state of mind. Graham notes that the composition of the text gives "the sensation of a man thinking aloud" (*Chuang-tzu's Essay* 137), and Watson recommends reading the text so as to discover Chuang Tzu's "mind moving behind the words" (*Works* 7).

The *Chuang Tzu* employs a variety of narrative strategies in pursuit of its various persuasive aims. I will discuss three strategies used to acquaint readers with the mind of the sage. One approach is telling stories that suggest qualities of the sage's mind by analogy. Another is narrating deeds that directly display this state of mind. A third is telling stories that evoke audience responses that approximate the sage's state of mind. Studying these strategies will show that Chuang Tzu uses stories with considerable rhetorical skill, and it will show how narrative can overcome some of the obstacles that hinder efforts to disclose unfamiliar possibilities.

Suggesting the Mind of the Sage by Analogy

Chuang Tzu tells some stories to suggest qualities of the mind of the sage by analogy. Two of the most memorable of these appear in the essay, "In the World of Men." As is the case elsewhere in the text (e.g., W 29–35), Chuang Tzu first tells an allegorical story featuring a non-human character, then follows it with a comparable tale set "in the world of men." In this case the non-human protagonist is an enormous, ancient, and completely worthless tree, a favorite subject of Chuang Tzu's (W 35, 63–65, 67, 209). Carpenter Shih saw the tree standing near a village shrine, but when he examined it he found it was completely worthless — "Use it for doors and it would sweat sap like pine; use it for posts and the worms

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13 Crandell (107); Mair; Watson (*Literature* 161–162, *Works* 5).
would eat them up." Later the tree appeared to the carpenter in a dream and told him, "... I've been trying a long time to be of no use, and though I almost died, I've finally got it. This is of great use to me. If I had been of some use, would I ever have grown this large?" (W 63–64)

Here the uselessness of the tree at the village shrine offers a tangible analogy for the state of mind of the sage. Because the tree cannot be used to make things, it is free simply to exist. Likewise, the sage's utterly simple and undivided state of mind — which Taoists often compare to p'ū, an "uncarved block of wood" (Waley 97–98) — is not "useful" in the conventional sense of the word. Having no conscious purpose or intention, it is a state of pure being. Cultivating this state allows the sage to "remain [psychologically] whole" (W 73–74, 198–99), undisturbed by external events or pressures (see Crandell 112–113). As Chuang Tzu says of another huge tree, "Aha! — it is this unusableness that the Holy Man makes use of!" (W 65) Elsewhere he tells the logician Hui Tzu to stop complaining about the uselessness of a large tree and instead "relax and do nothing by its side" (W 35).

Later in section four Chuang Tzu offers a different analogy, featuring "crippled Shu," who must live with extreme deformity. Yet this very disability allows him to live well:

By sewing and washing he gets enough to fill his mouth; by handling a winnow and sifting out the good grain, he makes enough to feed ten people. When the authorities call out the troops, he stands in the crowd waving good-by; when they get up a big work party, they pass him over because he's a chronic invalid. And when they are doling out grain to the ailing, he gets three big measures and ten bundles of firewood. With a crippled body, he's still able to look after himself and finish out the years Heaven gave him. How much better, then, if he had crippled virtue! (W 66)

Like Shu's seemingly useless body, a state of "crippled virtue" serves the sage well. But Chuang Tzu leaves readers with a challenging puzzle regarding just what crippled virtue might be. His story shows the value of uselessness in the world of men, but only hints at the special kind of uselessness that characterizes the mind of the sage.

Thus, when Chuang Tzu's stories function as analogies, they serve as "rhetorical stories" (Lucaites and Condit 94) which advance tacit value claims about the sage's state of mind — for instance, that it is "useful." However, even as they exhort this state, they do not quite reveal it. The deeds they depict are metaphors for a state of mind, but these acts do not enact or perform that state; "crippled Shu's" ability to make use of his disability does not necessarily require him to exercise the awareness of the sage.14 Hence analogous performances are symbols of a state of awareness, but not clear examples of it. Chuang Tzu must tell other kinds of stories to reveal the mind of the sage more directly.

14 This performance might in fact be the product of the mind of a sage, but the story of the performance does not make this unambiguously clear, because it is possible for Shu to act as he does without having the mind of the sage.
Displaying the Mind of the Sage

By narrating actions that can only be performed by those who possess the mind of the sage, Chuang Tzu can do more than symbolize this state of mind; he can display it. However, this narrative strategy is not easily executed, for even performances that require the mind of the sage may not be unambiguous for all readers, and in any event readers will be inclined to interpret them in light of their existing beliefs. As already noted, this is a shortcoming of direct encounters with sages, and it also poses a challenge for Chuang Tzu as narrator. However, while one cannot easily control direct experience to reduce its ambiguity, narrators can make their stories more revealing through rhetorical means. They can do so in two ways — through what Booth calls "telling" and "showing" (3–20). These strategies have different consequences in a rhetoric of possibility. Briefly noting these consequences will permit further analysis of Chuang Tzu's narrative rhetoric.  

By supplying commentary, or "telling," authors can provide insights about a narrated performance which readers may not be able to gain by reflecting on the details of the performance. In effect, rhetors tell readers what the performance means (see Booth 177–182). When readers cannot test the validity of such commentary against the details of a story, the commentary is indispensable. Then its acceptance depends largely on how much auditors trust the commentator. Hence indispensable commentary is essentially a form of ethical proof. Its value in disclosing unfamiliar possibilities is limited, for stories that rely on it disclose possibilities only if readers accept the commentator's word that they do. It is noteworthy that Chuang Tzu makes little use of this kind of commentary. As I will illustrate shortly, when he does supply commentary it is not indispensable, but serves chiefly to guide readers' reflection on his stories and to confirm and amplify their insights. 

A second way to make stories less ambiguous and more revealing is to stipulate essential narrative details which preclude rival explanations for the state of mind a performance displays. Rhetors thus "show" people the state of mind being displayed, by creating stories that resist being "rewritten" to fit auditors' prior beliefs. Providing essential narrative details permits readers to participate in the circumstances of a story and see for themselves the state of mind that enables a given performance. In so doing, they perceive that state, rather than hearing a description of it by a commentator. Hence stories can "show" people possibilities that cannot easily be described. Moreover, even when a story is clearly invented, the state of mind it reveals transcends the particular details of the story. When auditors behold this state they experience a possibility that does not depend on their trust in a commentator or the veracity of the story. 

Hence "showing" offers auditors a more direct experience of the possibility of a state of mind than "telling" can. Perhaps for this reason Chuang Tzu relies heavily on the former technique. The following story is one of many in which he employs it. Once Confucius was viewing a famous waterfall and rapids, when he saw a man dive into the boiling water, apparently to end his life. "But after the man had gone"
a couple hundred paces, he came out of the water and began strolling along the base of the embankment, his hair streaming down, singing a song." When Confucius asked how he could do this, the man replied,

I have no way. I began with what I was used to, grew up with my nature, and let things come to completion with fate. I go under the swirls and come out with the eddies, following along the way the water goes and never thinking about myself. That's how I stay afloat. (W 126)

One might object that this story merely presents a rather obvious metaphor of "going with the flow." It also contains a commentary, presented as the swimmer's remarks to Confucius. However, while swimming in the rapids may serve as a metaphor for working with life instead of at odds with it, it is more than a metaphor, because such swimming is possible only if one exercises the mind of the sage — a lucid, single-minded awareness of events as they are, free from fear and from the egocentric desire to impose one's will on them. As for the commentary, it is not needed to understand the swimmer's performance, but serves to focus readers' reflection on the performance and to discourage a merely metaphorical reading of it. By imagining what kind of awareness is required to swim in the rapids, readers can discern the mind of the sage for themselves. Moreover, while the story does not imply that they, too, can swim in the rapids, when readers "see for themselves" the awareness needed to swim, their beholding implies that they may be capable of this awareness. For to behold a character's state of mind is to experience it oneself, if only for a moment (Kiritwood, "Narrative"). Thus this narrative strategy helps affirm that the mind of the sage is indeed attainable.

Storytellers in other mystical traditions have similarly described performances which "show" listeners states of awareness that cannot or should not be described (Kirkwood, "Parables"). However, Chuang Tzu's extensive use of this technique is remarkable. In addition to the story just cited, he describes how a master butcher effortlessly carves up an ox by following its natural contours (W 50-51), how a hunchbacked man catches flying cicadas on the sticky end of a pole (W 120-21), and how a sage marvels at the "transformations" of his body caused by serious illness (W 80-81). All these stories depict performances that do more than symbolize the mind of the sage or praise it; they help readers see it for themselves, if they will reflect carefully on the text.

Chuang Tzu's choice of this rhetorical strategy reflects important elements of his philosophy. First, many of the performances he depicts — swimming in the rapids, carving up an ox, catching cicadas — are arresting, but seemingly of little consequence socially, morally, or mystically. This is consistent with the purpose of the Chuang Tzu, for describing such acts discourages efforts to reduce the way of the sage to a code of outward conduct and calls attention to the state of mind that underlies the performances. Second, Chuang Tzu's stories make greater demands on readers than those that supply insights through commentary. His strategy affirms the need for readers to be self-reliant, rather than dependent on others — even sages — for their insights. It also runs the risk that some readers may not "get the point" of some stories. But when readers do meet the challenge of Chuang Tzu's stories, they not only discover unexpected possibilities of awareness, they learn they too are capable of these, in some measure. Hence this narrative strategy, while risky (or "reckless"), offers several advantages over description and actual encounters with sages.
Evoking Audience Responses

In discussing persuasion "in the world of men," Chuang Tzu has Confucius warn against using exaggeration to support one's opinions. He urges speakers to "transmit the established facts" and avoid "words of exaggeration," for the latter are "irresponsible" and undermine trust (W 60). However, the stories of the Chuang Tzu do not follow this conventional advice. Not only are they plainly invented; they also display a "rhetoric of exaggeration" (Yearley 137). The goal of this exaggeration is not, however, to support Chuang Tzu's opinions, but rather "to stun us into some kind of reflection on who we are and why we do what we do" (Yearley 137). Watson contends that the reckless rhetoric of the Chuang Tzu thus "shock[s] the reader into awareness of his own narrow conventionalism" (Literature 162) and "jolts the mind into awareness of a truth outside the pale of ordinary logic" (Works 5).

I would argue, moreover, that challenging people's most deeply seated assumptions about life is not so much Chuang Tzu's ultimate aim, but rather a means to a further end. When his stories shock, stun, or jolt people, they briefly evoke a state of non-rational awareness which approximates the sage's state of mind. These stories are similar to some Zen stories, Hasidic tales, and New Testament parables in which "altering the mood or state of awareness of listeners is a significant strategy in its own right, quite apart from the impact of such stories on listeners' beliefs" (Kirkwood, "Storytelling" 66). Thus Chuang Tzu's rhetoric is not only one of exaggeration, but of direct audience experience.

Several examples of this strategy are found in section six, "The Great and Venerable Teacher." In a series of stories Chuang Tzu depicts the reactions of Taoist sages to their impending death or the death of friends or loved ones (W 83–88). In one such story,

Suddenly Master Lai grew ill. Gasping and wheezing, he lay at the point of death. His wife and children gathered round in a circle and began to cry. Master Li, who had come to ask how he was, said, "Shoo! Get back! Don't disturb the process of change!"

Then he leaned against the doorway and talked to Master Lai. "How marvelous the Creator is! What is he going to make of you next? Where is he going to send you? Will he make you into a rat’s liver? Will he make you into a bug's arm?"

Master Lai responded warmly and placidly to these remarks, concluding, "I will go off to sleep peacefully, and then with a start I will wake up" (W 85).

This story does challenge listeners' beliefs about death, but this is its method, not its end. Those who are shocked by the story find their accustomed beliefs undermined, but they will not suddenly adopt new views of death. However, this is not a shortcoming of the story. On the contrary, the story's success depends on the delay between old beliefs abandoned and new beliefs embraced. For when listeners have not yet adopted new views of death, they must simply encounter Master Lai's death, rather than explaining it. In so doing, they will briefly experience something like the sage's nonintellectual awareness of life. Moreover, like many of Chuang Tzu's stories, this one can elicit not only shock, but amusement. If auditors enjoy Master Li's remarks to Master Lai and his easygoing reply, in their enjoyment they will approach the sage's state of mind even more closely.
Hence, one cannot fully appreciate the narrative rhetoric of the *Chuang Tzu* only by analyzing how it challenges or advocates various beliefs about life. Some of its stories also have a more direct, experiential aim. They disclose an unsuspected possibility by evoking in readers fleeting reactions that approximate the sage's state of mind. These reactions to the stories are different from readers' perceptions of characters' states of awareness in stories that "display" the mind of the sage. Whereas the latter may be discovered after sustained reflection on a story and represent an act of discernment by readers, the former occur spontaneously, as in the reaction to a joke. Such reactions both acquaint readers with unfamiliar states of mind and affirm their ability to experience similar states.

**Conclusion**

Many writers have noted the *Chuang Tzu's* skeptical view of argumentation, language, and eloquent speech, but the text does more than stress the limitations of rhetoric. *Chuang Tzu* displays practical knowledge of moral and political persuasion, although he eschews any interest in practicing either. Still more important, he offers a penetrating critique of the obstacles to achieving the affirmative aim of his text — revealing the mind of the sage. His critique is grounded in a rhetorical perspective, for it hinges on an assessment of how auditors are likely to respond to various attempts to disclose the mind of the sage. *Chuang Tzu* demonstrates that description and even encounters with sages are unlikely to prove successful, given people's conceptual and perceptual predispositions. Yet while he stresses the difficulty of disclosing unfamiliar possibilities to people, *Chuang Tzu* is not merely a cynical critic of those with eyes that do not see and ears that do not hear. On the contrary, his text reflects a fundamental optimism about the power of language to help people encounter the mind of the sage. Much of his text is devoted to telling stories long admired for their humor and their humanity; these stories repeatedly affirm that the mind of the sage is not merely conceivable, but attainable. Thus *Chuang Tzu's* narratives accomplish what he has shown other strategies do not. Studying this "reckless rhetoric" can enhance our understanding of the role of narrative in a rhetoric of possibility.

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