

Lao Tzu, Knowing, and Being

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Editor's Note: Many of us as therapists just do what we do without much thought about underlying philosophical assumptions or implications. Why do we in Hakomi align our work with nature, track experiential signals, and attempt to listen with our hearts? Do we work out of a metaphysics of being or of change? What is the relationship between meaning and suffering? Here Siroj Sorajjakool helps us struggle with these issues in dialogue with contemporary philosophy and theology. His own experience with depression that led him into these issues and the discovery Taoist wisdom is outlined more fully in his book *Wu Wei, Negativity and Depression* (New York: Haworth Press, 2001).

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ABSTRACT: This article deals with philosophical issues of epistemology and ontology related to issues of concern for psychotherapists, most fundamentally life--knowing it rationally or receiving it, observing life's flow, controlling or resisting it, coming to know it or releasing oneself to it, certainly and uncertainty, and subject/object dichotomies. Western philosophers and theologians such as Wittgenstein, Sartre, Heidegger, and Tillich are referenced as well as Eastern thinkers such as Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu.

Introduction

A man is supple and weak when living, but hard and stiff when dead. Grass and trees are pliant and fragile when living, but dried and shriveled when dead. Thus the hard and the strong are the comrades of death; the supple and the weak are the comrades of life. Therefore a weapon that is strong will not vanquish; A tree that is strong will suffer the axe. The strong and big takes the lower position, the supple and weak takes the higher position.

In describing the early American's view of "nature" John Fieg (1980, 9) writes: "A foe rather than a friend, the physical environment seemed a huge obstacle course which man had to somehow outwit. Harmony was out of the question. Control was the answer." Conversely the 1283 inscription by King Ram Kamhaeng describing Sukothai, the former capital of Thailand, states "This land of Thai is good. In the waters are fish; in the fields is rice Coconut groves abound in this land. Jackfruit abounds in this land. Mango trees abound in this land . . . whoever wants to play, plays. Whoever wants to laugh, laughs. Whoever wants to sing, sings (Fieg, 1980, 9)" Hence the role of human beings is to conform to the rhythm of nature.ⁱ

The above accounts remind us of the predominant attitude in modern societies: control and manipulation of nature on

one hand, and compliance toward nature in the spirit of Lao Tzu, on the other. Lao Tzu (1963, 140) writes:

In the world there is nothing more submissive and weak than water. yet for attacking that which is hard and strong nothing can surpass it. This is because there is nothing that can take its place. That the weak overcomes the strong, and the submissive overcomes the hard, everyone in the world knows yet no one can put this knowledge into practice.

I am personally intrigued by the metaphor of "water" and its movement. A major part of my life was spent trying to conquer and control and yet I sense something enticing and mystical about the "flow" of life. Alan Watts' (1975, 90) description of Taoists that states, "They have no design to subjugate or alter the universe by force or will-power, for their art is entirely to go along with the flow of things in an intelligent way" makes me want to find out more about the possible relation between the "flow of water" and psychotherapy.

"To flow" suggests the ability to adapt its shape and form in order to follow the course of gravity and the contour of riverbanks. It is the ability to move along the line of less resistance. Philosophically, this concept rejects any attempt to encapsulate reality in a set of logic, to understand life rationally, or to capture divinity in a systematic form. We have in the past sought to fit life and reality into a system of logic and rationality. We have constructed systems of thinking that seek to explain everything consistently and tried to delineate any

contradictions that do not fit into our concept of causal relation.

Life is Not about Knowing.

In contrast to the rational attempt to grasp reality Wittgenstein, in the *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology* writes: "Words have their meaning only in the flow of life (Malcolm, 1986, 238)." In explaining this concept, Malcolm points out that philosophers look for the foundation of language in a priori principles, axioms, self-evident truths, immediate experiences or sense-data, but for Wittgenstein the foundations of language and thinking are forms of life.ⁱⁱ The concept of the "form of life" brings request for explanations or justification (rational process) to a stop. This is so because our connectedness with the world is not one of knowledge (knowing the world). If the world is something we come to know then we can question the act of knowing (we can question the certainty of what we know, the rational process). To know the world suggests that we somehow through rational process arrive at the conclusion that there is a chair. Without the act of knowing, we would not have realized that there is a chair. Without the knowledge that our body needs oxygen, we would not struggle for air when we fall into a river. If this be the case, it is therefore justifiable to ask 'how we come to know?' How can we rationally justify that there is an external reality? Asking this question is like asking, can we justify struggling for air without the knowledge that our body needs oxygen or can I justify asking if there is a chair when I'm sitting on one.

Can we truly justify our act of knowing that there is an external reality? According to Wittgenstein and Cavell, the world is not something we know (if by knowing we refer to an act of logical analysis, a rational process of cause and effect). The world is not something we come to know.ⁱⁱⁱ It is a form of life that is given to us. We realize that it "is" prior to any cognitive reflection.^{iv} In *On Certainty* (Cavell, 1979, 148) Wittgenstein writes: "Why don't I satisfy myself that I still have two feet, when I want to get up from a chair? There is no why. I simply don't? That is how I act." Commenting on this 'certainty' Malcolm (1986, 153) writes, "This natural certainty (or 'sureness') is too fundamental to be either 'justified' or 'unjustified'. It is presupposed by any use of language in which a justification might be framed." Language does not emerge from reasoning but from natural forms of life.^v

By showing that we are in attunement with the world, that the external reality is not something we come to know through rational process, Wittgenstein puts a full stop to philosophy, or to put it in his own word, 'leaves everything as it is'.^{vi} This 'full stop' is clearly stated by Phillips (1993, 80):

[T]o question certain propositions which are held fast by all that surrounds them is senseless. If our trust in these propositions were undermined, if we could not show in our actions that we took these things for granted, we would not say that we were mistaken, since we would not know any more what it would mean to speak of knowing, not knowing, believing, not believing, being right or being mistaken, about such things. At certain points we say, 'But this is what I mean by saying it's a tree, a person, or a certain colour.' Or in physics we say, 'This is what I mean when I say that the conclusion is justified.' Wittgenstein asks, 'Is it wrong for me to be guided in my actions by the propositions of physics? Am I to say that I have no good ground for doing so? Isn't precisely this what we call a 'good ground'? (*On Certainty*, 608) Our request for justifications in our talk about physical objects, persons, colours and physics, comes to an end. Our assurance is shown in the way we do go on, in the way we act with respect to these things.^{vii}

The world and reality is not about knowing and grasping through the rational process. Any attempt at placing the world into a consistent logical conclusion is uprooting life from its natural form; is resisting the natural flow of life.^{viii}

Life is About Observing Its Flow.

Tillich (1951, 71) writes: "Epistemology, the 'knowledge' of knowing, is a part of ontology, the knowledge of being, for knowing is an event within the totality of events. Every epistemological assertion is implicitly ontological. Therefore, it is more adequate to begin an analysis of existence with the question of being rather than with the problem of knowledge." Implied in this statement is the idea that knowledge is suspended in being and not being in knowledge.

To understand life is to observe the rhythm and the flow of life. To observe is to learn to listen carefully to life, to pay attention to our thoughts, feelings, and images that come to us naturally. It is to learn to listen to our hearts because the heart always seeks to speak to us.

Controlling/Resisting.

We seek to control that which we feel is out of control. At a deeper level there exists the internal desire of "being" wanting to define its own "being." In attempting to define "being" one reflects cognitively. This cognitive reflection results in a definition of what it means to be, the "ought" of "beings." In describing "being" defining its own path of being from a theological view point, Bonhoeffer (1965) suggests that thinking in terms of good and evil implies our desire to ordain or own path of being for God. Through guilt we become aware of our disunity (the lack of authenticity). Through conscience we construct our

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understanding of "Being" and through our knowledge of good and evil we strive to authenticate ourselves, to be reunited with "Being." But in all our striving through our knowledge of good and evil we are still aware that we are in guilt. From our own resources we cannot authenticate ourselves because we do not know our essence. Only the Creator knows human essence. When we try to authenticate ourselves from our knowledge of good and evil, we transgress our limit, deny our state of creatureliness and seek to be the creator. In such an attempt we experience self-alienation. In describing self-alienation Bonhoeffer writes (1965):

The antitype to the man who is taken up into the form of Christ is the man who is his own creator, his own judge and his own restorer, the man whose life misses the mark of his own human existence and who, therefore, sooner or later destroys himself. Man's apostasy from Christ is at the same time his apostasy from his own essential nature (p. 110).

In seeking to define "being" from "being-itself" one sets up criteria for what it means "to be." In the process of setting up criteria we seek to align the "ought" and the "should" with our sense of reasonableness. We define good parenting, good citizen, good children, good spouse, good society, good Christians and so forth. From these definitions we strive to fulfill our tasks and work toward getting others to come in line with these definitions. The inability to fulfill these tasks within ourselves and in others leads to frustration, agitation, conflict, anger, denial etc. The psychological effect of this inability within ourselves is well stated by Scott Peck (1978) in his description of neurotic individuals:

The speech of the neurotic is notable for such expressions as "I ought to," "I should," and "I shouldn't," indicating the individual's self-image as an inferior man or woman, always falling short of the mark, always making the wrong choices...In actuality, many individuals have both a neurosis and a character disorder and are referred to as "character neurotics," indicating that in some areas of their lives they are guilt-ridden by virtue of having assumed responsibility that is not really theirs, while in other areas of their lives they fail to take realistic responsibility for themselves (p. 36).

The attempt at directing ourselves according to our self-definition may lead to the alienation of ourselves, the alienation that results from the inability of the self to fulfill its own self-definition. This alienation comes in the forms of the lack of self-acceptance, denial, repression, rationalization, guilt and self-blame. These behaviors potentially lead to depression. The lack of self-esteem, guilt and self-blame are characteristic behaviors of depressive personality. In describing the relation between depression and self-esteem David Burns (1980) writes:

When you are depressed, you invariably believe that you are worthless. The worse the depression, the more

you feel this way...A recent survey by Dr. Aaron Beck revealed that over 80 percent of depressed patients expressed self-dislike. Furthermore, Dr. Beck found that depressed patients see themselves as deficient in the very qualities they value most highly: intelligence, achievement, popularity, attractiveness, health, and strength. He said a depressed self-image can be characterized by the four D's: You feel Defeated, Defective, Deserted, and Deprived...Almost all negative emotional reactions inflict their damage only as a result of low self-esteem (p. 59).

Likewise the attempt at aligning others with our definition of "being" is also self-destructive. In trying to make others fulfill what you define as an appropriate role ("Make them behave as you think they should. . . . We have written the play, and we will see to it that the actors behave and the scenes unfold exactly as we have decided they should. . . . If we charge ahead insistently enough, we can stop the flow of life, transform people, and change things to our liking"—Beattie, 1987, 71) for them, one ends up getting frustrated and angry. As long as this belief remains, there is no end to the feeling and the expression of anger. On the other hand if the anger is being repressed, it will exhibit itself in other self-destructive forms.^{ix}

Ontological Basis for Philosophical Consideration.

Although we like to think of ourselves as rational beings, in our everyday lives we have come to realize that our rationality resides within "beings" and it is from this "being" that the structure of rationality is being determined. It is what Tillich (1951, 79) calls the "depth of reason" as a substance which appears in the rational structure or "being-itself"; which proceeds reason and is manifest through it. In *The World as Will and Idea* Schopenhauer argues that we human beings do not reason from cause to effect. We reason backward. We start from what we want, and from this will to achieve what we want, we search for reasons to support and justify our wants (Mayer, 1951, 386). "Men," says Schopenhauer "are only apparently drawn from in front; in reality they are pushed from behind (Durant, 1961, 313)."

The structure of "being" seems to be in possession of the power to dictate the direction of "being." And it is from within this dynamic of "being" that "being" searches for its definition and its fulfillment. The philosophical search reflects the attempt of "being" to find the best possible answer for what it means to be within the environment of that "being" itself. This attempt is clearly reflected in the philosophical thinking of various religions. While I was watching "Little Buddha," (a Bernardo Bertolucci film reflecting the Tibetan quest for the reincarnation of their teacher) it dawned on me that religious quest is closely connected to the issues of suffering, old-age, death and dying. It is an attempt at reframing worldviews to

accommodate, explain and cope with human suffering.^x From a religious point of view, suffering shapes our way of looking at reality. World religions seek a way of looking at reality that will reduce suffering. In his statement regarding human suffering, Grimm (1958, 138), a Buddhist Scholar, replaced Descartes' "Cogito Ergo Sum" with "I suffer therefore I am." While Hinduism resolves suffering by turning reality into illusion, Buddhism teaches that the real is real but the self is not (*anatta*--the doctrine of "no-self"). Christians believe that suffering is the result of sin. Confucius teaches that the lack of morality and respect for the elderly are the causes of suffering while Taoist masters, Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, see suffering as the result of imbalance between the yin and the yang.

Dictated by the inner ontological need, "being" searches for the meaning of the self within the world of pain and suffering by reframing being's understanding of reality (its immediate environment). The hermeneutical task is to define reality in such a way that will provide meaning for "being" while reduces pain and suffering. The Taoist masters taught us that the meaning of "being" is contained in "being-itself" and therefore this meaning has to be attained through listening to "being." Only in aligning ourselves with nature do we come to understand the meaning of "being." And when we listen carefully we will discover that this "being" has an inner mechanism that reduces pain and suffering.

Man models himself after Earth.
Earth models itself after Heaven.
Heaven models itself after Tao.
And Tao models itself after Nature.

Commenting on this passage Johanson and Kurtz (1991, 68) write: "The *Tao-te ching* suggests that nature is the best model for everything, perhaps especially for psychotherapy."

NOTES:

ⁱSad to say, conformity to nature as suggested by King Ram Kamhaeng has now been replaced by control through technology.

ⁱⁱSimilar concept which lay an emphasis on the ontological structure is suggested by Tillich (1951, 169) when he writes: "The truth of all ontological concepts is their power of expressing that which makes the subject-object structure possible."

ⁱⁱⁱSpeaking about knowing Cavell writes, ". . . the human creature's basis in the world as a whole, its relation to the world as such, is not that of knowing, anyway not what we think of as knowing (Cavell, 1979, 241)."

^{iv}I seem to notice a certain proximity between this idea and the concept of *Dasien* as suggested by Heidegger. Heidegger's *Dasien* has been thrown into the world of objects (we do not know where we come from and we do not need to. To know is to make essence precede existence). By this concept Heidegger is able to overcome the Kantian dichotomy (subject-object). But their reasoning (Heidegger's and Wittgenstein's) differ. Heidegger's *Dasien* is his attempt at justifying existentialism whereas for Wittgenstein, it is an attempt to show that there is no need for any kind of justification. In discussing the relationship

between these two concepts, Cavell suggests that Heidegger attempts to lay out 'how to think about what the human creature's relation to the world as such is' whereas Wittgenstein attempts to 'investigate the cost of our continuous temptation to knowledge (Cavell, 1979, 241).' It is interesting at this point to note how Sartre (1956) takes Heidegger's *Dasien* a step further. In attempting to show that being emerges out of nothing, Sartre argues that consciousness arises only in relation to object outside of itself. There is no consciousness-in-itself apart from other object; in fact, consciousness cannot arise without external object. Thus consciousness is nothingness. It is nothingness in itself because consciousness is always consciousness of something or someone. Through this analysis Sartre (1956) also arrives at the conclusion that phenomenon is 'absolutely indicative of itself.' In Wittgenstein too we see an emphasis on 'description' (in contrast to 'prescription'). Commenting on this point Hilmy (1987, 60) writes: "The notion of 'something behind the signs' is of course precisely what Wittgenstein was repudiating in his rejection of his own 'earlier' metalogical explanations of language."

^vCavell (1979, 178) suggests that when we teach a word we initiate them 'into the relevant forms of life held in language.'

^{vi}In *Philosophical Investigation* Wittgenstein (p., 133) writes: "The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to (cited in Cavell, 1979)"

^{vii}Of course the 'full stop' does not fully stop and D.Z. Phillips went on discussing the difficulties in contemporary philosophy of religion at stopping. To this difficulty Cavell (1988, 48) admits (in his lingo) "that the threat of skepticism is a natural or inevitable presentiment of the human mind" and therefore it is something we are habitually 'forced' or 'driven.'"

^{viii}This concept can be applied directly toward the understanding of the writings of Chuang-tzu. According to Chuang-tzu, cognitivism "fosters irrelevance to life, and manifests itself in irresponsible mystical abandonment of the self and of the world (Wu, 1965, 14-15)."Cognitivism uproots a person from his surroundings and contexts.

^{ix}According to Paul Meier (1993, 168-172), repressed anger leads to depression.

^xIn Hinduism the analysis of suffering is arrived at via the understanding that impermanent creates suffering and therefore any attachment to "impermanent" leads finally to suffering. In order to resolve this Hinduism proposes that that which is real is permanent and that which is impermanent is unreal. This hypothesis suggests that only when we arrive at the "real" will we be able to avoid suffering. In discussing the real, Hinduism suggests the "Stillness" of the self. The attainment of stillness, of attaching oneself to nothingness naturally leads to no-suffering. Buddhism reframes this concept differently. In Buddhism the self is not there in the first place. If the self is not there, there is therefore no need to attach oneself to anything that is impermanent. The attainment of this philosophical belief of no-self through cultivation of self-discipline helps one to attain peace. The self suffers. When this self is not there, there is no possibility of suffering.

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*Yet mystery and manifestations
arise from the same source.
This source is called darkness.
(Lao Tzu, 1)*

*Darkness with darkness.
The gateway to all
understanding.
(Lao Tzu, 1)*

*Ever desireless, one can see
the mystery.
Ever desiring, one sees
the manifestations.
(Lao Tzu, 1)
(Lao Tzu quoted in
Johanson & Kurtz, *Grade Unfolding*, 1991)*