

I AM THE WAY: MICHAEL POLANYI'S TAOISM

by James W. Stines

Abstract. Several contemporary writers have found certain correlations between Taoism and modern philosophy of science to be particularly noteworthy because of their usefulness for interpreting world views, implicit or explicit, in each. However, the recent project in science and epistemology—the work of Michael Polanyi—which is probably most fruitfully resonant with Taoism has not yet been explored in that connection. The purpose of the present article is to begin that exploration. The essay provides a preliminary sketch of certain key moments in Polanyi's thought and then turns attention to the Taoist themes of *Tao*, *wu-wei*, and *tz'u* as these illuminate and are illuminated by the Polanyian post-critical epistemology.

Textbook discussions of Taoism often misleadingly suggest that Taoism teaches ignorance pure and simple (Blackney 1955; Carmody and Carmody 1983; Hopfe 1980; Noss 1980). They also generally note that the qualities of weakness and passivity are inculcated; however, it is usually indicated that this weakness and passivity are as the weakness and passivity of water or of women. Clearly the import is that, being weak and passive in this way, who needs strength! But it is just as important, and in continuity with this ironic twist, to take account of the irony of ignorance in Taoism. Being ignorant in the way which is Tao, who needs knowledge?!

EPISTEMOLOGY AND THREE THEMES OF TAOISM

Taoism, of course, has a long and complex history whose philosophical perspectives are classically stated in the *Treatise on the Way and Its Power* (*Tao Te Ching*) and in the *Chuang-tzu*. While these probably date from the fourth and third centuries B.C., many of their decisive themes date from 1000 B.C. or earlier. Among these themes, often reciprocal and overlapping, the following are of central concern to this essay.

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[*Zygon*, vol. 20, no. 1 (March 1985).]

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Tao. First is the notion of *Tao* itself which connotes both a certain characteristic harmony, the way of the whole realm of nature, and the primal reality conceived, not as a being, but as something closer to the ground of being or to Plato's idea of "the good." It is fundamental to our purposes to note that, while *Tao* suggests the effortless course and order of nature, it is utterly intractable to focal or explicit awareness. It is never an object for knowledge in the context of a subject-object duality because it is inalienable and because it is associated with the incommensurability of life and possibility with stasis. It is said to be like a block of untooled wood which, though small, "may still excel the world" (*Lao Tzu* 32).¹ "Most perfect, yet it seems . . . poured out, an empty void. The way that can be way-ed is not the eternal Way; The name that can be named is not the real Name" (*Lao Tzu* 1).²

Wu-wei. A second central and closely correlated theme is that of *wu-wei* which suggests a kind of *kenosis* on humanity's part—that is, the self-emptying, quietness, stillness by which a human being allows the Way to be (to Way!) through him or her. The *Tao* never appears to pretense and its lifelessness. As appearance, as phenomenon, it is fraught with possibility and life; it is, therefore, elusive and disappearing before the timeless closedness of the finished and certain. Here, as in relation to the God of the Psalmist, the only acceptable sacrifice is the openness of "a broken and contrite heart" (Psalm 51:17). *Wei wu-wei* is to act without action through stillness and silence. It gives rise to a speaking and a naming in which *wu-wei* is expressed: I speak because spoken-to, having been quiet and continuing to be quiet even as I speak. Clearly then, *wu-wei* should not be understood in the mode of a kind of Cartesian suspension prefatory to objective and apodictic certainty. It is more closely aligned with what Søren Kierkegaard called "mastered irony" or, as we shall see, with what Michael Polanyi has described as the personal and fiduciary mode of relation to truth. It may be said that, in terms of Taoism and of such *subjective* thinkers as Polanyi (and Kierkegaard), the Cartesian bracketing of subjectivity together with the pretense of objective certainty simply conspire to create illusion by reducing phenomena to illusion. The Taoist way beyond illusion is through ignorance or no-knowledge which is expressed as *wu-wei*. *Wu-wei*, then, is a mode of the subject pole in the concrete subject-object relatedness in which *wu-wei* and the manifestation of the *Tao* correspond. Human speech in this context is not fundamentally argumentative, but presentational and confessional and rooted in silence.

Tz'u. The third intertwined thematic focus concerns a concept associated with love and sympathy and with the mystery of

organization—*tz'u*. There is a prominent preoccupation in Taoism with the question of the relation between wholes and parts, between particulars and the comprehensive entities to which they are subordinate. Relatedness, synthesis, sympathy, and love presuppose some sort of discontinuity and freedom, contingency, and possibility. The Taoists speak of this requisite space or nothingness as nonbeing or the void. Nonbeing, however, stands in dialectical tension with *tz'u* which is the power of relatedness and integration, “the great sympathy.” “The realm of nonbeing is the ground of the great sympathy or *tz'u*” (Chung-Yuan [1963] 1970, 35). “Only in the world of absolutely free identity does the great sympathy exist: the universal force that holds together man and man and all things” (Chung-Yuan [1963] 1970, 35). In other words, no-knowledge or *wu-wei* dialectically corresponds with freedom and in turn, with the indeterminate possibilities of *tz'u*—the indeterminate possibilities of discovery and of creation and organization. Caught up in the power of *tz'u* one is caught up in the depth of reason and in the selflessness of *wu-wei*. Thereby the Tao is manifest—the way in which and by which humans, green leaves, tiny fish, and xi-negative particles are as they are.

TAOISM AND POST-CRITICAL EPISTEMOLOGY

Several contemporary writers have seen in the elaboration of these themes both an anticipation of and a most fruitful resource for interpreting many of the most notable developments of modern scientific epistemology (Capra 1975; Chung-Yuan [1963] 1970; Northrop 1959; Siu 1957; Zukov 1979).³ My own reading of Taoism and the *Tao Te Ching* has been influenced by these writings and by the work of certain existentialist philosophers and has been focused particularly upon the theme of epistemological irony. However, the contemporary work in science and epistemology which is probably most profoundly and fruitfully resonant with Taoism—the work of Michael Polanyi—has not yet been explored in that connection. The principle concern of this paper is to begin that exploration.

Epistemological irony is a prominent feature of much of Eastern thought. However, it should already be evident that Taoism embodies certain unique turns in this connection and that these turns set it apart from those tendencies of unrelieved negativity (toward phenomena) such as are found, for instance, in Sankara's Vedanta philosophy; therefore, they provide Taoism a more ready entree to the Western mind while, nevertheless, standing in creative tension with it. Coincident with these considerations one finds importantly analogous features—and thereby interesting and helpful tools for reciprocal interpretation—in the thought of Polanyi. Hence, the following pro-

vides a sketch of relevant elements of Polanyi's post-critical epistemology and then turns attention to the aforementioned themes in Taoist tradition as seen in the Polanyian light.

Hopefully, the continuities and distinctions which appear will lend new dimensions to East-West dialogue and give credence to the idea that a reciprocal Polanyian-Taoist hermeneutic is intrinsically interesting and highly useful. As something of a by-product of the larger discussion, there emerges a rather striking potential interpretation of the radical claim which the fourth Gospel writer attributes to Jesus: "I am the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6).

FOUR ASPECTS OF TACIT KNOWING

In his Terry Lectures at Yale University in 1962, published under the title of *The Tacit Dimension*, Polanyi reconsiders human knowing "by starting from the fact that *we can know more than we can tell*" ([1966] 1967, 4). In his earlier, much larger work on epistemology, entitled *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi already had provided the basic evidence and argumentation for claiming as a fact that we can know more than we can tell and for his move to distinguish such knowledge from knowledge which is tellable or explicit by referring to it as "tacit knowledge." Hence, in *The Tacit Dimension* his citation of evidential material for these basic moves is not of major importance. What is of major importance, however, is his discussion of four principal aspects of this phenomenon which he calls tacit knowing. They are, first, the functional structure of tacit knowing, second, the phenomenal structure of tacit knowing, third, the semantic aspect of tacit knowing, and, fourth, the ontological aspect of tacit knowing.

In discussing the first of these, the functional structure of tacit knowing, Polanyi is concerned with pointing to that aspect of the tacit which may be characterized in the language of *purpose* and *achievement*. There are two terms, moments, or directions of tacit knowing. This may be illustrated by reference to numerous experiments which are perhaps best known in a popular context in relation to the mechanics of hidden persuasion. The psychologists R. S. Lazarus and R. A. McCleary presented subjects with a large number of nonsense syllables.⁴ After showing certain of these syllables they administered electric shocks. After a few repetitions of this pattern, symptoms presented themselves which made it clear that the subjects were anticipating the shocks at the sight of the shock syllables. Yet, when questioned, they could not identify them. They knew when to expect the shock but could not tell what made them expect it. This and many similar experiments demonstrate the relations of the two terms of tacit knowing. In these experiments these terms are, first, the association syllables, and, sec-

ond, their connection with the electric shocks. The experimental subjects learned to connect the sight of shock syllables with the electric shock and thus suppressed the shock syllables in order to avoid shock. Yet this connection remained tacit. Why? The subjects were riveting their attention to the electric shocks and were relying upon their awareness of the shock-producing particulars only in their bearing upon the electric shock. The electric shock is known by attending to it. That is, it is the object of focal or explicit awareness. The shock-producing particulars, on the other hand, are known not by attending to them but by relying upon them for attending to something else. Of them and their connection to the electric shock one does not have focal, but subsidiary awareness. Hence, it may be said that one *attends from* what is, ipso facto, a subsidiary awareness of these particulars in an attempt to envision a meaning or purpose which they achieve. This is the functional structure of tacit knowing. That is to say, tacit awareness functions to achieve an awareness of particulars in the interconnections and concatenations by which they may comprise a comprehensive entity which is their joint meaning and/or purpose. While analysis may reveal to focal or explicit awareness some of the particulars of a given meaning or entity and some of their possible linkages, particulars in this explicit context have a merely possible role or meaning which is quite different from their roles in lived meaning as components of a purpose or comprehensive entity which they jointly achieve.

A second principle aspect of tacit knowing is its phenomenal structure. This refers to the fact that the particulars of which one is subsidiarily aware in focusing upon any comprehensive entity present themselves to awareness in the appearance of the object or entity which is their meaning. The experimental subjects described above become aware of shock syllables in terms of the apprehension it evokes in them. Polanyi says, "We may say, in general, that we are aware of the proximal term of an act of tacit knowing in the *appearance* of its distal term; we are aware of that *from* which we are attending to another thing in the appearance of that thing" (italics added) (Polanyi [1966] 1967, 11).

The third major aspect of tacit knowing, the semantic aspect, refers to the separation of a meaning from whatever has this meaning. Polanyi's background as a physician comes to the foreground in his illustration of this point. He says that

anyone using a probe for the first time will feel its impact against his fingers and palm. But as we learn to use a probe, or to use a stick for feeling our way, our awareness of its impact on our hand is transformed with a sense of its point touching the objects we are exploring. This is how an interpretive effort transposes meaningless feelings into meaningful ones and places these at some distance from the original feeling. We become aware of the feelings in our hand in terms of their meaning located at the tip of the probe or stick to which we are

attending. . . . We may call this the *semantic aspect* of tacit knowing. All meaning tends to be displaced *away from ourselves*, and this, in fact, is my justification for using the terms "proximal" and "distal" to describe the first and second terms of tacit knowing (Polanyi [1966] 1967, 12-13).

In seeking clarification on this latter point, it is important to recall a concept which Polanyi develops at length in *Personal Knowledge*, the concept of indwelling or embodied knowledge. The paradigmatic case of tacit awareness is the kind of awareness people most habitually possess in relation to their own bodies and bodily processes. The body is, as it were, a probe and the ultimate instrument of all our knowledge. We do not ordinarily attend to it except in the privative cases of pain and illness; rather, we rely upon it for attending to other things. And everything which we annex to our own bodies—whether physical probes like telescopes and eyeglasses, or conceptual probes like the principle of the rectilinear propagation of light or the myth of Purusha—becomes for us a tacit moment in the bipolar tacit-explicit structure of knowledge. That is to say, all knowledge which we have by relying on it for attending to other things becomes knowledge which we have by dwelling in it, by embodying it or incorporating it. Our bodies in this enriched sense—human bodies in any other sense are abstractions, that is, corpses (*Körper*), not lived-bodies (*Leib*)⁵—become the horizon from which and to which there appears a world, which is to say a conglomerate of explicit meanings. Hence, the proximal term in tacit knowing is what we know by relying upon it, that is, by living its meanings. It is, in short, René Descartes to the contrary, embodied intellect. In the same way that focal attention and, hence, meanings tend to be displaced away from our own bodies, and in accord with the fact that for each of us our own bodies continually point beyond themselves, meaning tends to be at the distal end of the tacit connection between particulars and the comprehensive entities of which they are components.

However, it is worthwhile noting that there is some fruitful equivocation in Polanyi on this point which may be unscrambled, at least partially, by recourse to expressing the issues in terms of the relation between *being* a meaning and *having* a meaning. In general it may be said that to be a meaning is, epistemologically speaking, to be an object of focal awareness and, ontologically speaking, to be a comprehensive entity; to have a meaning is to be an object for subsidiary awareness and, hence, ontologically speaking, to be a subsidiary component of a comprehensive entity. The semantic aspect of tacit knowing, then, has to do with the fact that the tacit dimension is the meaning-bearer, the foundation and harbinger of meaning as the tellable.

For example, when one hears the sentence "The bull is charging!" uttered in the midst of an enclosure in which there are several tem-

peramental Black Angus bulls, one is highly unlikely to focus upon individual words, syllables, letters, the mechanics of voice production, and the possible connections between all of these particulars. Those are ready-to-hand, incorporated and lived, and by virtue of that fact they immediately point away from themselves to their joint meaning. Otherwise, the listener is paralyzed, and all is lost; relevant meaning will have failed of transmission; the attempt to alarm will have misfired. Words will have degenerated into sounds which is to say that the sounds, as objects of focal attention, will have lost their semantic dimension. They will be the meaning of the moment and, as such, they will not have the meaning of an alarm and its correlative force of motivating the listener to focus attention on the charging bull and the business of getting out of his way.

From these three aspects of tacit knowing—the functional, phenomenal, and semantic—Polanyi moves to a fourth, the ontological aspect. We have already assumed that aspect in the foregoing in noting the ontological correlations of the semantic aspect of tacit knowing. Here is another major dimension of Polanyi's break with Cartesian tradition, and herein resides one of the fundamental leads into new dimensions of the East-West dialogue. Polanyi does not have the usual set of mind-body, knowing-being, thought-extension, internal-external, being-having, subject-object problems which derive from assuming the Cartesian dichotomy at the outset. Rather, he begins with mind in its encountered forms of knowing and never finds it any other way than as a form of indwelling and, hence, as sense-giving in constant relation to something-not-itself. That is, it is a living *relation* to its objects. Or, to put it the other way around, he never discovers any other objects, extended or otherwise, than as meanings for a form of indwelling. But the meanings in this case are not the indwelling. They are for an indwelling. Hence, just as all knowing is personal knowing, so all truth is truth as it resounds through persons. (We have here duality or relationality, but never dichotomy.) As a consequence, there cannot be objective truth-tests in the sense of tests made by a Cartesian mind—that is, a mind which is not a form of indwelling and sense-giving. The final ground of the human sense of failure and success in the pursuit of meaning and truth is to be found in failure or success in the risky, venturesome extension of the horizon of meanings through incorporation. It is to be found in the attempt to annex any new potential objects or meanings-for-consciousness into its form of indwelling for the pursuit of the “still more” and the “not yet.”

The possibility that such attempts may fail in terms of the standards integral to the embodied mind which makes them, or that they may even issue in a revolution in that mind, is an extension of the fact that

these standards are, as Polanyi says, personal or self-set. They exist by virtue of personal acts of accreditation; and these acts, in their turn, always presuppose integral experience extending backward in time and logic to the most primary appropriations of culture. Tacit, that is to say embodied, actualizations of self-set standards provide the power of understanding rather than the object of understanding for explicit awareness. The ground of knowing is, then, personal and fiduciary rather than either objective or merely voluntaristic.

In the history of science it is clear that, within a given area of investigation, subscription to some models, even though they prove to be misguided or impoverished, is preferable to a state of affairs where there are no prevailing models at all. To a mentality presumably devoid of the commitment situations which are incurred by acts of accreditation every direction of attention has equal appeal to every other, and there can be no sorting or ordering which is not gratuitous. Hence, over the whole range of human attempts to know, fiduciary acts of indwelling which might be misguided are risked. The sense of risk and venture and the strength of the existential component implied by these tend to vary with the comprehensiveness of the integrations being pursued. But in no case, even in physics or in mathematics, can the personal participation of the knower be utterly escaped and replaced by purely formal operations. The rejection of the Augustinian order—“unless you believe, you shall not understand”—implies the rejection of any meaning or knowing whatever.⁶

In Polanyi then, and it is here submitted in Taoist thought as well, there is this unavoidable equivocation with the concept of meaning; and this is no failure. Language, as such, is not univocal; rather it is equivocal. Its explicit apparatus points beyond itself insofar as simultaneously it points back to the speaker, the meaning-bearer. In turn, anything that is to be said to *be* a meaning and to have ontological status receives that accreditation at least in part by virtue of its promise and capability for also playing the subsidiary role of *having* a meaning or being indwelled. This, if you will, is a kind of Socratic or Kierkegaardian or later Wittgensteinian kind of truth-test. Meaning as something merely attended-to exists in the realm of the questionable or purely possible, in the mode of the subjunctive; as such it is parasitic upon the indicative mode of the embodied consciousness. It moves to indicative and ontological status insofar as it also is deemed worthy of annexation and subordination in the role of a probe. The ontological correlation of tacit knowing, then, consists not only in the fact that the known reflects the structure of knowing but also in the fact that it corresponds with knowing in a dialectical sense. Whatever is accredited as being real and/or true is, as such, embodied by the knower and the

knowing process itself. Here is the crux: The truth becomes ever more *atoned, attuned, at one with* the way; ontology becomes epistemology. Epistemology expresses ontology. But the correspondence here is not the traditional and therefore, perhaps, the more obvious one, in terms of which new accumulations of information simply become the objective factual foundation for an explicit process of inference making. Rather, truth incorporated and lived by the subject takes on a life of its own and accordingly gains in its unspecifiable powers insofar as it wholly outstrips any explicit control or deliberate manipulation.

The progress of the present writing, however erroneous it may turn out to be, is a reduplication of this process. Upon sitting down to write I find myself without any explicit pre-vision of the words I am to write. At most there is a rather polymorphous sense for a set of relationships which I would like to bring to light. At the moment they interest me intrinsically, but I cannot separate that from the fact that they hold promise of having a meaning, that is, of being fruitful. However, all this comes to me presently as a question which I can state only in the most general terms; I am not at all clear and explicit about the object of my search. Nevertheless, I am guided by assuming this problem. My difficulty and hesitancy in bringing this vision or potential meaning into focus and in supporting or defending it has corresponding epistemological and ontological bases. That is, tacit awareness corresponds with the particulars of the comprehensive vision or entity which guides my thinking. But these particulars, subsidiary components of the entity, do not gain control over their own boundary conditions, that is to say, over the way they are to be related and organized. Correlatively, there is no *a priori* rule or formula for guiding me in the organization of these particulars or even for telling me which are the relevant particulars. There is a tension, a dialectical interplay, between the object or comprehensive entity intended and the way or, if you will, the Tao by which or from which it is intended. How then do my particular words and sentences emerge, and how are they guided and checked? Not by explicit pre-vision of the particulars as such, but rather by my assent to a sense of call, a hunch, or a problem which in initial states is only vaguely sensed but which lures me by its promise. Therefore, the particulars which are proximal terms of that vision come to light here on the page in a very halting and tentative manner. As I write these words and sentences they seem at times to emerge spontaneously, and these particulars often appear to be the ones which are least haphazard. They are the ones which emerge when, trusting to the vision, however fuzzy its outline, I allow it to coordinate spontaneously all of the particulars of my performance. Nevertheless, each new sentence emerges at first blush, blushing. I examine it. Can I rely upon it? Can I go from here? Or must I strike it as being unresponsive?

Hence, in a profound sense I, the embodied knower, am *way* and *truth*. I, the subject, am becoming atoned with and attuned by my objects. But I am always the not-yet of meaning in the sense that among the realities which I always am for as long as I am is my possibilities for meaning. I have meaning as the bearer of meaning. So, as *way* and *truth* I am also *life*, for I am constantly becoming one with meaning. As historical and religious being I am always pointing beyond myself (semantic aspect of tacit knowing) to the “not I” or “not yet,” and towards “the Kingdom” or “the Father” or “point Omega” or “Tao” (“way-without-end”). Continually, therefore, I am being converted whether I will it or not.⁷ As Polanyi says, “I am by nature addressed to the attainment of meaning, and what genuinely seems to me to open doors to greater meaning is what I can only verbally refuse to believe.” Quoting George Santayana, Polanyi goes on to say, “Should we ever hear the summons of a liturgical religion calling to us: *Sursum corda*, lift up your hearts, we might sincerely answer, *Habemus ad Dominum*, our hearts by nature are addressed to the Lord” (Polanyi and Prosch 1975, 180).

As such a semantic being, however, I also reflexively and inexorably point to myself. All pointing is parasitic upon the embodiment of the pointer as its ground. However, if I point to myself otherwise than reflexively, in the act of pointing away from myself, then I have come to my end and my death, for such pointing is solipsistic and loses sense. Concretely, I am always the horizon-from-which, never the horizon-to-which except by indirection.⁸ “If I bear witness to myself, my testimony is untrue” (John 5:32).

It is here submitted that Polanyi’s adumbration of tacit knowing in terms of its functional, phenomenal, semantic, and ontological aspects provides an interpretive repertoire in terms of which the Western mind might experience a significantly new opening of itself to some of the classical themes of Eastern philosophy and religion and, specifically, to the themes of Taoism mentioned in the beginning of this essay. Let us now recapitulate the themes of Tao, wu-wei, and tz’u in terms explicitly informed by Polanyi’s vernacular.

TAO AND THE BEING-KNOWING DIALECTIC

Our discussion of Polanyi suggests that all articulation and meaning subsist in the dialectical interplay of an embodied—that is, a committed-but-risking, self-limiting, and vulnerable—subject with its objects. It consists in the interplay of relying upon tacit and unspecifiable integrations (and powers of integration) and attending to the objects before us from these integrities and these powers. In popular and Taoist parlance, then, meaning subsists in polar movements of

“coming off it” and “coming on.” It obtains in the focal and explicit practice of “going out” and “far-reaching” and in the indwelling movements of return and atonement, in scattering and gathering, losing and finding. The way of being and the way of knowing are one Tao.

In essence, these themes are expressed succinctly in Martin Heidegger’s lines in the opening verse of *Poetry, Language and Thought*:

Way and Weighing
Stile and saying
On a single walk are found (1975, 3).

The be-attitude of being and knowing and the infinity of the infinitives *to be* and *to know* are a single pathway. Being has voice through its resonation for, and its resounding in, the embodied knower. Marjorie Grene, commenting on Polanyi, states the issue eloquently: “In the from-to stretch by which we grope our way forward out of and into and within a world, we both make and are made, possess and are possessed. The action through which we appropriate is also the passion through which we give ourselves a being. Our self-integration is also self-surrender, our self-surrender is also the process through which we find ourselves” ([1969] 1974, xi-xii).

Here, we envision in quite specific terms the underlying continuity of Polanyi’s description of knowing and being with the *Tao Te Ching* description of the Tao:

I do not know its name
A name for it is “Way,”
Pressed for designation
I call it Great.
Great means outgoing,
Outgoing, far-reaching,
Far-reaching, return (*Lao Tzu*, 25).

In it are images, elusive, evading one.
In it are things like shadows in twilight.
In it are essences, subtle but real,
Embedded in truth.
From of old until now,
Under names without end,
The First, the Beginning is seen,
How do I know the beginning of all
What its nature may be?
By these! (*Lao Tzu*, 21).

By these? By what? we may ask. By the named and naming, the question and the quest; by “outgoing, far-reaching, far-reaching, return”; by unity (the embodied subject-from-which) in diversity and diversity (the objects-to-which) in unity. Concepts are a call to and the

call of being. They gather it, and they scatter it. They limit me or embody me as I surrender to them, but immediately they may also set me free—a risk I must take.

Such talk seems cryptic, and it tends to baffle if not scandalize the Western consciousness which is in great measure a function of subject-object, concept-percept, mind-body, and epistemology-ontology dichotomies. Both Taoism and Polanyi's description of the encountered forms of knowing turn away from these dichotomies. Apropos of the Taoist subversion of the subject-object dichotomy, let us turn attention again to the concept of tz'u.

TZ'U AND THE TACIT-EXPLICIT DIALECTIC

Chang Chung-Yuan says that "the awareness of the . . . interpenetration of self and nonself is the key that unlocks the mystery of Tao" ([1963] 1970, 20). Underlying such awareness is tz'u. There were two basic notions about sympathy—or, if you will, synthesis—in pre-Buddhist China. One of these was the Confucian ideal of fellow-feeling proceeding from the self to other selves and ultimately penetrating and embracing even things. The second concept of sympathy was found in the view of the Taoists. "This sympathy was primordial identification, interfusion and unification of subject and object, of one and many, of man and the universe. It was not a product of rational intellection, but an ontological experience" (Chung-Yuan [1963] 1970, 20). The Taoist term for this great sympathy was tz'u; and they boldly distinguished it from the Confucian term *jen* which, though often translated as *love*, came to be associated with rational calculation governed by rules for determining how one's love should be measured out. The Taoists declared that they would banish *jen* so that, once again, people could love one another. One might say that they came to see tz'u as spirit and life and, as such, opposed to the dead letter, the system, which attached itself to *jen*. In other words, they saw *jen* as giving away the powers of integration to explicit, rule-governed, objective operations. How could *jen* bring together so long as it could not risk going out of itself? Tz'u, though ordinarily translated as love, is not love itself but, rather, the primordial source of love, the hidden root of all love and compassion. It is "the great sympathy," the elusive ground of all being-in-relation and all integration (Chung-Yuan [1963] 1970, 20). It is the very virtue or power of the Tao. Hence human powers of love, synthesis, and integration, like "personal knowledge," exist in a dialectic of living integrities in which the knower lures and is lured in a *way* which is revealed in its very intractability to focal awareness and is hidden insofar as there is a presumption to explicit control. That is, the way is

hidden insofar as there is no practice of wu-wei and no graceful vulnerability to being-in-relation.⁹

In the *New Testament* Gospel of John, grace—in its connection with love and the power to relate and communicate—is correlated to the “word” or logos. “In the beginning was the word. . . . and the word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth” (John 2:1; 14). Barring a suggestion of unequivocal correspondence, there is clearly a helpful analogy to be seen in the relation between logos and grace and that between Tao and tz’u. The Tao, like the logos, may be said to dwell among us “full of grace (tz’u pei).”¹⁰ Tz’u then is that mediating power and lure which bespeaks both transcendence and immanence.

A story in *The Works of Chuang Tzu* goes as follows:

Tung Kuo Tzu asked Chuang Tzu: “Where is this which you call Tao?” “Everywhere,” Chuang Tzu replied. “Where specifically?” insisted Tung Kuo Tzu. “It is in the ant,” Chuang Tzu answered. “How can it be so low?” “It is in the earthware tiles.” “Still worse.” “It is in the excrement.” To this Tung Kuo Tzu did not answer. Chuang Tzu proceeded to explain himself. “Your questions did not go to the heart of Tao. You must not ask for the specification of particular things in which Tao exists. There is no single thing without Tao!” (Quoted in Chung-Yuan [1963] 1970, 34).

Tung was making a Rylean kind of category mistake, just as does the Cartesian tradition in its presumption to find explanation for the comprehensive entity and our comprehension of it by making subsidiary components focal in the act of specifying them. The relation of Tao—which is both transcendent and immanent to every particular thing (the hairs of the head, the sparrow, the split seconds of existence)—to tz’u or the power of integration and interfusion is illuminated by Chuang Tzu in the following: “Take for instance a human body consisting of a hundred bones, nine external cavities and six internal organs, all of which exist through their complete integration. May I ask which of them I should favor most? Should I not favor them all equally? Or should I favor only one in particular? Are all these organs subordinates of a power apart from themselves? As subordinates cannot govern themselves, do they rather alternate as master and subordinates? Is there not something real that exists through their own integration?” (Quoted in Chung-Yuan [1963] 1970, 34).

It may be said that this is Taoist for the following, which is the way Polanyi might state the issue (and this might smack of caricature if the quest for interpretive fruitfulness is forgotten):

Alternations of focal and subsidiary awareness correspond to the potentially alternating roles and meanings of the particulars of any comprehensive entity, and, hence, to the changing of the entity. The particulars do not gain control over their own boundary conditions. Therefore, no comprehensive entity is

comprehended in the mere enumeration of the particulars which are its subsidiary components. Any organization is an emergence which, while it depends upon its components, at the same time governs them and calls them into being as such. Hence, neither the ground of any emergent entity nor the basis of our awareness of it can be made fully explicit.

Call the basis of the emergence "evolution," call it "creation," call it "accident." Call the basis of our awareness of it "inspiration," call it a "hunch," call it "tacit awareness." Taoists call it tz'u—the invisible ground of sympathy in which subject and object, knowing and being co-respond. Something real is manifested by the interfusion and interpenetration of multiplicities. It is called "the spirit of the great sympathy," the power of Tao, the primary moving force of the universe. Taoists say that we see it "by the light of Heaven" (Chung-Yuan [1963] 1970, 34). Polanyi, with respect to the epistemological side, spoke of it as a "visitation by unspecifiable powers" or "grace" (Polanyi 1958, 324). One with the Tao, it may be described as it is in the following from *Tao Te Ching*:

the form of the formless,
the image of the imageless.
Hence it is called Evasive.
It is met with but no one sees its face:
It is followed but no one sees its back (*Lao Tzu*, 14).

Polanyi could not speak of emergence and evolution either in terms of accident or in terms of a machinery based on the laws of physics and chemistry. Rather, the epistemological "visitation by unspecifiable powers" communicated, in his view, with ontological "gradients of meaning," that is, with gradients sloping in the direction of stabler organizations and evoking deepened meaning in the whole field of potential meanings surrounding us (Polanyi and Prosch 1975, 178). Such gradients resound in the very problems and interests focused by the mind. Certain states of affairs speak to us or become the medium of some sort of signification precisely insofar as they bespeak boundary conditions which not only are left indeterminate by the laws governing the physical-chemical constituents of that state of affairs but which are highly improbable with reference to those constituents. We distinguish, for example, signal from background noise only insofar as we attend to certain sounds with the emerging conviction that they are not arranged or disarranged as usual, but precisely because of the improbability of their order. In that light we sense that there is something which they are supposed to achieve and that there is a norm which they seem to be approximating. Similarly, we can speak meaningfully of a DNA configuration transmitting information only as a function of the tacit recognition that its order is not due to forces of potential energy. "Just

as the arrangement of a printed page is and must be extraneous to the chemistry of the printed page, so the base sequence in a DNA molecule is and must be extraneous to the chemical forces at work in the DNA molecule" (Polanyi and Prosch 1975, 172). Otherwise, we would not have gotten interested in it and, certainly, could not think of it in terms of information transfer. The physical and chemical forces *per se* are silent. When archaeologists uncover certain artifacts from previous civilizations they may be mystified as to their meaning. That they are even quizzical, however, is not due to the fact that the physical and chemical composition of the artifact, or of the brain which beholds it, is a secret. We focus discrete phenomena because they evoke our attention as meanings or as potential meaning-bearers, that is, in light of our sense of something they achieve which we take to be significant precisely insofar as what they are achieving is underivable from potential energy.

For Polanyi, then, evolution constitutes a hierarchy of emergent organizations whose reality is to be understood not simply in terms of what lies behind, immanent to material preconditions, but in terms of what lies ahead which transcends reduction to prevenient particulars. When evolution has given rise to, and has been evoked by, human consciousness, it meets itself inquiring about the next levels of meaning and perhaps about the ultimate gradient of meaning—A boundless boundary condition? An imageless God? Tao?—in terms of which the whole scenario of nature and history experiences a calling (Tz'u?). "This cosmic emergence of meaning is inspiring. But its products were mainly plants and animals that could be satisfied with a brief existence. Men need a purpose that bears on eternity. Perhaps this problem cannot be solved on secular grounds alone. But its religious solution should become more feasible once religious faith is released from pressure by an absurd vision of the universe, and so there will open up instead a meaningful world which could resound to religion" (Polanyi [1966] 1967, 92).

WU-WEI AND THE DIALECTIC OF IRONY IN THE CONCEPT OF PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE

While we by no means exhaust the areas of fruitful correlation, we allude here to one final general area of comparison. It has to do with the place in Polanyi's thought and in Taoism of the cognate elements of venture, risk, irony, and humility or submissiveness. The Taoist practice of *wu-wei* (connoting, as will be recalled, self-emptying, noninterference, action in nonaction, and no-knowledge) clearly is not to be interpreted as mere quietism. There is a co-respondence between humanity's powers of creating and those of the Tao. Humans, by the

practice of *wu-wei* allow being to be or the Tao to become manifest and to resonate through themselves. That is, in order that the Tao should become manifest in humanity, human beings must give up dogmatism; our images must constantly be subject to subversion. Here we see obvious analogy in the relation between image and the imageless Tao and image and the imageless God of the Bible. While in the latter there are to be no images of God, we are told that humans are made in God's image. Thus God-beyond-all-images becomes manifest like the Tao, when a human being opens the self, empties the self, surrenders the self, entrusts the self. Above all, one must never utterly close her- or himself. He or she must be as a penitent or as an "un-carved block." He or she must be prepared to offer up the present organization of his or her life and world—in short, all images—to a new vision, a new visitation, a new ingathering, a new meaning. He or she must be prepared to be freed of the grip of the images which govern the role played by the particulars of his or her life and awareness. The masters may need to become subordinated; the focal may need to become subsidiary, and the subsidiary may need to be focused.¹¹

Saint Paul's Christological formula in Philippians 2 suggests the issues and analogies quite well. We paraphrase it: "Let this mind be in you which was in Christ Jesus who though he was in the role of the Master did not cling to that but, rather, emptied himself and took upon himself the role of a servant. Therefore the Tao has exalted him." Note that the role of the servant, the meaning bearer, is freely undertaken. Clearly, the relationship between the master role and the servant role—which, in epistemological terms, is the relationship between focal and subsidiary awareness and, in ontological terms, is the relationship between comprehensive entities and particulars—is a contingent relationship. Nothing here is finally coerced by the *a priori* and hence objective necessity of rule governed procedures and logical inference. But this by no means excludes rule governed procedures and logical inference. It is simply that they too are ultimately put into motion by the stroke of *wu-wei*. This reflects the mood which, in Polanyian terms, corresponds to the recognition that the manifest knowing and being of truth has roots in the tacit and hidden which gives promise of revealing itself in unforeseen ways. Our approach to it, therefore, is neither without a sense for the incommensurate, nor is it in the mood of sheer hesitancy; rather it is in the mood of believing submission, risk, and expectancy.

Lest *wu-wei* seem more like a Cartesian suspension of belief and of subjectivity, I quote from a Chinese artist who has put the issue of the alternating and contingent relationship of the roles of master and slave, and hence one of the correlates of the primary indeterminacy of

the uncarved block, in terms of the Chinese concept of *K'ai-ho*: "Where things grow and expand that is K'ai; where things are gathered up, that is ho. When you expand (k'ai) you should think of gathering up (ho) and then there will be structure; when you gather up (ho) you should think of expanding (k'ai) and then you will have inexpressible effortlessness and an air of inexhaustible spirit. In using the brush and in laying out the composition, there is not a moment when you can depart from K'ai-ho" (quoted in Chung-Yuan [1963] 1970, 9). What the artist says here provides one more mode of viewing the way in which both Taoism and "personal knowledge" militate against that ingrained dualistic way of thinking which, in the West, issued in the dichotomies of body and mind, subject and object, knowing and being, proximal and distal, tacit and explicit. At the same time, the mood of this passage certainly is not commensurate with that feared quietism of the sort which more truly belongs to objectivism.

Consummately, then, for both Taoism and Polanyi "he is called a sage whose life is not divorced from his actions and in whom the inner and outer are a dialectical unity. The sage's life is the undivided life or the integral life, and his naturalness means that he is living from his whole nature, which is itself not divorced from the nature of things" (Park 1974, 39). "To follow our nature is called the Way (Tao). Cultivating the Way is called education. The Way cannot be separated from us for a moment. What can be separated from us is not the Way" (quoted in Park 1974, 29-30). Hence, the sage is quietistic only in a certain sense. His life, as such, is fundamentally ontological. As Polanyi would have it, the logic of commitment to self-set standards with the intention of approaching universality is such that "action and submission are totally blended in a heuristic communion with reality" (Polanyi 1958, 396).

Polanyi's contextualization of science and the foregoing aspects of a Taoist contextualization of religion suggest not only common causes of science and religion but a common way between East and West. Although East and West, and science and religion, have been preoccupied with different moments of integration, Polanyi's redescription of knowing powerfully suggests that they are engulfed in one Tao.

NOTES

1. References to *The Way of Life, Lao Tzu: A New Translation of the Tao Te Ching* will be given as *Lao Tzu* together with stanza number.

2. This is R. B. Blackney's alternative translation (1955, stanza 1, line 1).

3. Though less directly, I have also found Carl Raschke (1982) a generally compatible and most helpful example of thinking in this vein.

4. Polanyi cites: "Lazarus, R. S., and McCleary, R. A., *Journal of Personality* (Vol. 18, 1949), p. 191, and *Psychological Review* (Vol. 58, 1951), p. 113" (Polanyi [1966] 1967, 95).

5. "Whatever the body may be, it is not a thing that we can contemplate as we would some 'foreign' object. . . . Some German writers distinguish in this connection between

the body as a thing (*Körper*) and bodiliness as we experience it (*Leib*). Thus for Scheler bodiliness is a precondition of our awareness, externally of things and internally of the life of the psyche" (Van Peursen 1966, 126).

6. Even in *The Study of Man* where he refines some of his ideas about personal knowing as it relates to the spectrum ranging from physics to dramatic history and from knowledge of fact to knowledge of value, Polanyi clearly insists on this point. (Polanyi [1959] 1963, 36-39, 49, 73-74). This issue became more controversial with the publication of *Meaning* (Polanyi and Prosch, 1975). See n. 8.

7. In this connection recall Kierkegaard's categories of "repetition" and "pathetic dialectic." When the self is engaged through choice it does not come to rest; rather, through pathos at the level of each new engagement (or "indwelling"), it is put into motion. Hence, it *lives* in the face of possibility with eternity in front rather than behind.

This position raises interesting questions about—but does not obviate the presence of—*intrinsic* values. There are some *be*-attitudes which remain *in front* of us in the sense that they resist collapse into the purely instrumental. But they are relatively open-textured—like "persons" or "sympathy" or "love." Hence they are both behind me and before me, alpha and omega. I rely on them and they inspire me. Without them I am exanimate, a dispirited or disensouled body, and then I am not at all like the uncarved block which is "greater than the whole world."

8. For these and other reasons I find Harry Prosch's interpretation of Polanyi's understanding of religion virtually inconceivable even though certain aspects of *Meaning* (1975) may seem, *prima facie*, to support a dichotomy of "self-centered" and "self-giving" integrations. In terms of the foregoing discussion such a dichotomy would also entail a dichotomy between "being a meaning" and "having a meaning" and, in Gabriel Marcel's terms, between "being and having." This issue, in the context of Prosch's interpretation, is discussed in *Zygon* 17 (March 1982). The entire issue is devoted to Polanyi's studies; however, it is Prosch's "Polanyi's View of Religion in *Personal Knowledge*: A Response to Richard Gelwick" (41-48) which is especially pertinent here. The issues are also discussed in *The Polanyi Society: Newsletter* 7 (Winter 1980); *The Polanyi Society: Newsletter* 9 (Fall 1981); and in various unpublished papers presented at American Academy of Religion meetings. One such paper is Joseph Kroger's "Religious Imagination and Theological Reflection." Surely Kroger is eminently correct in holding that the interpretation of the distinction between self-centered and self-giving integrations "in such a way as to suggest that Polanyi is advocating the enlightenment dichotomy between two radically different kinds of understanding (art and science) not only undermines the theological significance of his thought but the major achievement of his post-critical philosophy." A major, but as yet unpublished, work bearing on this issue on a grand scale is W. H. Poteat's "Polanyian Meditations: In Search of a Post-Critical Logic." This 392-page essay, aside from being an independent conceptual analysis, brilliantly focuses the innovative forces at work in Polanyi's understanding of logic and makes it rather clear that Polanyi himself was not fully aware or consistent in his handling of these innovations. (See review of this work in *The Polanyi Society: Newsletter* 9 [Winter 1982]).

9. There is an analogy for this point in the difficult lesson of indeterminacy in quantum mechanics. The presumption to explicit and objective control at the quantum level simply entails that where the desideratum should be there is only a disappearance. The important phenomenon consists in the fact that the desideratum hides itself and thus reveals the Tao of nature. We might say, in the mood of Werner Heisenberg (1962), that no longer in the "exact sciences" do we have a picture of nature but, rather, a reflexive sense of our living relation to nature. (It should be noted that *jen* was not always surrendered to explicitism. See Fingarette [1972].)

10. I am told by scholars of Chinese that *tz'u* is indeed cognate to *endian*, the term ordinarily used to translate "grace." *Tz'u* would not appear alone but together with *pei* which functions to intensify the sense of *tz'u*. Remarkably, this expression *tz'u pei* may also be translated as "loving sorrow." The "sorrow" here carries with it a connotation of relaxation in the wake of tension.

11. Surely one of the most powerful and beautiful exemplifications of the correlations between logos and graciousness, and between Tao, *Tz'u* and the openness of *wu-wei*, is to be found in the record of Martin Heidegger's conversation with an un-

named Japanese thinker (Heidegger [1959] 1971, 1-54). A fundamental issue underlying the conversation is whether persons of such widely divergent cultures and native tongues can ever truly communicate with each other. Heidegger asks his correspondent to tell him the Japanese word or expression for "language." The Japanese companion evades responding to this inquiry until a certain point arrives in the conversation which serves, dramatically, as a reduplication of the very heart of the matter with regard to the Japanese sensibility about language. This is the point at which, having spoke of *iki* as "the gracious," "the pure delight of the beckoning stillness," the Japanese interlocutor senses Heidegger's openness and indicates that he now has the confidence to drop his hesitations and to tell him about *koto ba*—the Japanese term deemed expressive of "language." It refers to petals, as of a flower, and also to the delightful radiance, "the lightening message of grace," which calls the petals to the open and to appearance.

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