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Field-Being and the Philosophy of Open Ontology

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- ¶1. We begin with the familiar refrain of Rudyard Kipling: "East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet." This assertion, of course, was made during the heights of colonialism with a distinct Euro-centric cultural base. Since then scholars of East and West have gone to great lengths to debunk it with some measurable success, but in a way, we are still engaged in the debunking process. We must not only be keen to the perception of the process, but more importantly, be involved in it in serious ways. This conference is a vital part of the process.
- ¶2. There are different phases in the debunking process:
- ¶3.
 1. The initial phase of cultural independence or dialogic standoff will be, e.g., Euro-centrism versus Asia-centrism or Western orientalism versus Eastern orientalism.
 2. In the second phase of multi(inter)-cultural dynamics, the dynamics will be slow or rapid depending on the nature of the contact, i.e., slow on social and psychological nature of contacts but rapid on economic and scientific/ technological matters.
 3. The third phase of national multi-cultural dynamics will be when each nation is seriously involved in improving the relationship by openness, accommodation, and incorporation of alien cultural elements. We are, generally speaking, in this phase.
 4. The fourth phase of mature understanding will be when most of the barriers in cultural interchange are lowered for freer access to most or all aspects of human relationships. In some instances we have already touched this phase,

but it is still far from being integrated or systematized into a coherent process. There are a few exceptions here, such as the great strides being made in linguistic understanding and usage. Other disciplines are also contributing and closing the gap.

- ¶4. The point to emphasize here is that we should now be concentrating on the fourth phase, and it is heartening to see so many of the conference papers seriously addressing and exploring the issues germane to this phase.
- ¶5. Let us not deceive ourselves into thinking that our project is easy, and that time will inevitably resolve the problems attendant with multicultural dynamics. On the contrary, time may not even be a factor when deep philosophical issues are involved. The philosophical enterprise should be one that is an open and growing phenomenon, whether in the West or the East. The West, of course, has the lead in philosophical analysis as we see it in the present, but can it sustain the unchallengeable lead? Or, does the West have the unquestioned monopoly and tool to properly seek the truth of existence? Are there not other alternatives? We who are familiar with Eastern thought will of course have doubts about complete Western dominance in all phases of the philosophical enterprise. The East will not be intimidated nor ignored.
- ¶6. The point then is this: Intercultural dynamics compels us to always seek fairness, openness, novelty, and profundity in the perception of things. The International Institute for Field-Being's focus on the concepts of "Field-Being" and the "Non-Substantialistic Turn" is a very auspicious beginning. This is not to say that the West has not been exposed to such a concept. It has indeed, and our twentieth century exhibits abundant examples of thinkers moving in the direction of a "field" and "non-substantial" perception of things as, for example, in such thinkers as Einstein, Bergson, C.S. Peirce, Dewey, G.H. Mead, Whitehead, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Sartre, Gadamer and Habermas, to name a few. These thinkers and their works would not be remembered at all were it not for their bold and *speculative* vision of things. They had to, in a sense, go against the grain of ordinary perception and come up with novel ways of dealing with reality. On the other hand, unfortunately, some major Western thinkers simply ignored Eastern thought or were exposed to it too late in their lives to challenge themselves and incorporate such thought in their philosophies. In some extreme cases, they have blatantly misconstrued Eastern thought, not only totally, but in damaging ways. So here we are at a crucial point where perhaps a kind of critical mass is slowly coming into being which will seriously compel comparative thinkers to act quickly and decisively. The important point is that with the exposure to Eastern thought in cultural dynamics, we must seriously engage in dialogues on fair, open, and equal grounds. So far, the dialogues have been skewed unilaterally or reduced to mere exhibition of Western Orientalism that imposes Western ideas and methodology on Eastern thought. So the crucial question is, how do we arrive at an

open and fair dialogue? This important question requires the service of many thinkers from many disciplines. Indeed, this paper is merely one of the attempts to answer the question in a philosophical way by focusing on the primordial nature of our experiences. So now let us get to the heart of this paper.

- ¶7. Field-Being and open ontology are not separate concepts but are intimately related or interwoven, and for all intents and purposes, it can be said that they focus on the selfsame experiential reality. However, in order to understand both concepts in their intricate manifestation, inevitably we must engage in *speculative* philosophy. To be sure, the term *speculative* philosophy is not in vogue nowadays, but nevertheless there is a need for it today more than ever. To quell any misunderstanding at the outset, it should be noted that *speculative* philosophy does not engage in mere speculation on the nature of things, nor does it refer to pipe dreams about what reality is or how the world should be seen. *Speculative* philosophy actually moves ahead to new frontiers of knowledge and experience based on present knowledge of the world and human perception of it, and, when necessary, introduces new ideas or concepts in order to accommodate novel elements or regions of experience, thereby presenting a fuller perception of things. It is audacious and adventurous in spirit. Parenthetically, it might be added that the great philosophers of both East and West have been engaged in *speculative* philosophy to exhibit their respective unique philosophies. Their big ideas, whether of Platonic Being, Aristotelian substance and attributes, Parmenidean One, Heraclitean flux, Cartesian dualism, Humean empiricism, Kantian categories of existence, Hegelian idealism, Nietzschean critique of classical metaphysics, Husserlian phenomenology, Whiteheadian process thought, Heideggerian being-in-the-world, Wittgensteinian language games, Sartrean nothingness, etc., have all been dramatic turns in visions of reality and singular contributions to the Western philosophical tradition. Analogously, the same can be said of the Buddha's *Dharma* (enlightened state of existence), Confucian *Jen* (humaneness), Taoist naturalism, and modern Japanese thinkers' focus on nothingness or emptiness. The Japanese thinkers were initially attracted to and challenged by Western philosophy, but they inevitably returned to their Eastern tradition to express home grown and nourished ideas, especially by members of the so-called Kyoto School centering on the philosophy of Nishida Kitaro.
- ¶8. The first verse of the *Tao Te Ching* is a prime example displaying the nature of *speculative* philosophy. It carries one through ordinary perception and candidly suggests the need to go beyond such perception, to realms or regions of experience that the uninitiate could not fathom, but which are potentially present. It presents in a nutshell the whole philosophy of Taoism—its subtle nature and action, although the presentation is couched in cryptic terms. Let us examine the first verse:

- ¶9. The Tao (Way) that can be told of is not the eternal Tao;
 The name that can be named is not the eternal name.
 The Nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth;
 The Named is the mother of all things.
 Therefore, let there always be non-being so we may see their subtlety,
 And let there always be being so we may see their outcome.
 The two are the same,
 But after they are produced, they have different names.
 They both may be called deep and profound (*hsuan*).
 Deeper and more profound,
 The door of all subtleties.[\[1\]](#)
- ¶10. The first line cautions the reader not to attempt any analysis of the Tao. Naive realists or even mature realists would not be able to comprehend this line because their position would not allow the existence of anything that cannot be analyzed or manipulated. The first line is, in actuality, an assertion of the supreme naturalness that defies all delineation. Thus the second line states clearly that any designation or naming veers away from the eternal naturalness of things. The reader by now is puzzled in that she/he is brought to a paradoxical situation by which to comprehend reality, i.e., to perceive things in the simultaneity of the Named and Nameless. This is a uniquely Eastern way of delineating reality and, as expressed above, it is a peculiarly Eastern *speculative* vision of reality. The Nameless is surely the origin of Heaven and Earth, but no amount of seeking that origin will produce anything. However, the Named is the mother of all things in the sense that it allows delineation within the background of the Nameless.[\[2\]](#) It is all that we refer to as earthly manifestation. Thus, the Named and Nameless are correlatives, or two aspects of the selfsame reality.
- ¶11. The verse goes on to say that the Nameless or non-being is there for us to probe deeper into the subtleties of nature, and the Named or being is there for us to appreciate the world of the sensed, or empirical realm. In a sense, the Nameless/non-being and Named/being correspond to the realms of the sensed and the non-sensed. They manifest in different ways and are referred to differently.[\[3\]](#)

- ¶12. Finally, both realms are in the nature of profound and deep experiential dimensions that open the door to all subtleties. This is the challenge, *the speculative challenge*, to probe beyond mere empirical data and information. In brief, this verse beckons us all to seek reality in terms of the infrastructural, dynamic nature of the Named and the Nameless, or being and nonbeing. We could go further to interpret the challenge as one that exhibits the openness of being/nonbeing dynamics. This dynamics is yet another way of revealing the Named/Nameless infra-dynamism. It also reveals that although the Tao seemingly is "dually" contained, in actuality it goes beyond duality of any sort.^[4] But the final point made in the verse is that unless the subtle dynamic unity of the Named and Nameless is comprehended, the doorway to further subtleties within manifestation and reason will be closed.
- ¶13. The verse further informs in no uncertain terms that the nature of things (the Tao) is open through and through, but that ordinary human perception of things intervene to shut off the openness. So, as we leave nature or the Tao alone in its inherent naturalness, it will in turn freely welcome and accommodate anything in its display. We humans are our own enemy, as the saying goes, and we need to learn to control our wanton manipulation and attachment to the substantive elements of being, however attractive and appealing they may be in the dynamics of things.
- ¶14. We may expand on this concept of openness by reference to the traditional triadic relationship of Heaven, Earth, and Humankind. This relationship, as I interpret it, is a perfect depiction of balance, harmony, and open dynamics; in it there are no signs or indications of superiority, dominance, hierarchy, origin, or end. Nature, or the Tao, does not indicate or delineate anything, for if it does, the first line of the verse will prevent one from asserting an eternal Tao. The Tao is neutral all the way, and yet all manifestations must be oriented in it just as the Named, the mother of all things, will have to seek the Nameless in order to roost.
- ¶15. The term, "open ontology," is normally reserved for the perfected nature of individual existence where there are no borders or limits to any form of perception. But now it would seem that the term is equally applicable to the triadic Heaven-Earth-Humankind relationship. Indeed, it can be asserted that the triadic relationship is the granddaddy of the term "open ontology," insofar as Far Eastern thought is concerned. We are part and parcel of the triadic relationship but fail to be conscious of this fact because we do not, according to Chuang Tzu, listen carefully to the pipings of Heaven and Earth whose presence are intimated everywhere at any time.^[5] Instead we seem to thrive within our own human realm of existence, bound by self-serving prejudices that only narrow perception rather than expand and open up new regions of experience. That is, although we are vital parts of the triadic relationship, there is a tendency to isolate ourselves and veer away from it, or to "go it alone" in individualistic ways. But such acts could not happen, for, as we have seen in the first verse, the bonds are unbreakable and the individual-world process evolves together, or co-terminously. This means, in short, that both the world and the individual are

functioning within the selfsame open grounds of existence. But how does it happen?

- ¶16. For a possible answer, we take cue from the age-old phenomenon of *yin-yang* dynamics. Although this dynamics is popularly known to all, unfortunately its subtleness and profundity is hardly known or appreciated. Most people, including some scholars, err by referring to it as a form of dualism or dualistic metaphysics where the components are equal and separate. The nature of equality is not questioned here, but the nature of separation is. The famous depiction of *yin-yang* in a black and white circular movement should affirm the fact that the *yin-yang* are hyphenated correlatives in constant dynamic relationship. In brief, the *yin-yang* dynamics corresponds to the Named-Nameless (*ming-wuming*) dynamics or the being/nonbeing (*yuwu*) dynamics. *Yin* is *yin* because of *yang*, and by the same token, *yang* is *yang* because of *yin* and "never the twain shall part," to quote Kipling again. They mutually involve each other, and for our understanding, they mutually define each other. But now if the *yin-yang* dynamics is correlated to the being/nonbeing dynamics, there is a need to explain how being and nonbeing are able to be together to constitute a dynamics. This type of dynamics, needless to say, is not only formidable but also forbidding to the Western mind, although by contrast the Eastern mind could readily accept and accommodate it. It is forbidding because the very concept of nonbeing is, to the Westerner, logically and rationally impermissible. Nonbeing belongs to the null class and is thus assigned to the category of a nonentity or nonexistent. It cannot be a part of the existential nature of things and thus ruled out as a datum for the conceptual mill. This is where, perhaps, the greatest and most fundamental break occurs in Western and Eastern metaphysical understanding of the nature of things. It also becomes a basic barrier in East-West meaningful discourse and dialogue.
- ¶17. In Eastern thought, nonbeing, or *wu*, is a ubiquitous concept that prevails in any and every parcel of experience, but it does not exhibit itself as such since it is always involved in the being/nonbeing dynamics. What is visible is really the nature of being in the backdrop of invisible and unsensed nonbeing. Paradoxical as it may seem, nonbeing both pre-exists as well as co-exists with being. This double character of nonbeing clearly demonstrates the fundamental Chinese *speculative* spirit. We could even go further to assert that it is because of nonbeing that we are able to continue the living process, or more specifically, the nature of continuity is guaranteed by the presence and role of nonbeing. So when Wang Pi, for example, says that being comes from nonbeing or, vice versa, nonbeing produces being, the production is really an affirmation of the nature of being supported by nonbeing in its dual character.^[6] Such a production or process of being is atemporal and asymmetric,^[7] to use more subtle terms. We could even go further to assert that because of nonbeing, for example, the relational nature in the triadic relationship or even in ordinary contact of human beings, including nonhumans, is made possible. This is but another way of understanding the basis of the Field-Being nature of existence, where the field is essentially a nonbeing phenomenon. In this case, we will have to expand the field into an "open field" where the borders of perception are not clearly described nor defined, and in consequence, there will be no restriction or limits to perception. Western

epistemology, naturally, does not function in this kind of borderless perception because its activity is strictly confined to the realm of being. This is not to assign any superiority of one epistemological tradition over another or even to condemn another, but to herald a new challenge to all epistemologies to bring out their so-called "wares" and open up for dialogues. In the spirit of change and innovation, we need to be fair and open to novel ideas that will, consciously or unconsciously, affect our own well-being.

- ¶18. We have gone over some heavy, dense matters. To be sure, they are novel ideas that strain the ordinary perception of things. The being/nonbeing dynamics is a way of probing the basic grounds of Far Eastern thought, underlying every fabric of existence, inclusive of the West. The implications of this dynamics are legion, but let us select a few for the purpose of summing up the essay:
- ¶19. 1. First of all, the being/nonbeing dynamics reveals that the West, in its logical and rational orientation, has somehow missed the opportunity to include nonbeing as a vital component of existence. For this reason, perception is confined to what is obvious, visible, tangible, and manipulable, but at the same time, it cannot go beyond such confines and thereby remains stale, monotonous, narrow, and truncated. We aim at creativity, but creativity is too restrictive if it were merely involved in the visible, tangible, and manipulable elements. If creativity refers to freedom, to the unrestrictive nature of things, then it means that it allows for a larger region of experience to function in order to accommodate and incorporate novel elements at play.
- ¶20. 2. The being/nonbeing dynamics is a potentially creative phenomenon because of the presence of nonbeing. Why is this? Because the nonbeing component is the source for the nonrestrictive, borderless reach for the so-called "unknown regions" of momentary dynamics with being. Hypothetically, if nonbeing, or wu, were left alone, its range would be infinite; however, because it functions dynamically with being, at least in terms of our experiential nature of things, its range of the dynamics is somewhat confined, but not totally, because it is still the source from which access, freedom, and novelty spring.
- ¶21. 3. The being/nonbeing dynamics can be correlated generally to the temporal/spatial dynamics. That is, where the temporal is to being, the spatial is to nonbeing. On first encounter, this statement will be taken with disbelief. However, on close examination, it will be seen that the temporal dimension or time, in our experience, is a manipulable quantity and thus rightly belongs to the realm of being. Space or spatiality, on the other hand, is a non-manipulable quantity, extending as far as experiences warrant, and rightly belongs to the realm of nonbeing. Here we are not referring to controlled types of experimentation which function within designated set of spatio-temporal dimensions.

- ¶22. 4. Finally, it should be pointed out that the concept of causality will have to be redefined, nay even reinvented, within the context of being/nonbeing dynamics. The reason for this is that this dynamics is an open phenomenon, whereas ordinary nature of causality is closed in the sense of having meaning only within certain restricted or controlled phenomenon of cause and effect. This would be too simplistic in design and function, for by contrast, the being/nonbeing dynamics is much more complicated and involves more than what is visible and tangible. Indeed, the presence of the nonbeing component assures the profundity and extensiveness of experience.
- ¶23. To conclude, we have presented a novel *speculative* philosophical view of our experience gathered mainly from the Chinese, albeit Taoist, vision of nature and its function. It is most profound (*hsuan*) because we are not familiar with the intricate nature of the dynamics of Eastern experience. We narrowed the focus on this experiential dynamics by correlating the *yin-yang* dynamics to the being/nonbeing dynamics. Much indeed must be explored and discussed, but at least we have opened the doors to a form of implicative dynamics. The novelty of introducing and justifying nonbeing in the dynamics is perhaps the greatest challenge, a challenge which may well be the central focus of metaphysics in the twenty-first century.

END NOTES

1. Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book of Chinese Philosophy*, New Jersey: Princeton University (1963), 139.
2. The speculative vision of reality prompts us to see it in the form of a unique Named/Nameless dynamics. The West understandably has a difficult time conceiving this type of dynamics and thereby forestalls much progress in penetrating the Eastern mind in the holistic sense.
3. Here we see an expanded view of the Named/Nameless dynamics correlated to the being/nonbeing dynamics, that is, the sensed/unsensed nature of existence. It should be noted that the unsensed or nonbeing aspect of the dynamics does not deny existence itself. In other words, nondescription does not equate with nonexistence.
4. Duality takes on many forms, but in Taoism it should be noted that all manifested or phenomenal dualities are relative, transitory, and secondary in nature. There is, however, a more profound type of duality which functions as manifested-cum-unmanifested, presenting “dual” characters, so to speak, but ordinary/conventional perception is confined to the manifested. Thus, there is a need to “perceive” this profound compounded nature of the dynamics by probing beyond mere surface appearances.

5. For an excellent discussion of the pipings of nature and humankind, see Wu Kuang-ming, *Chuang Tzu: World Philosopher at Play*, New York: Crossroad Publishing (1982).
6. The “dual” nature of nonbeing informs that the being/nonbeing metaphysics is both specific and fluid. The specificity refers to the momentary dynamics where only the being component is visible but co-existent with nonbeing at all times. The fluidity refers to the continuum of momentary dynamics, i.e., nonbeing “guarantees” the continuum by remaining in the background, but ever-ready to engage in the dynamics. In this sense, the diversity and plurality of the dynamics are unlimited and go on incessantly in the temporal flow of creative events.
7. In a statement, such as “Nonbeing produces being” or “Being comes from nonbeing,” the production or origin is not a causal or temporal phenomenon in the cosmological sense. Indeed, paradoxically, they are acausal or atemporal. In this respect, we may say that the constitution of events is asymmetric and that, oddly enough, nonbeing can be both prior to and coterminous with being. What is more, nonbeing may “return” to its so-called primordial nature without involvement with the nature of being.

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