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Being and Field-Being

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I.

"But, Sariputra, to elucidate this matter more at large, I will tell thee a parable, for men and women of good understanding will generally readily enough catch the meaning of what is taught under the shape of a parable."^[1]

¶1. Buddha told a parable in a sutra:

¶2. A man traveling across a field encountered a tiger. He fled, the tiger after him. Coming to a precipice, he caught hold of the root of a wild vine and swung himself down over the edge. The tiger sniffed at him from above. Trembling, the man looked down to where, far below, another tiger was waiting to eat him. Only the vine sustained him. Two mice, one white and one black, started to gnaw away the vine. The man saw a luscious strawberry near him. Grasping the vine with one hand, he plucked the strawberry with the other. How sweet it tasted! ^[2]

¶3. This story illustrates the existential problem of humanity and its solution: we find ourselves suspended as it were between two tigers, the tiger of death below, and the tiger above which has chased us into life. The tiger waiting above bars the way back, for it is also a tiger of death, the terminus of the interim period between death and rebirth. The wild vine from which the man hangs is our life-line; the two mice, the "white" of day and the "black" of night, are the inexorable workings of time, which gradually cut through the strands of life. Yet in the midst of this, if we can become aware of it, the wild strawberry of enlightenment is near at hand.

- ¶4. Translating the metaphor into the phenomenal reality of daily life presents an exercise in insight and self-knowledge. From our perspective as the man on the vine, only the vine is a given in direct experience. It corresponds to the world of common sense and common perception. The other elements are subliminal for us.
- ¶5. The area of the vine above the man's head, which the mice are voraciously devouring, is so to speak, beyond the angle of our vision, thus we cannot know how far the rats have cut into our sustaining vine. Yet this content may intrude into consciousness, perhaps as a nagging sensation that something is wrong, that there is something important you can't remember, like a *deja vu* experience in which you are just on the verge of isolating the key to knowing what it is all about when it fades away or like the dream in which you realize that you have to do something and you're really late but you haven't changed your clothes yet.
- ¶6. The tiger above is also beyond the range of our experience. It is relegated to the deepest parts of the subconscious, not to be retrieved unless you have the bad karma to get hooked into some sort of past life regression therapy, but that is losing the thread anyway. The tiger below does force its way into the forefront of our attention from time to time. Its growl may be heard in the shock which follows narrowly avoiding a serious auto accident, or jail, or in some sort of inevitably traumatic encounter with a member of the medical profession who inevitably wants to discuss philosophy. Rather than your fatal disease and imminent death. The gnawing too can be felt, like a background hum as if there were giant motors operating somewhere underground, a kind of sickening oscillation like something moving back and forth in your head, which can only be diagnosed as impending Nausea, caused by a sort of viral infection, highly contagious and particularly debilitating, a symptom of which is the philosophical vertigo a la J. P. Sartre. At least Sartre had the honesty to just barf, but it's a rather messy solution to the existential predicament.
- ¶7. And after returning from the abyss of Nothingness, and understandably resting up from his encounter, what has Sartre learned? He tells us, "I have seen the future and it is Marxist." And right there we can see that this man knows nothing of the deep. One can understand Sartre's Fear in looking into the abyss, but one cannot forgive his shrinking back, like some slug whose antenna folds back into itself when it touches something unknown, for the rule in facing the Unknown is: Hold the Gaze, even though you are shaking in your boots.
- ¶8. While agreeing with Heidegger that anguish is the fear of nothingness, Sartre claims that "anguish is distinguished from fear in that fear is fear of beings in the world whereas anguish is anguish before myself."[\[3\]](#) As an example, Sartre cites the experience of vertigo:

- ¶9. Vertigo announces itself through fear; I am on a narrow path-without a guard-rail-which goes along a precipice. The precipice presents itself to me as to be avoided; it represents the danger of death. [\[4\]](#)
- ¶10. But vertigo is also a symptom of the primordial nexus of fear and anguish, which prompted Sartre's original choice to swoon, for as he admits, "Vertigo is anguish to the extent that I am not afraid of falling over the precipice, but of throwing myself over."[\[5\]](#) This neurotic complex is an inevitable consequence of defining one's own essence as a negation, as a being whose prime activity is nihilating: the fear is that the nihilator will nihilate himself.
- ¶11. How is one to avert this terrible inevitability? Sartre says:
- ¶12. My reaction will be of the reflective order; I will pay attention to the stones in the road; I will keep myself as far away as possible from the edge of the path ... pushing away the threatening situation with all my strength ... keep [\[ing\]](#) the threats of the world at a distance from me. [\[6\]](#)
- ¶13. This is only a temporary expedient however, not "real" safety. It does not protect one from the fear of emptiness in oneself, nor does it break the spell of fascination with the Void. The only reflection which will really do the job is one in which the Non-Being of the negator is transformed into Being.
- ¶14. Hence Sartre disinters the mummy of the cogito, thinking that if he can just extricate it from the solipsistic world of the Pyramid and bring it into the light of a new phenomenological day, it can live again as the god-king of a new subjectivity. The cogito is the firm guard-rail which shields one from having to make the frank admission that consciousness is not all that substantial, otherwise why make such a big deal out of it?: "The absolute truth of consciousness becoming aware of itself," Sartre claims, is both the necessary foundation and the guarantor of the for-itself, and of any possible philosophy, for,
- ¶15. Outside the Cartesian cogito, all views are only probable, and a doctrine of probability which is not bound to truth dissolves into thin air. In order to describe the probable, you must have a firm hold on the true. Therefore, before there can be any truth whatsoever, there must be an absolute truth.(sic)[\[7\]](#)

II.

- ¶16. Well, if you have got a free ticket, you might as well use it, hence there are two regions of being: Things, which are such brutish louts that they can have no relation to anything, not even themselves, and Man, who is, well, ah different, in that he can have a relationship with himself. Fortunately, however, Non-Being, the nihilator, the for-itself, et al, which we formerly thought was Nothingness, turns out to be Being, and when you think "being" you automatically think of plentitude, density, solidity. What a relief. This intellectual slight-of-hand makes the Nothing nothing to worry about, by wishing it away into a cornfield, hurling oblivion into oblivion. It is the philosophical equivalent of assuring the frightened child that there aren't any monsters under the bed, and proving it by shining a flashlight under there, declaring, "Nothing but dust-balls." This doesn't help though, for the child fears the monsters of the dark, not the ones holding flashlights.
- ¶17. Sartre blithely assumes that there is only one kind of subjectivity: the one constituted by the self as a "thinking thing." This leads him to the grandiose claim that he can comprehend the subjective experience of every person because of the supposedly universal human condition:
- ¶18. Every configuration, even the Chinese, the Indian, or the Negro, can be understood by a Westerner. A European ... by virtue of a situation he can imagine ... can push himself to his limits and re-constitute within himself the configuration of the Chinese, the Indian, or the African ... There is always a way to understand the idiot, the child, the savage, the foreigner, provided one has the necessary information. [\[8\]](#)
- ¶19. But if understanding altered states of awareness is a matter of experience, not just imagining, then it will be impossible for Sartre to understand the subjective experience of the Taoist adept, the Yogi, or the African shaman. After all, Sartre didn't get to human subjectivity through information. This is getting to be pathological. Why be so *de trop* as to claim possession of absolute truth, why is it necessary to rule out any possibility of unconscious processes, and why assume that your own subjectivity is subjectivity, if not for the existential fear that ego-consciousness is so insubstantial that it threatens to waft away in the "thin air" of thought?

- ¶20. Isn't it better to face up to it, like Lao-Tzu did in gazing into "the crack between Heaven and Earth?" Doing so, he found it to be "fathomless, deep like clear water." "It is empty like a bellows," he says, and like the air that issues from a bellows, it is "the origin of all things," thus "being comes from non-being." This is not the whole story, though, for Non-being also comes from Being. The ontological relativity of these two opposites is shown in the *Tai Chi Tu*, in which the opposed lobes of the dark and the light define each other. In Taoist terminology, they "mutually arise." Not only that, the opposites are related to each other: they are reciprocal, as shown in the Diagram by the spot of light and the spot of dark inhabiting the region of the other. Thus their identity is constituted by their relativity and relatedness. This is a union, not a compound, hence all things have a being aspect and a non-being aspect, even the self. This union is the Tao, or Field.
- ¶21. Taoism is a phenomenology of the depths, constructed by the ancient Chinese sages, who started from the point of view of Emptiness. It asserts that what is experienced in meditation is the primary nature of the world, and what is experienced in ordinary states is secondary.

III.

- ¶22. This might lead one to think that the opposition between existentialism and Taoism is an opposition between the point of view of Being vis-a-vis the point of view of Field. But this would not be accurate, for the point of view which Taoism opposes to Being is not Field, but Field-Being. For those afflicted with the substantialist neurosis, field-being is a paradox and a riddle, for the opposition here is truly non-logical. One cannot expect to bring the Sartres of the world up to speed on this. But we can increase our own speed.
- ¶23. I can see the future too. It will be like this: in his old age Sartre will finally get religion, and become a leading light in the Jehova's Witnesses, who, as you know, envision a materialistic Heaven. Under his influence, however, the faith will transmogrify into the Witnesses of Jehova-Marx, which we will later find out is actually an asteroid on a collision course with earth.
- ¶24. This brings up the big question behind all of this: Is Sartre's solution to the existential predicament, if it is not itself a product of neurosis, really any better than the "solution" of the miserable neurotic who clutches the vine, and, refusing to look down, and quickly repairs any damage to the psychic baffles designed to keep out nasty noises? In other words, is cynicism, cleverness, and ego any better than self-deception, superficiality, and ego? Who cares? What about the man on the vine who has heard the parable of the man on the vine?

- ¶25. Buddha: Just to your left are some luscious strawberries.
- Man on Vine: What do you mean "to my left"?
- Buddha: There are three paths that go to the left.
- Man on Vine: I see the same thing when I look to my left as when I look straight ahead.
- Buddha: You were the same in both cases.
- Man on Vine: How do you define "strawberry"?
- Buddha: Just reach out and grab one.
- Man on Vine: How do you expect me to reach out, can't you see that I have to keep hold of this vine? I am not an acrobat.
- Buddha: Yes you are. You are an acrobat with amnesia. Just reach out and grab the damn strawberries.
- Man on Vine: If it were apparent that there were any strawberries out there, we wouldn't be having this conversation and everyone would know about them and be trying to get them. Furthermore, when I look I don't see any strawberries. Besides, you must admit that this "strawberry-eating" experience ("How sweet it tasted" give me a break) seems rather empty of intellectual content anyway. So the upshot of this is that the burden of proof rests on you old fellow, so if you can prove to me that there are some strawberries out there then I'll consider reaching out to get them, because as you know it will take a lot of time and effort to adjust my position on the vine and at the same time keep a good grip on it because I will have to reach out with one hand, which is tricky, just for some alleged strawberries, although I believe you about that tiger down there, but you really don't expect me to risk my life, do you?

IV.

- ¶26. Buddha: (sotto voce) Not a big risk in your case. It's not what you think it is. You are forgetting about the mice.
- Man on Vine: O.K., O.K., I'll try to do it, but it will take time, I have obligations, you know.
- Buddha: (sotto voce) What an idiot.
- Buddha: Well, I was an idiot once, thousands of lifetimes ago. Just get the strawberries.
- Man on Vine: What? Strawberries.
- Man on Vine: Oh yeah.

Buddha: You obviously have never heard the story of Prince Jen. He is a man who knows how to hold the gaze on the deep.

Prince Jen made an enormous fishhook, with a huge line, baited it with fifty bullocks, settled himself on top of Mount K'uai-chi, and cast with his pole into the eastern sea. Morning after morning he dropped the hook, but for a whole year he got nothing. At last a huge fish swallowed the bait and dived down, dragging the enormous hook. It plunged to the bottom in a fierce charge, rose up and shook its dorsal fins, until the white waves were like mountains and the seawaters lashed and churned. The noise was like that of gods and demons and it spread terror for a thousand li. When Prince Jen had landed his fish he cut it up and dried it and from Chih-ho east, from Ts'ang-wu north, there was no one who did not get his fill. Since then the men of later generations who have piddling talents and a penchant for odd stories all astound each other by repeating the tale. Now if you shoulder your pole and line, march to the ditches and gullies, and watch for minnows and perch, then you'll have a hard time ever landing a big fish. If you parade your little theories and fish for the post of district magistrate, you will be far from the Great Understanding. So if a man has never heard of the style of Prince Jen, he's a long way from being able to join with the men who run the world.[\[9\]](#)

Man on Vine: What kind of fish do you offer?

Buddha: Very good. But it is not like you think it is.
The giant fish is only a metaphor. You are the fish.

Man on Vine: Must I fish for myself?

Buddha: Very Good. But it is not like you think it is.
There is no fisherman, and the fishing is a no-fishing.
Perhaps you've never heard how Tzu-ch'i fished?

Tzu-ch'i of South wall sat leaning on his arm-rest, staring up at the sky and breathing-vacant and far away, as though he had lost his companion. Yen Ch'eng Tzu-yu, who was by his side in attendance said, 'What is this? Can you really make the body like a withered tree and the mind like dead ashes? The man leaning on the arm-rest now is not the one who leaned on it before.' Tzu-ch'i said, 'You do well to ask the question, Yen. Now I have lost myself. Do you understand that?'[\[10\]](#)

V.

¶27. Man on Vine: Well, I see that a withered tree is absolutely still and dead ashes have no spark in them which may spontaneously flame up. This means that Tzu-ch'i's mind must have been vacant of thoughts, and his heart must have been set on something far away from human concerns. But who is it who has lost the self?

Buddha: Can phantom existences be lost?

Man on Vine: Well, I'll have to think about that, but what I want to know is how did Yen know that Tzu-ch'i had changed?

Buddha: That is precisely your problem, but perhaps you have never heard the story of the Three Friends.

Master Sang-hu, Meng-tzu Fan, and Master Ch'in-chang, three friends, said to each other, 'Who can join with others without joining with others? Who can do with others without doing with others? Who can climb up to heaven and wander in the mists, roam the infinite, and forget life forever and forever?' The three men looked at each other and smiled. There was no disagreement in their hearts so they became friends."[\[11\]](#)

Man on Vine: How can they forget life forever and remain friends?

Buddha: They share the same subjectivity, but it is a different subjectivity than that shared by those who merely clutch and dangle. These masters have all made the shift to the left.

Man on Vine: What is the phantom existence that is non-lost?

Buddha: Sometimes a step up is a step back. Perhaps you've never heard Tzu-ch'i's tale of the self.

Tzu-ch'i said, 'The Great Clod belches out its breath and its name is wind. So long as it doesn't come forth, nothing happens. But when it does the ten thousand hollows begin crying wildly. Can't you hear them, long drawn out? In the mountain forests that lash and sway, there are huge trees a hundred spans around with hollows and openings like noses, like mouths, like ears, like jugs, like cups, like mortars, like rifts, like ruts. They roar like waves, whistle like arrows, screech, gasp, cry, wail, moan, and howl...In a gentle breeze, they answer faintly, but in a full gale the chorus is gigantic. And when the fierce wind has passed on, then all the hollows are empty again...'

Tzu-yu said, 'By the Piping of Earth, then, you mean simply [the sound of] these hollows... But may I ask about the Piping of Heaven?'

Tzu-ch'i said, 'Blowing on the ten thousand things in a different way, so that each can be itself-all take what they want for themselves, but

who does the sounding?... Joy, anger, grief, delight, regret, fickleness, inflex-ibility, modesty, willfulness, candor, insolence-music from empty holes! mushrooms springing up in dampness! day and night replacing each other before us, and no one knows where they sprout from. Let it be! Let it be!"[12]

Man on Vine: If my feelings are not mine, whose are they?

Buddha: Does a tree own the moanings of the wind passing over its hollows?

VI.

¶28. Man on Vine: Can a man really be without feelings?

Buddha: Yes.

Man on Vine: But a man who has no feelings—how can you call him a man?

Buddha: The Way gave him a face; Heaven gave him a form—why can't you call him a man? But that is not what I mean by feelings. When I talk about having no feelings, I mean that a man doesn't allow likes and dislikes to get in and do him harm. He just lets things be the way they are and doesn't try to help life along.[13]

Man on Vine: If he doesn't try to help life along, how can he keep himself away from that tiger?

Buddha: What does one who has lost the self have to fear from tigers?

Man on Vine: I don't know what to say.

Buddha: (Smiles)

END NOTES

1. *Saddharma-Pundarika or The Lotus of the True Law*, translated by H Kern, Dover Books (1963), 72 Includes the important and extensive parable of the Burning House and several others in the chapter "On Plants."
2. *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, translated by Paul Reys and Nyogen Senzake, Middlesex: Penguin (1971), 22-23 An excellent source of Ch'an and Zen anecdotes; very useful for classroom analysis.
3. Jean P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, New York: Philosophical Library (1957), 756.
4. *ibid.*, 756.

- [5.](#) *ibid.*, 755.
- [6.](#) *ibid.*, 756.
- [7.](#) Jean P. Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions* , New York: Philosophical Library (1957), 36.
- [8.](#) *ibid.*, 39.
- [9.](#) Chuang-tzu, *Chuang-zu: Basic Writings*, translated by Burton Watson, New York: Columbia University Press (1996), 133.
- [10.](#) *ibid.*, 31.
- [11.](#) *ibid.*, 82.
- [12.](#) *ibid.*, 31-33 To identify with those feelings, Chuang-tzu says, is to "treat your spirit like an outsider,"(33), for the feelings and thoughts which pass through us are not intrinsic to us, just as the wind which blows over the cracks in the tree are not part of its essential nature. As the cracks are part of the basic nature of a tree, we may say that, as humans, we have the permanent possibilities of experiencing feelings.
- [13.](#) *ibid.*, 72 "likes and dislikes" = "preferences for certain feelings, attitudes ..."; "to get in" = "to identify with, to dwell on" as in the heart-wood of a tree somehow becoming exposed to a dry prevailing wind. So the sage just lets the feelings pass through, neither clinging to them nor resisting them; and the winds die down.

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