

## In Search of the Quintessential: Towards a Field-Being Hermeneutics

Lik Kuen Tong

What do we mean by the quintessential? We mean the real as the basis of the good. Goodness is not separable from reality but is internally related to it; for the good, most succinctly put, is but the real *par excellence*. While the good arises from the inner dynamics of the real as its vital source and ground, it is also the teleological ideal that directs its fulfillment and consummation. The good in abstraction from the real is rootless; the real without its goodness is deficient. A rootless goodness is no good at all, and reality in the total absence of goodness—a complete lack of value and excellence—is not even a possibility. It is in the betweenness and mutuality of the real and the good that resides the quintessence and quintessentiality of all things.

The words “quintessence” and its cognate “quintessential” are, as we know, Greek in origin. Quintessence, from Latin *quinta* (fifth) + *essentia* (essence), is a translation of Greek *pempte ousia*, which in ancient and medieval philosophy names the fifth and highest essence (above the four elements of fire, air, water, and earth) that permeates all things in nature, and is the substance composing the celestial bodies. For ancient and medieval thinkers, things in nature are not created equal. The heavenly bodies, composed entirely of the fifth essence (*pempte ousia* or *quinta essentia*) and thought to be the purest and most refined substance or essence, were regarded as more excellent—and therefore superior and more real—than anything in the sublunary world. Just in what sense the *pempte ousia* or quintessence is pure, and how its excellence or superiority or goodness is determined by its essential purity need not concern us here. One thing is certain; the answer has something to do with the circular movement of the heavenly bodies, and in the case of Aristotle, whose cosmology represents at once the consumption of the Hellenic, and the beginning of the Scholastic-Medieval, worldviews, with the additional element of pure thought which Aristotle attributed to the Divine, God the Unmoved Mover, whose thinking is completely self-reflective (a thinking that has only itself as object)—thus in a sense also circular. Anyway, it suffices for our purpose to observe in this connection that in the ancient-medieval or pre-modern conception of the universe, there can be no separation between fact and value or reality and goodness, and that, moreover, the goodness or value of a thing is, as already stated or implied in the above exposition, determined and measured by its excellence—the greater the excellence, the higher the reality. The universe is, in other words, a hierarchical order and all things in it are ranked according to their significance or value that reflects their relative degrees or grades of excellence or perfection. At the top of the ontic hierarchy—the “Chain of Being,” as it has come to be known, the two terms of the quintessential relation—the real and the good—fully coincide: the real *par excellence*, or the “really real” (*ontos on*) as the Greeks were fond of expressing it, is also the good in perfection, the *summa bonum* or highest good in the vocabulary of Scholastic metaphysics. This identity of the real and the good, which instantiates a special case of the quintessential relation, is given a special name in Field-Being: the “wholesome universal.” What we intend in this idea is, as suggested by the etymology of the words (“whole” as adj. from ME. *Hol*, *hal*, entire, sound, uninjured), a state of supreme vigor, health, soundness, wellbeing and beauty that is made possible by an optimal

condition of the universe in which universality and particularity are one (whole-some), a condition procured and sustained by the rounded perfection of its procreative vitality. This supreme wholesomeness inevitably associated with the highest honorific terms in our philosophical vocabularies with which we speak and think of the quintessential being—whether it be called Logos, God, Brahman, Dao, and what not, is what defines the “ideal identity” of the real-and-good that we respectively hold up for ourselves as the ultimate measure of existence within the perspectivity of our own culture or tradition. It is hard to think of a conception of God or of the Ultimate Reality that does not bear the imprint of quintessentiality as here understood. And this is something to be expected. For quintessential ideals are projections of our deepest concerns and desires, our most elevated hopes and aspirations, our most cherished virtues and values, as well as our most tenaciously held beliefs and convictions. As such, they are mirrors of what we are and what we want to be: we are, indeed, made—intellectually, morally and spiritually—in the image of our quintessential ideals, although, conversely, we are also to a significant extent responsible for their making. And to the extent everything human is in some way an embodiment or reflection of the ideal identity held up by the cultural traditions to which we respectively belong, human understanding, including the understanding of understanding, is in its inmost essence a quintessential matter. But what is the real? What is the good? And how does the real constitute the basis of the good? These three questions implicit in our notion of the quintessential—the real as the basis of the good, are what make up the backbone of Field-Being hermeneutics, an attempt to formulate a theoretical perspective on civilized thought as a historical movement of quintessential thinking or reflection. From the Field-Being standpoint, how a given culture or tradition answers these three questions defines what that culture or tradition quintessentially is. For that given culture or tradition what is thus defined is its world of significance, its “*dao-world*” wherein the *Dao*, the Way, reveals itself as the quintessential in its truth.

Hermeneutics in the Field-Being sense then is a form of *dao*-learning; and a thinker or philosopher who directs himself or herself to the quintessentiality of things is a *dao*-learner or *dao*-thinker. It is in light of this conception of philosophy as *dao*-learning and as quintessential hermeneutics—which one may regard as *dao*-learning on the intellectual side, that we advance the concept of “reflective-quintessential history.” More exactly, “reflective-quintessential history” is an account of the movement of intellectual events wherein ideas and patterns of thought of quintessential import emerge in the light of truth. Such an account is described as ‘reflective’ because hermeneutics is for us not so much an interpretation of text, as it is usually understood, but is more fundamentally an interpretation of experience, an exercise of reflective thinking wherein the real-and-good, the quintessential, comes to know itself, to exhibit itself in discriminative consciousness. In respect of this intrinsic reflectivity inherent in the nature of activity and experience, all hermeneutics is from the Field-Being perspective quintessential hermeneutics whose central task is to fathom the depth of reality underlying the *dao-world*, to penetrate to the inner dynamics of appropriation that is the ground of all significance. In short, the goal of quintessential hermeneutics is to be awakened to the wholesome universal in *Dao*, the Way that is, once again, the quintessential in its truth.

But just what is it that constitutes the depth of reality underlying our quintessential experience and understanding? What do we have in mind when we speak of the inner dynamics of appropriation? Why do we identify it as the source of all significance? And finally, what generalizations can be

made about the movement of civilized thought that we call reflective-quintessential history? These questions, which are crucial for the hermeneutic project of *dao*-learning, cannot be adequately answered without invoking the ontological or metaphysical presuppositions of Field-Being. Although the issues involved here are, needless to say, enormously complex, our answers to these questions are ultimately derived from a philosophical position that we refer to as the “power thesis.” In a nutshell, the power thesis holds that *all things are power-made and ownness bound*. Power and ownness, the two primary notions in our conceptual scheme, are related, respectively, as source and ground in the Field-Being universe. While all things are dynamically constituted, being procreative expressions and manifestations of power concrescence, they are delimited and differentiated by the power of ownness as the universal principle of individuation, the “Ego principle,” as we elsewhere called it.<sup>1</sup> If Power as such is the source of Oneness, then it is by virtue of the Ego Principle, the power of ownness, that the universe is a field of the Many. The Ego Principle is at work whenever we perceive, cognize, or speak of a “this” as distinct, differentiated, or separated from a “that.” Generally speaking, the ownness of a thing—we mean *anything*, whether abstract or concrete, mental or physical, human or non-human, is what accounts or gives the thing its individuated or differentiated identity. And we cannot think of or talk about anything unless it is in some sense or to some degree abiding or enduring, whatever the ground of its abidingness or durability. It is in terms of this fundamental property of existence—to exist is to abide—that we entertain, with respect to the beings and things in nature like people, animals, mountains, trees, and rocks which compose the realm of the concrete, the concept of the “ontic self,” that is, a (concrete) being or thing in its abiding or enduring ownness. The important philosophical question is, of course, what constitutes ontic selfhood or where does abiding ownness lie. In this connection Field-Being makes a distinction between the ontic self and the empirical ego. While the ontic self points to the integral reality of a thing, the empirical ego pertains only to its abiding ownness as existentially grasped and conceptually projected in a particular context of experience—of which the notion of a substantial subject in traditional Western metaphysics conceived as an independent substratum is the most notable example.

From the Field-Being point of view, the ontic self or abiding ownness of a thing is not, to be sure, an absolute, static entity, something fully determinate and ready-made; but it is not a mere illusion either, as the Buddhists are prone to take it. The ontic self is real; what is not real is the substantial subject or ego that is falsely equated with it. To be more exact, the self / ego of an individuated existent as an instance of abiding ownness is an emergent center of empowered activity, a relatively durable dynamic structure that has become what it is in a process of power concrescence wherein a congregation of power elements and force-events collectively come to define itself. Ownness, the integral reality of a thing, is not, in other words, something pre-given like a permanent fixture but something to be realized and acquired, a value to be achieved. And the ontic selfhood or abiding ownness thus achieved in the self-definition of power concrescence is not the isolated self of an independent substance but a social or relational self—a “field self,” to be most properly phrased—that belongs to the concrescence as a unified whole, to the teleologically bounded collectivity of co-participants in the dynamic congregation. The self-definition of power concrescence is thus, as we would like to put it, a matter of appropriation taken in the root sense of the word—from Latin *appropriatus*, pp. of *appropriare*, to make one’s own. Thus understood, appropriation, the self-definition of power concrescence, is what constitutes the inner reality of things. And it is in the vein

of this conception that we employ the term “inner dynamics” as alluded to above. More exactly, the inner dynamics is the dynamics of the inner reality, the dynamics of ownness and individuation that is the grounding principle of power concrescence. But the inner dynamics or grounding principle is not an abstract or formal thing but a self-organizing logic of movement governing all processes of appropriation or ownness in the making. Although one cannot hope to offer an exhaustive analysis of the inner dynamics—or of anything, for that matter, this much is crucial to a basic understanding of its multi-polar functionality: namely, the essence of the inner dynamics lies generally in the diremption (separation), transaction, and resolution of opposing tendencies and forces that are perpetually at work in the Great Ocean of Becoming. All egos or ego-centers in the universe—the powers of ownness that are embodied in each and every being or thing—are subject to the grips of the inner dynamics in their respective paths of appropriation. The inner dynamics is the concrete foundation of the *Dao*-world, the world of significance in which we live and flourish.

Let us elaborate. The term power here is not to be grasped in any of its mundane or worldly senses, often associated with dominative, manipulative, or exploitative connotations, but must be understood solely in *functional* terms—as the potency or potential to function *and* the act of functioning which articulates and realizes the potential. Power, in other words, is what it does as well as what it can do. But we cannot determine a functional potential except in terms of its procreative efficacy, that is, in terms of the effects it produces or the traces or differences it generates in the world. These effects, traces, or differences of power which are the manifestations (*what* power does) of its procreative efficacy must be, moreover, distinguished from the activities or operations which collectively constitute the act of functioning (*what* power *does*)—the way it expresses itself in its self-definition, although these two aspects of power are obviously inseparable. A house is built; it is the product of the power that built it, a manifestation of its procreative efficacy. In our habitual or conventional way of thinking, we are apt to treat the house as an isolated, self-existing entity as if the manifest house is all there is to its truth and reality. The point is, of course, that the manifest house is only the partial truth: for the house in its authentic ownness—what the word “reality” primordially means—is not to be identified with the house in appearance but with the whole depth of reality that is co-extensive with the procreative power under consideration, including all the activities and operations which compose the act of building. The moment the house presents itself to us as a settled reality, a “done-deal,” so to speak, the “procreative subject”—the building power formerly at work in and through its articulate actions has already past into “objective immortality,” to borrow Whitehead’s well-known expression.

But just where, let us ask, does power reside? Where, to continue with our example, is the power that built the house? The answer: it resides both separately and collectively in all the power elements and force-events that contribute to the procreative process. Anything that plays a role or perform a function—whether directly or indirectly, actively or passively—in the building of the house in our example is a power element in its dynamic constitution, including the contributions of the architects, the blueprints, the contractors, the plumbers, the electrician, the bricks, and so on, and so on. The act of building which consists in the gathering or growing-together of the multifarious contributing factors is an instance of what we mean by power concrescence. To be more precise, power concrescence is a movement of force-events involving the transaction and interaction of power elements functioning and contributing to its procreative efficacy. To call them “force-

events” is to point to the various activities and operations that obtain and arise in the conjunction of the power elements that co-participate in the process—articulate actions which in their efficacious togetherness have the character of a force. Generally, every movement of empowered activity—or power at work—is for us a force-event to the extent it is procreatively efficacious; for an event is simply the movement of a force. What lies at the heart of the theory of power concrescence is the mutuality and co-dependence of force-events and power elements. While force-events arise from the multiplicity of power elements in and through their transaction and interaction, they are in turn modified, transformed, and renewed—even to an infinitesimal degree—by the latter in the very movement or process of becoming. This procreative circuit between force-events and power elements, which constitutes the inter dynamics of the universe, is the concrete foundation for all existents in nature. The concrete beings, things and objects which present themselves in our ordinary experience are for Field-Being “natural strands” of power concrescence whose overall character exhibits a fundamental ambiguity. They are, on the one hand, aggregations of power elements, and on the other, enduring centers of force-events. This duality of power concrescence underlying the dynamic constitution of natural strands is one of the key features that distinguish it from the substance approach in traditional Western metaphysics. The “subject-predicate” mode of thought and expression which the substance theory depends is, at least in its traditional form, woefully inadequate to the understanding and analytics of natural strands as concrete agents of power at work. For there is no “subject” in the sense of an isolated, self-sufficient and independent substance conceived as an unchanging underlying substrate or substratum in which a set of properties or qualities may inhere. Moreover, the complexity of power concrescence is such that it is utterly beyond any analytic representation by way of substantialistic predication. The truth is that there is no one way of thinking and talking about power at work at all which can do full justice to its elusive and enigmatic reality. The substance-based theory of predication, which has come to engulf almost the entire tradition of Western metaphysics, owes its success not so much to its objective validity as to its viability or practical expediency as an instrument of simplification—an instrument which has proved to be necessary, or at least conducive, to human survival and control. The subject-predicate mode of expression is a vital and powerful instrument because it takes advantage of the most controllable aspect of experience: to wit, the manifest effects of power concrescence which are amendable to generic classification and logical analysis. Effects belong to the settled past; they are traces or residuals of past, consummated activities or actions. Since what is done cannot be undone, the manifest effects are definite or determinate—hence can be grasped, discriminated and manipulated with greater ease and efficiency. This definiteness or determinateness of the done-and-settled, the ontic basis of logical manipulation and intellectual possession, is what makes possible the controllability of experience. It is therefore understandable why the desire to grasp, to control, and to possess—personified by the Greek god *Eros*, the possessive love of desire, is always accompanied by an obsession with definiteness. Although fascinated and tempted by the power of the indefinite, the elusive, and the mysterious, *Eros* or *Desire* cannot bear its presence. To make definite the indefinite, to grasp or take hold of the elusive, and to make transparent the mysterious and unknown, is the driving impetus of all *eros*-centric thinking. But behind the love of desire is the Ego Principle at work, the universal principle of individuation procuring the myriad of natural strands and life forms in the world.

In so far as Field-Being is concerned, nature is alive: a natural strand is a form of life in so far as it

is endowed with procreative vitality—a vibrant energy that is essentially productive and creative. It is, to put it in a somewhat Pre-Socratic fashion, the “stuff” or “matter” out of which all things in nature are made. What we designate by the terms “procreative vitality” or “vibrant energy” here is, however, not a “stuff” like water or air but power itself conceived as the concrete common source and medium of empowered activity—what life and the living functionally consists of. Is this perhaps what the Pre-Socratic philosophers actually had in mind in entertaining their favorite notions of *arche* (origin) and *physis* (nature) so that when they name the concrete common source as water or air or fire it is really power itself in its vital essence that was intended? For the early Greeks as well as the Pre-Qin Chinese philosophers, nature is indeed “alive” because all things in nature are “power-ful,” being capable of functioning and self-movement. When Thales pronounced that all things are made of water, he perhaps used water only metaphorically—as a metaphor for the vital, procreative power. He perhaps meant to say *not* that all things are in fact made of water but that the concrete source of all things is “water-like.”

The universe as Field-Being envisages it is not a collection of substantial entities—independent substances that are intrinsically separated and capable only of external relations. It is rather a plenum-field of power concrescences and empowered activities that are ineluctably interdependent and intertwined with each other, being ultimately derived from the same root—the infinite One, the ultimate activity. The plenum-field is a “plenum” because it is a holo-dynamic continuum of procreative vitality that is inexhaustible in its source and all pervasive in its extension. Yet the dynamic plenum is also a “field” in so far as it constitutes a multi-dimensional and multi-polar matrix of functional possibilities and real potentials, a womb of topological openness wherein all power elements and force-events—the components of natural strands—originate. Topology in the Field-Being sense is a study of dynamic structures or configurations with respect to the principles and patterns governing the distribution, appropriation and transformation of power. Everything in nature conceived as a strand of power concrescence occupies a *topos* or topological openness in the plenum-field, a place or locus for the inception and dispensation of its empowerment. In doing away with the idea of independent substratum in Aristotelian-traditional metaphysics—especially in its extreme form, Field-Being advances the concept of topological—or more accurately, field-topological—occupation. The Aristotelian “substratum” (*hypokeimenon*) now rid of its independence has given way to a *topos* or place in topological space. Let us immediately add, however, that we must not confuse topological space with physical space. The *topos* or place that is opened up in the plenum-field for the occupation of a natural strand is not a position in physical space but a “dynamic vacuity”—a *xu* in the nature of things, as the Daoists would say—that makes room for the self-definition and becoming of an empowered activity. The topological space a house occupies is not the three-dimensional space where the house is located here and now but the plenum-field itself functioning as the holo-dynamic environment conditioning its birth, manifestation and ontic upbringing. What occupies topological space is not the house as built but the power—the natural strand of power concrescence in its full depth of reality—that has built it. We call this power that actualizes all the functional potentials pertaining to the house, its very possibility of existence in the plenum-field, the “let-be.” The house that appears here and now is a manifestation of the let-be at one phase of its procreative efficacy, an infinite arrival from time immemorial which, paradoxically speaking, is both temporal and non-temporal in its beginning. In contrast to the ordinary way of thinking which has become fixated and rigidized in the substantialist

mode of thought, Field-Being does not conceive the ontic self or abiding ownness of a thing with the thing as manifested but with the let-be, the procreative power that originates from the infinite background.

The house as built and manifested is characterized as an “infinite arrival” because its ontic self, the let-be of its ontic upbringing, has its ultimate roots in the One, the ultimate activity that constitutes the infinite background of all worldly existents, the common denominator that is included in the being and reality of all that is. But the One is at the same time the Two: the two aspects of the ultimate activity whose transfinite synthesis at the base of the plenum-field is what constitutes the primordial beginning of all becomings. The term “primordial” here designates the inception of time and the temporal in the life of a worldly existent, the time when the two sources of procreative vitality—pure vitality and karmic matter—first intersect. These two sources of the vital power constitute respectively the two major components in the empowerment and dynamic structure of a natural strand or worldly existent. While pure vitality is incarnated in a natural strand as its transcendental endowment, karmic matter is what gives a natural being or thing its environmental heritage. “The Two,” says he *Daodejing*, “gives rise to the Three. And the Three gives rise to the ten-thousand things.” This means, in Field-Being terms, that the myriad of worldly existents is the vital product of transfinite subjectivity—the Three.

The term “transfinite” refers generally to the dynamic relation between pure vitality and karmic matter, the two proto-strands of energy in the composition of procreative vitality. In Field-Being cosmology, every natural strand in process of becoming is made up of countless quanta of articulate action each of which is productive of an infinitesimal or smallest determinable effect or difference. These countless quanta of action or articulate quanta working in concert or in succession are what give rise to the myriad of enduring beings or things that appear in our gross, ordinary experience. Every quantum of action is a synergetic union of the two proto-strands, a synthesis of transcendental endowment and environmental heritage. Here by “karmic matter”—the “matter of karma”—we mean the accumulated effects (matter) of past action (karma), a term adopted from the Indian tradition but without its strong moral-religious significations and connotations. For us karmic matter is vital energy in the dissipated form in which all ontic traditions as habituated patterns of empowered activity established by articulate quanta in the past are passively embedded. By contrast, pure vitality is described as “pure” because it is undifferentiated vibrant, living energy devoid of and unaffected by karmic matter. In the Field-Being worldview, all natural strands and their component quanta of action are decedents or offsprings of the One, which came into existence originally as effluents of pure vitality emanating spontaneously and innocently from the ultimate activity. These originary emanations, transcendental gifts of the One, are what account for the creative and inventive power of natural strands and of every quantum of action. While, for example, a smoker’s desire and tendency to keep on smoking is determined by the compulsion of a habituated pattern of conduct—namely, the smoking habit—that is embedded in her karmic-material heritage, her ability to change or modify the habit is due to the pure vitality that is available in her dynamic constitution. At the “moment of fate” which witnesses the inception of experience and character in the becoming of an articulate quantum of action made possible by the originary ingression of pure vitality on karmic matter, a form of life as “transfinite subject”—a field individual or emergent in the plenum-field, is born.

The quintessential, let us recall, is the real as the basis of the good. We are now in a better position to clarify and further ascertain the meaning of this statement. In the Field-Being context, both the real and the good are concepts pertaining to life—not life as restricted in our ordinary usage but “life” as the expression and manifestation of procreative vitality, the concrete essence of empowered activity. In this amplified sense, life is both an affair and a duration in which a procreative power in the role of a field individual and transfinite subject dispenses and appropriates itself. The inner dynamics of appropriation is the inner dynamics of transfinite subjectivity. Here then lies the deepest meaning of reality in Field-Being philosophy. To the question “what is the real?” the Field-Being answer is simply this: the real consists concretely in the life and appropriation of transfinite subjects. Since a transfinite subject is a field individual, the plenum-field as the background of all transfinite subjects is implicit in this statement. But what is the good? What is the meaning of goodness from the Field-Being standpoint? The good is the excellence of the Real, as we have stated. That means the excellence of empowered activity, the excellence of transfinite subjectivity. The question is, of course, what does the “excellence” in question consists of? What exactly is involved in the excellence of transfinite subjectivity?

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1. See Lik Kuen Tong, “The Art of Appropriation: Towards a Field-Being Conception of Philosophy,” in Bo Mou, ed., *Two Roads to Wisdom? Chinese and analytic Philosophical Traditions* (Open Court Publication Company, 2001), 57-83.