

Epilogue: Must it Converge?

This essay has sought to explore the consequences for reason of two “sceptical” conclusions that have proven very difficult to argue with: The first is that all cognition depends on the active appropriation of events that are unknowable except through some interpretive process. The second is that no argument, however strong or valid, can literally *compel* reasoned assent – i.e. force its reader to accept results that he finds distasteful. There are still very many people who would deny these conclusions, but I have seen few attempts to meet them head on, and no successful attempt to refute them. Admittedly, these points are as resistant to proof as any other. However, they have the cardinal strength of explaining why men of intelligence and good will continue to disagree on everything we really care about.

Some have foolishly rejoiced in the seeming bankruptcy of reason – mistaking the classical reason of Plato and Aristotle for reason itself, and indulging a political fantasy that reason is something we would be better off without. Many more have failed to notice that there is a problem at all. Some have seen the problem of interpretation and reason clearly enough, but prefer to ignore it, because they see only chaos when the problem is recognized: that reason deals only in more or less plausible suggestions, not in compelling proofs.

Let one example serve for all that might be given. In his encyclical, *Fidei et Ratio*,¹ released just as I was finishing this book, Pope John Paul II directs a broadside against most of the positions on the contemporary philosophical table, while endorsing the importance and autonomy of philosophy itself. His purpose is to affirm both philosophical inquiry and the fundamental rationality and truth of Christian revelation in the face of post-modern scepticism. Yet he nowhere mentions the problem of interpretations explicitly, and avoids coming to grips with it directly, apart from insisting – as (he must feel) his position requires – that there exists One Truth for all humanity, and that his Church is its keeper.

Where a man stands depends on where he sits. The incumbent of the Chair of St. Peter is as much entitled as anyone to his own understanding; and he deserves all credit for attempting to defend that understanding in a reasoned way – and not by fire and sword, as his predecessors did, in an age when this was feasible. Still, he ducks the issue that Nietzsche raised; and the omission is

¹ *Faith and Reason*

conspicuous, given the purpose of his document.

Had he wished, the pope might have addressed Nietzsche's point directly, with an argument that beyond all differences of human understanding, there is such a thing as universal truth, and that all good men approach it. This doctrine finds crisp expression in the phrase, "Everything that rises must converge", used by Flannery O'Connor as the title of a short story, and quoting a central doctrine of the Jesuit theologian Teilhard de Chardin.² In this book's language, a claim might be made that conversation of integrity must necessarily advance toward consensus on the fundamentals – toward a common vision of human existence. Granting the right of interlocutors to their own viewpoints, a possibility exists that the discipline of good conversation, and of life itself, must draw our understandings closer together. As a matter of experience, this convergence is not very reliable. Yet it is more than pious hope; and the pontiff might have chosen to stake the intellectual respectability of his faith on its ultimate necessity as a limit point of the human conversation, or as an intuitive foreglimpse thereof. The question is, What are we to make of such a claim? Ought we to expect that experience and serious discourse will converge, or that they probably will not?

Persons who give themselves to the discipline of any knowledge culture – music, a scholarly discipline, a certain industry and business firm, a martial art – do indeed draw closer in many respects. They acquire, typically, the cognitive habits of the culture they are working in, becoming characteristically sensitive and discriminating in some respects, and characteristically less so in others. They gain a working familiarity with that culture's ideas, and with its tool set. They acquire the skills and methodological habits to select and use these "competently:" i.e. in the ways validated by practice, and approved by their colleagues. Above all, they internalize that culture's values, and come to judge themselves by its standards. In all these senses, de Chardin's aphorism seems correct: As participants submit to the values and disciplines of any craft or practice, as they internalize and master these and rise in that culture's hierarchy, there will indeed be a noticeable convergence amongst them.

The limit point of craftsmanly effectiveness, and of existence itself, was called *Tao* by the Chinese, and *Techne* by the ancient Greeks, and was an

² In *The Future of Mankind*, de Chardin wrote: "No doubt each in his own fashion, following his separate path, believes that he has once and for all solved the riddle of the world's future. But the divergence between them is in reality neither complete nor final, unless we suppose that by some inconceivable and even contradictory feat of exclusion (contradictory because nothing would remain of his faith) the Marxist, for example, were to eliminate from his materialistic doctrine every upward surge towards the spirit. Followed to their conclusion the two paths must certainly end by coming together: *for in the nature of things everything that is faith must rise, and everything that rises must converge.* (italics mine)

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aspect of the Judaeo-Christian *God*, whose death Nietzsche announced. *Tao* means “the Way of Nature.” *Techne* is the spirit of human artifice. The English name *God* is a cognate form of “good.” Yet despite the differing shades of meaning, all these concepts, share a common intuition. Each puts a label on some ultimately unknowable natural order that commands Man’s respect, since compliance with this order will be rewarded with long life, prosperity, and success in one’s undertakings, while ignorance or disobedience will be punished with failure, and premature death. The idea, once again, is that some realities must be recognized and dealt with, however one wishes to understand them:

Reality is what refuses to go away.

Today, we bow before a “technological imperative” of efficiency, cost effectiveness and naked power. In a sense, the imperative of doing things along Nature’s grain and not against it was just Lao Tzu’s point. Indeed, science has been called “the teachable *Tao*.” But one measure of our post-modern predicament is that the identification of *Techne* with *Tao* no longer seems apt. To modern Man it seems all too likely that the Best Way of doing things, as judged by short-term human criteria, will not be Nature’s Way at all.

This worry is serious enough: If conversation in fact converges, does it converge to some place we want to go? But our concern here is to compare the claims of two contradicting principles: the normalizing power of *Tao* (or *God*, or *Techne*), as against the diversifying power of interpretation that Nietzsche pointed out. The Greeks saw this issue very clearly: That is why Dionysos, lord of the dance, intoxication and aesthetic freedom is the dissolute brother of Apollo, the god of clarity, measure and harmony, and of Athena, mistress and teacher of craftsmanship and of all particular crafts. Eternally, the normative disciplines of craftsmanly competence constrain and channel the willful energies of creative inventiveness and interpretation. Yet we must admit that different disciplines tend to channel the understanding in significantly divergent ways. Eternally too, creative insight overflows the existing channels of conversation and eventually cuts new ones. Dimly, we can perceive that these two great aphorisms: “Everything that rises must converge”, and “There are no facts, only interpretations”, are themselves poles of an argument between competing understandings of cognition itself. All human activity, and the cognitive tensions beneath its surface, spring from the interplay of disciplined technique with imaginative freedom. So much we can probably stipulate – probably agree and rely upon as “fact.”

In the interplay of Apollo, Athena and Dionysos, the role of language is ambiguous; and has been the focus of one of the oldest of philosophical controversies: Does language “map” or “mirror” reality in any important sense,

or does it merely impose its own arbitrary structures? Just what connection exists (if any) between concepts and things?

If one had to point to a single issue marking the watershed between Eastern and Western mind-sets and civilizations, it would have to be their differing attitudes on this question. Until quite recently and, perhaps even today (to some extent that is still unclear), Oriental philosophies were characterized by a profound scepticism about the descriptive power of words. The *Tao Te Ching*, a seminal text of Chinese thought, opens with this warning: “The *Tao*³ that can be told is not the true *Tao*; the names that can be named are not the right names. The *Nameless* is the mother of Heaven and Earth.” Lao Tzu points to a concept that cannot be articulated, cannot be captured in discourse. The *Tao* can be felt and pointed to, but not adequately talked about. Nonetheless (Lao Tzu claims), it has an objective reality beyond individual perception or interpretation. If you stray from it, you will feel a pull back toward the Normal and the “Self-So.” If you persist against this pull, you will be sorry. Lao Tzu invokes the metaphor of a bow, which breaks if it is bent too far. The archer must learn to feel the correct stringing tension of his weapon. He cannot be told where this lies, since every bow is different.

Contrast this Taoist regard for the ineffable with the religious respect for language that has been destiny for the West: For Plato, everything had its correct name; and the *ideas* these stood for were more primordial, more enduring, and thus more “real” than their transient manifestations that one could see or touch. The idea of Man or Horse pre-existed all actual men or horses in the Creator’s mind and surpassed these in perfection, just as the idea of a mathematical circle pre-exists and surpasses any circle that can be drawn. The Jews, for their part, also had the world begin with a speech-act: God says, “Let there be . . .” And so it became and will remain, until God ordains otherwise. The Gospel of John harks back to this Greek and Jewish theory of creation, beginning with a divine idea and utterance: “In the beginning was the Word (*Logos*), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning, with God. Everything came about through him, and without him not one thing came about.”⁴ Even today, we imagine a universe ruled by physical laws expressed in the language of mathematics – the most rigorous version of *Logos*. But each of these visions flatly contradicts Lao Tzu’s idea that the Nameless stands at the beginning. Taoism is a philosophy of the Self-So, of a natural world that manifests by itself, out of its own inward Nature. It has no need, and indeed no room for Divine edicts or physical “laws.” It runs

³ *Tao*: roughly, the Way, or Path, of Nature – or its Law, as we would say.

⁴ Richmond Lattimore translation.

by itself, as it must and can.

As between these Eastern and Western attitudes toward language, who was right? There is no consensus on this issue today; and there may never be one. My own judgment is that Nietzsche and the post-modernists are correct that language cannot bear the whole burden that Western thought had hoped. Much that we know and feel cannot be captured in flatly true statements. Lao Tzu has the right end of it: “The *Tao* that can be told is not the true *Tao*.” Words do not stand for eternal, sharply definable categories, but for fuzzy, man-made abstractions from ambiguous experience. Lao Tzu is right again: “The names that can be named are not the right names.” By now, the point is a common-place: The core of the post-modern assault on reason has been its recognition that the *Logos* of a techno-industrial civilization cannot encompass or accommodate the *Tao* of Nature, including human nature.

Yet, if the Western attitude toward language turns out to be mistaken, we must still recognize how fruitful the error has been. Through a deep historical irony, the East steadily and necessarily has been turning away from its own philosophical insight, to embrace the West’s mistake! Wisdom may be gained by sudden insight into the Fruitful Emptiness, but knowledge advances through incremental refinement of inadequate theories and concepts. The West’s obsession with concepts started the game of science, and finally enabled a more detailed and precise knowledge than could have been possible otherwise. Nor is it clear, even now, how far articulate knowledge can reach, and what its limits are. From one perspective, the post-modern revolution was not an overthrow of reason, but an enormous gain in reason’s scope and sophistication. I think this will become apparent when the dust (which has been excessive) finally settles down.

Perhaps, what we need more than anything else today is some kind of working synthesis of the ancient East’s ideal of intuition and obedience to Nature with the Promethean Western project of articulate knowledge and technical mastery. What the intellectual world needs, in particular, is some kind of synthesis between Taoist scepticism about language, and our Western obsession with it. As individuals and as a global society, our problem is to enjoy the fruits of articulate thought without losing the peace, clarity, subtlety and balance that Lao Tzu emphasized. The trick may be to use ideals and ideas to mark the poles of what is conceivable, not necessarily as objectives to be realized.— one at the expense of another, often with bloody conflict and much suffering. For human truth is a structure of argument, and human justice is a balance amongst competing claims. Lao Tzu was surely right that the exaggeration of any articulate idea or intention accumulates reactive energy,

leading eventually to sharp recoil or breakdown.

We might compare the situation for reason today with the classical mechanics of Newton which is quite obsolete as theory, but which remains useful partly as an introduction to the concepts of physics, and partly because its calculations are relatively easy, and accurate enough for most purposes. Only with very small, very large, or very fast-moving objects do quantum and relativity effects become important. Similarly in ordinary thinking: When no divergent interpretations are at issue, the complexities of conversational logic and polyphonic truth, remain unnecessary. We may continue to ask and answer questions of overwhelmingly consensual perception, and call our answers *true* in the classical, Aristotelian sense until consensus is seriously challenged. At that point, certain Nietzschean effects must be reckoned with, and reason must work polyphonically to deserve its name.

Its theory might be articulated somewhat differently than has been done here; but I see no other way to save a worthwhile notion of reason once you accept Nietzsche's point that interpretation is an act of cognitive power, imposed by a mind to render the world intelligible for its own purposes. And I see no way to dodge that point without first persuading yourself (without a shred of justification) that your preferred story is everyone's Absolute Truth.