

9/8/20

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 34

Our most interesting meeting was canceled early by the failure of the internet, though we still enjoyed a fascinating hour together. Most of what got cut off was some readings and the closing meditation. I was able to call everyone by phone to assure them we were still safe. There is a lot of worry, as Oregon is going through the greatest disaster in its history, with whole towns burning and vast stretches of our gorgeous wildlands billowing into the atmosphere. After the abrupt ending I watched a six-alarm fire across the valley, along the top of Bald Peak, a scenic redoubt of parklands hanging high above lush, secluded valleys. This is in fact what I saw from the deck:



Verse 34 is short and quite potent for its size, which is appropriate since it's the second one, after 32 about *smallness*. The Tao is small and humble, but it includes everything, so it is also great. The question of what is great and what is small is turned upside down by the master, Lao Tzu.

The gist is that the Tao is a flood that goes in all directions, summed up as left and right. Although everything is dependent on it, it doesn't take credit. There is no intention, or need to satisfy any desire. As Pine puts it, "Everything turns to it / but it wields no control." For this it might be called small. Calling it great offends its innocence.

None of our sources indicated any mystical import for left and right. Our largely flatulent political uses for these terms date from the French Revolution, where for a time the extremely conservative monarchy and its Church sat on the right, while the freedom-yearning rabble and its intellectuals were seated on the left in the new National Assembly. Left brain/right brain theories are even more recent. Deeply engrained in English from heraldry—and typically opposite the French—is left: sinister, or bad, and right: dexter (dextrous) or good, but that's still only 600 years old, a quarter the age of the Tao Te Ching. Perhaps some of our living sages can add to our understanding.

The Tao is said to be the moving heart of everything, though without taking any credit or providing any direction.

Thus it's *great*, which gets a lot of ink:

In Anita's anonymous translation, "It gives everything for nothing."

Feng: "It does not show greatness, / And is therefore truly great."

Several are similar to Hamill's: "By not claiming greatness, / the sage achieves greatness."

Minford adds, by not lording it over the ten-thousand things, the Tao can be called Truly Great.

Mitchell's is nice: "It isn't aware of its greatness; / thus it is truly great." In his end note he affirms: "It acts without any conscious plan or purpose."

Pine's sages have a lot to add. Su Ch'e says: Those who are great and think themselves great are small."

Li Hsi-Chai sums up the whole verse: "The Great Way is a watery expanse that extends to the eight horizons. But when we use it, it's as close as our left or right hand. There is nothing that doesn't depend on it for life, and yet it never speaks of its power. There is nothing that doesn't happen without its help, and yet it never mentions its achievements."

The last lines stimulated some valuable thoughts, in both the class and the sages, as we will see.

The excellent Needleman endnote on smallness in the Feng was reproduced in the notes for verse 32, and read out for this one. Anita's anonymous translation of the whole verse seems fair to put in—you can read it in Part II.

Deb had the evening off, so I opened with the way this verse especially reinforced my belief that the Tao, the Absolute, whatever the inner principle was called in the ancient languages, even God, is suspiciously similar to the ocean of atomic particles of current science. You can read the scriptures from that perspective, and easily see how the ancient rishis were intuiting what was going on in the invisible realms about them, without having the tools to directly see it or the math to calculate it. Some spoke of atoms, which to them meant an irreducibly small unit or monad, so they were really getting at the subatomic realm and/or the quantum field. The description of Tao in this verse, if you are thinking in terms of quantum reality, amounts to the same thing.

Sneering at the wisdom of the ancients is a lingering prejudice of science, a reaction to the ongoing intolerance and lethality of religious fanatics, who don't know their ancient

wisdom either. Fanatics of whatever stripe don't seem to realize they are actually poisoning their ideas for thinking people when they adhere to them so narrow-mindedly.

Bill mused that one of the great questions that arises in all systems is how was this world created, and it differs from philosophy to philosophy. They all agree there's some unified force in the universe from which all the "ten thousand things" manifest and then go back into it. What does that really look like? We have a unity that creates everything, yet doesn't have a sense of itself. Its greatness relies on fact that it's humble. Bill found it beautiful look at that in the Taoist context.

I reiterated how this verse is not really much different than the physical theories of modern science. There are laws built into the structure of the universe, and plenty of building blocks lying around, and as if by a miracle coherency manifests in all sorts of ways out of its innate abilities and power. It doesn't need a humanlike mind trying to make us what we are, it's simply busy coming up with new possibilities. It has no interest in ruling us. Although 'humble' is an anthropomorphic term, it's not a human-type ego at work, following a template to produce a certain result. There's plenty of serendipity. The coolest part is it produces quantum leaps all the time.

What baffles me is that science is so resistive, like a bully making fun of some stupid class member, who later turns out to be the actual genius in the room, while the junior scientist is destined to play out their life in a cube farm filling out forms.

Anita has been listening to well-known and controversial neuroscientist Donald Hoffman, who has come up with the theory that reality is not what we think it is. She thought his view resembled the movie *Matrix*, and it does, though without all the paranoia and king fu. She gave us some background, that all science serves us, but it's consciousness — conscious agents—that

are the foundation of the universe. Here's a pull quote, pending more research, from Wikipedia:

The objective world consists of *conscious agents* and their experiences that cannot be derived from physical particles and fields. "What exists in the objective world, independent of my perceptions, is a world of conscious agents, not a world of unconscious particles and fields."

Note how it's the same affirmation repeated, meant to make it doubly convincing....

According to Hoffman, everything we see we create, it's not actually "out there." He likens our awareness to a computer desktop interface, presumably to get through to the younger generations. On the desktop you click on an icon and drag it to the garbage, and it looks like what you are doing is moving the file, but no, that's just an interface. All sorts of complex processes are involved, and you would be overwhelmed and distracted if you had to pay attention to them. So the program just makes it simple, and we don't need to attend to the inner workings of the computer. Like that, Hoffman says, the world we perceive is an interface. All the material things are presented to us in simplified form, so they are easy to comprehend and work with. Yet the true reality is what is *behind* that interface.

In modern lingo, the interfaces dumb down reality for us. Anita added some more about how this impacts our lives and shapes the meanings that can be derived, but I found these secondary notions unsatisfactory, puerile. I'm definitely not sure it's "all about" anything, though reproductive success is surely one thread. It appears to be very much constrained by our social default settings, but I've not checked it out thoroughly yet. Probably if you're interested you should go to the source, maybe starting with a TED talk:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oYp5XuGYqqY&list=PLBDwvhxSE6PNWNFz7f2pXtt4_ZYa6q1n7&index=16&t=0s .

Despite the shortcomings, I found the basic premise to be very similar to Vedanta as we are unspooling it and brain imaging is confirming: incredibly complex calculations are made in the unconscious arena based on memories and sensory input and God knows what else, and then presented to our ego for implementation. In other words, a picture is made for us by our brains, designed with our mind in mind, so we readily choose (or go along with) what our wise self wants us to. So much complexity is being processed, we could never keep up with it anyway.

This is important regarding the unfoldment of each of us, to know we are playing a dumbed-down version of a game, but a version nonetheless that is crafted for our benefit. Come on! It's just like religion: we are blessed every minute with divine grace guiding us from within. Moreover, I feel our sanity is dependent on us thinking that what we're coming up with is ours and not something alien, as in the Matrix or the computer, with its hacker trolls. Schizophrenia may well involve the sense of not being connected to the presentations you are receiving from yourself.

Now that consensual reality is going down the toilet in earnest, we need to rely on something we can trust. Those who look to the outside world for their confidence are being manipulated by all manner of confidence games. Kill your enemy for salvation! Our inner wisdom offers a much more congenial set of options, if those are what we want. And, it's close to hand. Nearer than the near, though farther than the far for those who don't know the secret.

In the Pine, Hsuan-Tsung says of the verse, "To drift means to be unrestrained. The Tao is neither *yin* nor *yang*, weak nor strong. Unrestrained, it can respond to all things and in any direction. It isn't one-sided. As Chuang-tzu says, 'The Tao has no borders.'"

Susan resonated with the infinite possibilities of the Tao, having read a recent NY Times article about life on other planets, and how very different they would have to be. She always gets excited thinking about how the world would appear to a totally different organism.

Anita knew just what she meant: She had just been out picnicking by the river, and there were seagulls flying around. She tried to imagine what the world would be like as a seagull: would air currents have color? Would she be able to see fish under the water? What would experience be like out of the eyes of a bird? She had a lovely meditation being a gull instead of a girl.

The exchange gave me a chance to recommend one of the great science fiction stories: *He Who Shrank*, by Henry Hasse. In it, a mad scientist invents a shrinking potion and gives it to the author, who reduces into the micro world, the atomic, and then into new universes, where macrocosm matches the previous microcosm. He visits universe after universe, where he learns to shrink onto habitable worlds, and finds a series of exceedingly strange life forms on each one. It looks like you can read it online now, starting here:

<http://johnnypez9.blogspot.com/2010/06/he-who-shrank-by-henry-hasse-part-1.html> . Checking comments, I'm not the only one who was deeply affected by this cosmic tale. Take the trip!

This kind of imagining has a very practical basis, realizing that all humans are having different experiences even on this world. So much hostility could be averted if we tried to find out what the other was picturing before getting angry, knowing they couldn't possibly know what we are knowing. Yet because of "dumbing down," we are not focusing on the differences, we just seeing our own stuff. We need to make a correction for this.

It's famous that there's no way to tell if one person's experience of color is the same as another's, but that's actually true of everything. Our brain was untutored when it started to construct

a coherent story out of the welter of information pouring into it from Day 1, and it's been building on an initial quirk, or theory, ever since. Remember, personality is a strategy devised by an infant. Once erected, such castellations are very hard to reconstruct. Nitya used to point out the real miracle is that we can communicate with each other at all. Happily, our conscious agents have been factoring "the other" in all along, so somehow it does manage to be functional. We can work together. Amazing!

It sounds a bit like Ts'ao Tao-Ch'ung: "Although living things might be infinite in number, the Tao creates them all through the mystery of doing nothing. It doesn't mind making so many. And it creates them without thinking about its power."

Wang P'ang says: "When the Tao becomes small, it doesn't stop being great. And when it becomes great, it doesn't stop being small. But all we see are its traces. In reality, it's neither small nor great. It can't be described. It can only be known."

The Gita's chapter IX concurs, and has a perfect presentation of the mystery:

4)By Me all this world is pervaded, My form unmanifested; all beings have existence in Me and I do not have existence in them.

5)And further, beings do not exist in Me; behold My status as a divine mystery; further, Myself remaining that urge behind beings, I bear them but do not exist in them either.

6)As the great (expanse of) air filling all space has its basis in pure extension, thus you should understand all existences as having their basis in Me.

Like that, we're made of atoms and quarks but they are not made of us. They could become anything at all.

Chuang-tzu says: “Those who are skilled toil, and those who are clever worry. Meanwhile, those who do not possess such abilities seek nothing and yet eat their fill. They drift through life like unmoored boats.” You may recall our earlier reading of Chuang-tzu’s Empty Boat. The Chuang-tzu readings we didn’t get to are so terrific I’ll likely include them in the next class, which is in the same vein.

With much still pending, I was suddenly looking at an screen without a Zoom frame, asking me to terminate the class. Forgetting it was only an interface, the others were very impressed by my disappearing act. They must think I’m magic! But it was only another internet failure. I called everyone to assure them we weren’t yet on fire, and that has remained true. I don’t know how it factors in, but your prayers have kept us safe so far, so please keep them coming—especially you Indians, who are really good at it. Thanks and aums.

Part II

Beverley’s haiku:

34

Tao, the gift of life,
is the "Great Integrity"
working in secret.

* * *

Anita shared an anonymous translation that adds a nice twist to the verse:

That which makes everything exist, is present everywhere
It spreads itself throughout the entire Creation
Everything owes its existence to It, everything to its own nature
It gives everything for nothing
It cherishes and guards everything and everyone, but expects
nothing in return
Because It does not wish for anything, It seems to be important
It makes everything appear and disappear again
But Itself is eternal
Therefore the one who is wise is modest
And because she is modest,
Her actions are grand

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<https://www.buzzsprout.com/732839/3690403-tao-te-ching-verse-34-practicing-humility-by-emulating-the-tao>