

SEARCHING FOR THE ETERNAL MYSTERY:  
PLATO'S THE GOOD, THE TAO, BUDDHISM, DWORKIN'S INHERENT  
VALUE, THOREAU'S UNNAMEABLE  
by Clarence A. Crawford

*Hubris means forgetting where the real source of power lies and imagining that it  
is in oneself.*  
Ernest Becker

### Plato and the Good

One of Plato's most fruitful ideas, for me, is his tripartite division of the macrocosm of the state and the microcosm of the individual into Reason, Spirit, and Appetite. (In my personal view of psychology and ethics, I divide myself into the Intellect, the Emotional, and the Physical.)

Plato explains early on in *The Republic* that the goal of governance, both of the state and within the individual, is Justice. It follows logically that when the three elements of the state are in balance, then the goal of Justice has been achieved, and the result is Harmony within society.

In Plato's scheme, Reason is associated with wisdom, Spirit is associated with courage, and Appetite is associated with temperance. Reason contains the governing principle, Spirit includes the will and the executive function, and Appetite is restrained by temperance. Within the microcosm of the individual, when the three elements of the individual—wisdom, courage, appetite—are in balance, one leads a just life; harmony prevails. Happiness is not the explicit goal, but it is implicit that happiness is the outcome.

(In my personal view, I do not relegate the Physical to an inferior position, as Plato does with Appetite. Rather, I think, based on my personal experience, that the Physical and the Intellect feed each other, the Emotions and the Physical feed each other, and so on through all the permutations. My conclusion is based on empirical experience not logic.)

Of course Plato's analysis does not stop here. Beyond all the practical organizations of society and the self lies something additional, something overarching, both fundamental and inclusive; prior to and essential to; and that is the Good.

Plato introduces this concept in Part III, Chapter XXII, "The Good as the Highest Object of Knowledge," (as organized and translated by Francis Cornford). Just as the sun provides the light that allows the human eye to function, without

itself functioning as the organ of vision, so does the Good (or more precisely, “the Form or essential nature of Goodness”) enable the human intellect to know.

It is important to observe, however, that Plato refuses to define the Good. Glaucon presses Socrates to define the Good, but Socrates declines, claiming that “it is beyond my powers....” And so we learn that the ultimate of all truths, that which is the source of all illumination, is itself unknowable, except perhaps by the profoundly wise.

Here much of our understanding proceeds by analogy. Socrates introduces the Sun analogy after he declines to define the Good but before he clarifies the function of the Good. Socrates indicates that we know the Good by its results, not by contemplating the Good itself, and introducing the Sun analogy first is excellent preparation for this concept.

The Sun analogy has particular appeal to me. I have always been sensitive to the power of illumination, and my sensitivity has increased as I have aged. I named my guiding business Sunlight North Expeditions, and the title of my book is *Sunlight North*, one chapter of which is “The Quality of the Light.” In that chapter I wrote, “I realize that this is a world of light. It is light that communicates everything in my surroundings to me, that connects me to the world. The northern light: from the world, through my eyes, to my soul. I have no other word for this part of myself than ‘soul.’ The world is filled with beauty, the world is beauty, the world is great and good; I reach out and bless it; this is prayer” (p. 74). I drew these thoughts from my experience, not by cribbing Plato. Yet here is what Socrates says:

“The Sun is not vision, but it is the cause of vision and also is seen by the vision it causes.

“It was the Sun, then...[that] stand[s] there in the same relation to vision and visible things as that which the Good itself bears in the intelligible world to intelligence and to intelligible objects....

“Apply this comparison, then, to the soul. When its gaze is fixed upon an object irradiated by truth and reality, the soul gains understanding and knowledge and is manifestly in possession of intelligence....

“This, then, which gives to the objects of knowledge their truth and to him who knows them his power of knowing, is the Form or essential nature of Goodness. It is the cause of knowledge and truth; and so...you will do well to regard it as something beyond truth and knowledge and, precious as these both are, of still higher worth....

“And so with the objects of knowledge: these derive from the Good not only their power of being known, *but their very being and reality*; and Goodness is not the same thing as being, but *even beyond being*, surpassing it in dignity and

power.” (*The Republic*, pp.219-220, Oxford, Francis Cornford, trans. Emphasis added.)

Though the Good cannot be described—it is beyond words—we can sense what Plato is pushing towards by reference to the Sun analogy. Not everything in the universe can be sensed by humans or rendered into words. There is an Ineffable.

At one time I thought that this was the weakest, most improbable, part of Platonic Idealism. Now I suspect that it is indeed its essence.

### Lao Tzu and the Tao

I tried to read and understand the Tao several times (in the Legge translation) and finally made it through the text attributed to Lao Tzu. There I stopped.

My frustration was simple. Why should something as important as this question, the ultimate metaphysical question, be reduced to a series of metaphors and riddles?

There are probably several plausible answers, one being that the puzzles induce a desire for mental, and perhaps physical and emotional, discipline in the aspirant. I personally dislike riddles, puzzles, and games.

But there is a larger, fundamental, indeed profound, answer to my question, which is really very simple: ultimate truths are inexpressible in human terms. Chapter 78, section 4, p.120: “Words that are strictly true seem to be paradoxical.” *Seem to be!*

I think Lao Tzu is saying, in a hundred different ways, “I don’t know, you don’t know, we will never know.” This is also the necessary beginning of the quest for truth according to Socrates. We must recognize our ignorance, and admit it sincerely. And the Tao does indeed anticipate Socrates: “To know and yet (think) we do not know is the highest (attainment); not to know (and yet think) we do know is a disease.” (Chapter 71, section 1, p. 113.)

There are of course a number of ancillary questions. For example, what is the connection of the Tao to God? For example, James Legge points out in his Introduction (Dover, p.19) that the “Tao was before God,” and cites Book VI, paragraph 7, of the writings of Chuang Tzu (p. 243): “It has Its roots and ground (of existence) in Itself. Before there were heaven and earth, from of old, there It was, securely existing. From It came the mysterious existence of spirits, from It the mysterious existence of God.” (Legge’s footnote expresses his view that the Tao created the ideas of spirits and God in men rather than being prior to spirits and God in fact. However, I find the literal language to be more provoking. And I am at the mercy of the translator here and not fully aware of his motives and the causes of his judgment.)

Chapter 1 begins at the beginning: “1. The Tao that can be trodden is not the enduring and unchanging Tao. The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name. 2. (Conceived of as) having no name, it is the originator of heaven and earth; (conceived of as) having a name, it is the Mother of all things.” This theme is continued in Chapter 40: “2. All things under heaven sprang from It as existing (and named); that existence sprang from It as non-existent (and not named.” Here Legge points out that Chapter 40 springs directly from Chapter 1, and in his commentary quotes Lao Tzu: “ ‘If Tao seems to be before God,’ Tao itself sprang from nothing.”

My personal commentary on these passages is, When It is named or can be named, It is something or becomes something, and we therefore seem to be discussing language and the power of the noun. That is, we don’t know it until we put a name on it, and when we name it we capture it and confine it and possibly diminish it; we think we now know it, but we may not. I am reminded of the powerful enigma in John, Chapter 1, verse 1: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” I don’t know what the theologians make of this passage, but one plausible interpretation is that, once upon a time, before the Creation, was Something, and when that Something somehow “decided” (itself an enigma) to make the universe, that a conception of the universe was required before its manufacture; at the execution of the plan, the Word was spoken and the Creation ensued. There was the Something; then the Idea; then the “spoken” Word; then the Creation (a replication of the Idea) and its subsequent naming.

I will highlight this with bold italics, selecting from Genesis, Chapter 1 (and omitting verse numbers):

“And God *said*, Let there be light: and there was light....And God *called* the light day....And God *said*, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters....And God *called* the firmament heaven,” and so on through thirty-one verses of Creation.

There was a Something; that Something conceived an Idea (which implies intellect and will); a decision was made; the Word was expressed; the Creation ensued; the Creation was named. (The verbal forms change in the second creation story, Chapter 2. Now the verbs are “formed,” “planted,” “made,” and so on.)

I think it very likely that the more ancient of the two narratives (Chapter 1) follows the human propensity for equating words with things or actions. We can perform actions from a distance through words: magic spells. We can curse with a word. Incantations can have material effects. Poets use the word to create reality. The ancient Australian aborigines sang the world into being; Shakespeare sang a world into existence.

But behind the human attachment to the power of the word lies two other ideas. One, already alluded to, is that, prior to the word is the Idea. There is a separation between the Something and its conception of an Idea, and the word follows both.

At the moment that Something conceives an idea outside of Itself, a profound dualism occurs. The dualism takes permanent form when the Word is spoken.

Is it too much to suppose that, at the most primitive or basic level, the Tao and the early Jewish concept of God are the same? “The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name. (Conceived of as) having no name, it is the originator of heaven and earth; (conceived of as) having a name, it is the Mother of all things.” What mystery preceded the name of God?

Soft and hard, hard and soft; water and rock, rock and water. Paradox and contrast are at the root of all things.

### Buddhism

I read that Taoism bridges across to Buddhism, and that Buddhism has roots in Hinduism. The implication is that Buddhism is an advance on both of them. My personal reading is that Hinduism is too metaphorical, too animistic, too disjointed—I can’t develop either an emotional empathy or intellectual clarity in reference to it. On the other hand, Buddhism seems compatible with the Tao in at least one regard, and that is the conviction that an ultimate metaphysics is impossible, hence the one valuable task of being human is simply to be thoroughly human. (I come to Buddhism via Alan Watts, *The Way of Zen*; Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*; Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*; and D. T. Suzuki, *The Field of Zen*.)

I think the most fundamental point about both Taoism and Buddhism is that they are monistic; in their view, dualism is impossible and illogical. Of course, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are all thoroughly dualistic, and it is this dualism that renders them philosophically unsatisfactory. That God somehow separates Itself from the Creation is both illogical and counter-intuitive. In the end this viewpoint results in rendering God into a big person. It also leaves us with an infinite regression. If we try to explain the unexplainable, describe the indescribable, we are only left with falsehood.

The rejection of the possibility of ultimate cosmological and metaphysical knowledge, which is I think the position of both Taoism and Buddhism, throws us back upon ourselves. We must deal with the physical, sensual body, and the material world, and we must deal with our own psychology, including both the emotional and intellectual aspects of the self. These are what we can know. To my mind, in the end, what Buddhism focusses on is what in the West is called epistemology: how do we know the world? In our personal lives, that knowledge

comes through, first, our senses; I presume that institutional scientific knowledge is also primary.

In our personal lives, only the immediate experience is known, and I presume, therefore, real. Watts insist that personal mental convolutions, including memories, are merely abstractions and therefore can't represent reality. "It is important to recognize that the memories and past events which make up a man's historical identity are no more than a selection" (p. 6). (And, I might add, a selection often based on remembered trauma. I have fragmentary memories of pleasant, even joyful, childhood activities, but my most vivid early memories are of physical trauma, and later in life, emotional distress. Also, modern psychology tells us that memories are unreliable, even fictitious.) Gethin says it this way: "The 'person' that is me thus subsists not in some entity remaining constant for thirty-five years but merely in the fact that certain clusters of physical and mental events are linked causally" (p. 142.) And our senses and our minds both enable understanding and obscure understanding. Sweeping cosmological claims are nonsense (and the Tao agrees). (The mutability of existence is a theme likewise developed by Stoicism.)

Watts: "Because the ultimate reality has no qualities and is not a thing it cannot become an object of knowledge." And Watts quoting Seng-chao: "'Wisdom knows not, yet it illumines the deepest profundity'" (p. 82). This obviously is connected to Taoism, which seems logical and predictable, but does it not also sound like Plato and the Good? This is not a connection we would expect. The connection is very provocative.

### Ronald Dworkin Value is Inherent in Nature

It may seem odd to insert here a near contemporary, whose book *Religion without God* is more concerned with atheism, and the possibility that religion and atheism are compatible, than with metaphysics (or its impossibility). But his key insight is invaluable.

The first sentence is important. "The theme of this book is that religion is deeper than God."

I am not so much interested in atheism as I am in Dworkin's buttressing arguments that religion can exist independent of some conception of God. And that argument can be stated fairly simply: value permeates the universe, and value predates and is independent of any human conception of God. I might be so bold as to say that value is uncreated.

Value includes two realms of study, ethics and aesthetics, and of these two areas of study it is aesthetics that is closest to our daily intuitive experience. The

sense of beauty permeates our existence, and we find beauty throughout our world. It is fair to claim that the world is intrinsically beautiful, and that beauty is not a human construct (I am not discussing art here).

This seems to be an unsupported assertion. Is there any other source of knowledge that we can claim to be intrinsic and uncreated?

Indeed there is. Dworkin points out (p.16) that “We find it impossible not to believe the elementary truths of mathematics.... But we cannot demonstrate either the elementary truths or the methods of mathematical demonstration from outside mathematics.... [W]e do not need any independent certification: we know we have an innate capacity for logic and mathematical truth.” Mathematics is not true by consensus (as some might claim is the case with standards of beauty or ethical behavior), nor is it true by some empirical verification.

Speaking personally, I find it to be provocative, even astonishing, that some operations of the human brain coincide precisely with the operations of the natural world that lie outside the human brain. Mathematics and value both fit this description. Mathematics describes aspects of the universe because it is inherent in the universe. Beauty is a characteristic of the universe because it is inherent in the universe. Yet mathematics and beauty both reside also within the human brain, and we are tempted therefore to think that they are human creations, and, in the case of beauty, merely subjective. Those who conceive of the universe as dualistic would claim that the objective truths of mathematics and value are guaranteed by their original Creator, but Dworkin argues convincingly that both mathematics and value cannot have been created by a deity. I am reminded here of the Creation as spoken into existence in *Genesis*, Chapter 1: that the Idea precedes the Word.

So I turn back to Plato and the Good. I turn back to the Tao and its inexpressibility. I turn back to Buddhism and its rejection of metaphysics; its acceptance of an inexpressible mystery, and the pointlessness of trying to express it.

### Henry David Thoreau

I think that Henry David Thoreau’s life is heroic. His life was a continual quest, and his quest was triply heroic, because it was physical, intellectual, and emotional. His death was not tragic, but it was dismayingly early (age forty-four), leaving the ultimate goal of his quest unfulfilled. However, that may have been the case regardless of the length of his temporal life.

This triple quest is present in all of his writing and in his daily life (as we know it through the journals). His physical quests took him as far as he could extend himself—local rivers, Cape Cod, Maine—but also included his daily local excursions. His mornings were usually a time of study, and he steeped himself in

the classics, Hinduism, travel, science, poetry. But I think that, overarching the physical and intellectual worlds he inhabited, was his desire to connect everything, and to connect to everything, emotionally. Intellectual experience must be *felt*, physical experience must be understood and *felt*. There is no true depth without emotional depth.

He was always trending in the direction of that which could not be named. What he wanted to grasp was just slightly out of reach, just on the edge of his vision. What he could grasp—the scent or beauty of a plant, the surface of a sheet of water, the undulations of a landscape—produced, in his best moments, ecstasy. But he was always reaching for more, for what was at the edge of his vision or beyond his grasp.

I offer this as one example of many: “Perhaps the facts most astounding and most real are never communicated by man to man. The true harvest of my daily life is somewhat as intangible and indescribable as the tints of morning or evening.” (*Walden*, “Higher Laws,” p. 495 in the Library of America edition.)

Thoreau must have known the Taoists, because on page 406, discussing his connection to food, he quotes Thseng-tseu (Chuang Tzu in my text): “‘The soul not being mistress of herself, one looks, and one does not see; one listens, and one does not hear; one eats, and one does not know the savor of food.’ He who distinguishes the true savor of his food can never be a glutton; he who does not cannot be otherwise.” Thoreau wrote these words earlier in the paragraph: “I have been thrilled to think that I owed a mental perception to the commonly gross sense of taste, that I have been inspired through the palate, that some berries which I had eaten on a hillside had fed my genius.”

Thoreau has been criticized for being a sour ascetic, and this page from “Higher Laws” (p. 495) is often cited as an example: “I would fain keep sober always; and there are infinite degrees of drunkenness. I believe that water is the only drink for a wise man; wine is not so noble a liquor; and think of dashing the hopes of a morning with a cup of warm coffee, or of an evening with a dish of tea!” Yet the context shows us that Thoreau does not seek to mortify the flesh in order to gain a heightened sense of spirituality, but rather to intensify his experience *of the material world*. He is in fact a sensualist who loves the material world and the life of his senses, and wants to do what he can to intensify that experience without distorting it. He wants the *opposite* of an hallucinatory experience, preferring “the natural sky to an opium eater’s heaven.”

Thoreau is never far from the material world. He has no desire to separate his ethical and emotional life from it; even his spiritual life, if you will, is connected to the material; though nowhere in his work, to my knowledge, does he discuss the spirit, in the sense that it is a soul. One must call Thoreau a monist, in company with the Taoists and the Buddhists. All of existence is a unity.

Thoreau knew there was a Something, and he knew it was Unnameable. He knew that it was not a dualistic god, but he also knew that there was a Mystery at the center of the universe. He was determined to pursue that Mystery, though I suspect that he knew that it would be forever a Mystery. He knew that the world cohered in some logical way. I am inclined to think that Thoreau was an American Taoist who would have been sympathetic to Buddhism (though we hear about Hinduism in his references).

Thoreau shared this conviction of an unknowable Ultimate with Ralph Waldo Emerson and the other Transcendentalists. But Thoreau took it further, into his daily actions, into every moment of his (recorded ) life. His methods of pursuit were intellectual study, empirical observation, and emotional empathy for the natural world. He profoundly respected, and perhaps feared, the world's materiality. It certainly filled him with awe. Most important of all, he was keenly alert to the world's innate beauty.

It is not too much to say that his life was itself a form of worship. I have felt that way myself, that my existence is a mysterious blessing, and that my actions, when performed consciously and properly, are a form of prayer.

### Agnosticism as an Act of Courage

Before tackling this subject I thought of myself, in reference to the divine, as an agnostic.

Agnosticism has no appeal historically, philosophically, or emotionally. Atheists, especially Existentialists such as Sartre, view it as a position of cowardice, claiming that the agnostic should have the courage to admit to atheism. Kierkegaard critiqued it as an impossibility: scientific certainty will never pertain to theism, hence one must have the courage to make the "leap of faith." And of course Christian believers of all sects require a commitment. Salvation requires belief; lack of belief requires hellfire.

In fact, agnosticism requires courage, and is honorable. It is honorable, indeed Socratic, to say "I don't know." It requires courage to live without certainty. It requires forbearance to withhold judgment. On the other hand, it is prideful to say, "I have the final answer," and doubly prideful to add, "and furthermore, you must conform to my conclusions or pay an awful price." It is an act of both humility and good judgment to admit ignorance, and an act of restraint to refrain from insisting upon certainty.

Kierkegaard's analysis of agnosticism within a bourgeois European Christian society is insightful. But I differ from Kierkegaard on one important point. He assumed that everyone wants a final answer to the Mystery, that pursuing that final answer is of the greatest urgency, that the determination of that answer lies within

oneself, and that agnosticism simply postpones that final answer with no hope of resolution. This, however, is not true of everyone. Indeed, it is only true of the European or Western thinker who is committed to the dualistic viewpoint; hence his emphasis on the radical split between the subjective and the objective.

I liken the world of agnosticism to a closed circle. Within that closed circle lies all that currently can be known by the human organism. Everything outside that circle is known to exist but unknown in detail. As knowledge increases, the circle expands; the known is large but finite. Psychologically, the agnostic must have the humility and courage to accept this limitation. I cannot know what I cannot know.

On the other hand, dualistic believers live in a world that has no outer boundaries. That is, they claim to “know” everything by the methods of revelation and faith; their faith includes the infinite and the eternal—though they may be ignorant of science and history. I find this viewpoint to be monstrously arrogant.

My agnosticism is akin to both pragmatism and the scientific method. Pragmatism requires that claims to truth be tested for their workability. The scientific method requires that knowledge be progressive. Both methods recognize that there are bedrock truths, but that our knowledge is nevertheless incomplete and will remain so. Claiming relative ignorance requires both courage and humility. Claiming infinite “knowledge” through the methods of faith is naïve at best, prideful at worst.

I must conclude that my agnosticism is likely to resolve itself into something like Plato’s Good, or the Tao. There is indeed an ultimate Mystery; it is equally certain that I will never grasp it. I recognize that the mystery of Creation is central to my life. I must have the courage to admit that I will not know it; but, like Thoreau, I will keep on looking anyway.

And that raises the next question. Now that I have come to a murky and incomplete understanding of this Mystery, how can I convert this to actual practice? How does thought become action?

When he was on his deathbed, someone, I know not whom, asked Thoreau if he had made his peace with God. He replied, “I was not aware we had quarreled.” It seems likely that the questioner was a believer in a dualistic, punitive god. Thoreau’s answer was that of a monist who had lived much more closely, more intimately, more comfortably, with the Mystery than most people. Thoreau had no quarrel with the universe; nor, we can assume, did It with him.

The Good cannot be defined. The Tao cannot be expressed. The Buddhist mind can’t see to God. It is neither possible nor necessary to claim that one can see to God, because all value is already inherent in Nature. And a life of secular

heroism, even secular sainthood, can be attained by an obscure small town bachelor doomed to a short life.

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