

APOLOGY FOR QUIETISM

A *Sotto Voce* Symposium

Part 6

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Introduction: Vanishing into Things

“From the inconspicuous he hits upon brightness,” runs a proverb mentioned in chapter 51 of the *Guanzi*.¹ A variation occurs in the *Daodejing* (chapter 52): “To really see the little things is called enlightenment.” To really see the little things is to see the big things that they betoken. One sees into the virtual depth of the world and observes its incipient mutation, well before development makes the evolution obvious. To “really see” means to appreciate the opportunities those little things present and how to weave them wisely into an economy of effective inaction.

That seems an epitome of sage knowledge, which I suppose is what this symposium—two volumes of *Common Knowledge* have barely been enough to do the topic justice—has concerned. Sage knowledge is foresight into the development of a situation, by which I do not mean merely correct prediction, but

1. The *Guanzi* is a compilation of Chinese philosophical materials named after the seventh-century philosopher Guan Zhong. Around 26 BCE, the scholar Liu Xiang edited the received text.

rather seeing the disposition of things in an early, incipient form and knowing how to intervene with nearly effortless and (to the degree possible) undetectable effectiveness. The use of this effectiveness—or, one could say, what knowledge offers to practice—is to handle well anything that instigates a response. Whatever the circumstance, the profound person, the sage, handles it with finesse, not doing too much but leaving nothing required undone. If philosophy is, as Wilfrid Sellars maintains, the investigation of how things, in the broadest sense, hang together in the broadest sense, then wisdom—sage knowledge—concerns how things in the broadest sense are best handled in the broadest sense. And the more quietly handled, the better.

As I have read it, this symposium has been about how the problem of knowledge is basically a problem of praxis. Knowledge is not complete until it enhances practice; if practice turns out badly, then it never was knowledge. Quiet, when it is knowingly and effectively quiet (not pusillanimous or poor in spirit), is about what *not* to do, how *not* to approach a problem, what *not* to decide, what is *not* known, what will *not* work. The sort of quiet that this symposium has sought to recognize comes from sagacious knowledge of how, without sacrificing effectiveness, *not to act*. The issues raised have concerned how to handle well anything that instigates a response, how to do right by it, give it an appropriate place in the collective economy of human and nonhuman things. The question has regarded the value of doing so quietly, the wisdom of being quietly effective.

To be quietly effective requires not stealth—not unbruited acts of derring-do or whispers behind the arras. I am thinking instead of what, in traditional Chinese thought, is called *wei wu wei*, “doing not-doing,” which means effective inaction and is the cognitive accomplishment of a sage. What makes such wisdom possible is not mystical insight but discipline in a certain kind of art. What must above all be cultivated is the discernment to appreciate the evolution of circumstances from an early stage, when their development is not so settled that it cannot be diverted, making effective action almost effortless (provided you know how). Sagacious knowledge is quiet, draws no attention to itself, does not expect applause or seek ever to be justified. You do not need reasons (let alone doctrines), only effectiveness; and you do not need truth or justice, only subtlety.

In the West, at our best, subtlety is associated with detachment. But the point of detachment, in Western thought, is ocular; it helps one to see better what was always there so that one can better commit to it, hold on tighter to the truth, and transcend mere perspectives—one’s own perspective and those of others. In the traditional thought of China, Confucian and Daoist, as in most of the quietism that this symposium has induced to speak, detachment has little if anything to do with transcending perspectives. Detachment is good as a means to flexibility, overcoming obstacles. Instead of transcending perspectives, a sage

is skilled in the quiet art of never getting stuck in one. To be effectively quiet is not so much to be silent as to be inaudible, invisible; the sage *vanishes into things*. Brook Ziporyn brilliantly selects this expression to translate the Chinese word *ming* in the third-century commentary on *Zhuangzi* by Guo Xiang.² In a more prosaic context, *ming* might mean “dark” or “darkness,” but it is used by Guo as a transitive verb (“to darken” something), and thus *ming* refers not to the darkened *thing* but to the darkening *agent* as it becomes imperceptible and vanishes into things. To vanish into things is to interact with them without obstructive, forceful desires—without even a self. The self is eclipsed; not gone, but inaudible and imperceptible.

Classical Western philosophy identifies the achievement of sagacious knowledge with imperturbability. Most of what happens in life is uncontrollable, Socrates said (and it was especially the case back then), but it is up to us whether we are harmed; and nothing harms the wise. All the philosophers of Western antiquity reprise, qualify, and elaborate on that argument. Wise knowledge—philosophical knowledge, not the amoral art or mechanical skill of *techne*—lifts one above contingency and neutralizes circumstances, raising the soul to a transcendent plane of essences. Little is up to us. We should husband what small power we have and study how to maximize this liberty, while minimizing the ethical impact of everything before which we are helpless. The better one is at that dreary art, the less disturbed, the more tranquil one will be; and it is *this* that the Western tradition in philosophy calls wise.

But is it wise to persist in an idea of wisdom so innocent of technoscience? Is there anything, or anything important, that is not now—I mean today—in some measure *up to us*? In his conversations with Bruno Latour, Michel Serres has posed this question. Serres thinks that the new mixed scientific disciplines (biochemistry, medical physics, genetic engineering, and so on) have pushed back, even all but eliminated, what does not depend on us: “Our wisdom is shaken by the tearing down of those objective tendencies that were formerly irremediable and unforgiving. . . . We have become the tragic deciders of life or death, masters of the greatest aspects of our former dependence: Earth, life and matter, time and history, good and evil.”³ What, in these circumstances, becomes of virtue and duty, those warhorses of ancient ethics? “For what reasons must I behave in one way and not in another? So that the Earth can continue, so that the air remains

2. Brook Ziporyn, *The Penumbra Unbound: The Neo-Taoist Philosophy of Guo Xiang* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003). What I am calling *vanishing into things*, Deleuze and Guattari call *becoming imperceptible*. In passages like the following, they sound almost Chinese: “One has suppressed in oneself everything that prevents us from slipping between things and growing in the midst

of things.” Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 280.

3. Michel Serres with Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, trans. Roxanne Lapidus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 170–71.

breathable, so that the sea remains the sea.” Wisdom and the problems it has to address have

invaded the collective and the world, even historical time, because science and technology make us responsible for the generations to come, for their number and their health as well as the real conditions that we will leave them this or that kind of world, depending on our decisions and our acts. Successful scientific practice objectifies wisdom.⁴

The new problem of wisdom, or of making knowledge wise, responds to the new condition that our very mastery seems to escape our mastery. Serres says that we have resolved the Cartesian question “How can we dominate the world?” But will we know, he asks, how to resolve the next question to arise: “How can we dominate our domination; how can we master our own mastery?”⁵

Under our new conditions—and what is new about them is the effectiveness of our knowledge—imperturbability cannot have the old value. The mastery of mastery is a problem for which Chinese tradition seems better prepared than ours does, given its emphasis on the effectiveness (rather than on the truth) of knowledge. Angus Graham persuades me that reading this value in Chinese thought is not a gratuitous Western bias. According to Graham, the derivation of all value from the value of knowledge is a constant of Chinese thought, for which, he says, “[to] *know* is the supreme imperative.”⁶ Western tradition tends to frame the problem of knowledge as if knowledge depends on our having the right theory of its essence or nature. In China, the problem presents itself as one of value, not of essence. What good is knowledge? What desirable quality of practice distinguishes knowledge? How should we cultivate and regulate effective knowledge? What has looked like Daoist animosity toward technical knowledge might be better interpreted as hostility to a particular practice of knowledge, an ethos that Daoists disdain for its shortsighted commitment to efficiency, its artlessness, its inability to be effectively quiet and quietly effective.⁷

To achieve mastery of our mastery, we must bear quietly in mind the special cases. Order is a special case of chaos; balance, a special case of precariousness, far from equilibrium; being, a special case of becoming, which makes it not so special, privileged, or necessary. To dream of being is to dream of stopping. See harmony instead in the stampede of wild horses, and learn to gallop while you sit. Mastery of mastery means wisdom about knowledge, because knowledge is a capacity to

4. Serres, *Conversations*, 175.

5. Serres, *Conversations*, 172.

6. A. C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao* (Chicago: Open Court, 1989), 134, 146.

7. For more on this point, see Barry Allen, “A *Dao* of Technology?” *Dao: Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 9.2 (Summer 2010): 151–60.

operate, though not merely to operate; the capacity is also to transform artfully, which means not merely to change, but to change viably, life-enhancingly.

Becoming and change are not the same thing. What is becoming does not change; on the contrary, it maintains itself (*it is*, or *is the same*) only by maintaining a ceaseless difference from what it was. Only what constantly differs is transforming and becoming; never having been, neither does it change. To change is to stop being—stop being one thing and begin to be another; for example, to be dead. This is a privileged instance. “Whatever by being changed passes outside its own boundaries,” Lucretius writes, “at once this is the death of that which was before.”⁸ It is the mortuary logic of this *logos* that persuades us that becoming is change, then reassures us that change is illusory (and death, a benediction). Plato makes Socrates say, “It seems likely that we shall, only then, when we are dead, attain that which we desire and of which we claim to be lovers, namely, wisdom. . . . Either we can never attain knowledge or we can do so only after death.”⁹

The priority of identity over difference, and of being over becoming, is deep-lodged in Western thought, as is the complementary understanding of becoming as change—change happening contingently to beings. First there are beings (determinate, self-identical), and then there is change. The Chinese think in terms of original becoming, putting plurality and evolution squarely in medias res. What to Western understanding is a self-identical, reidentifiable thing is, for Chinese philosophy, a phase of a relatively slow, relatively local process. Individuals, at any level, are multiplicities one level down. The potency of transformation precedes actual form. Hence, according to François Jullien, the impossibility of a Chinese nude:

That nudes were neither painted nor sculpted in China can ultimately be attributed to theoretical reasons: namely, that China never conceived, singled out, and put forward a cohesive plane of essences, and that the Chinese imagination therefore found no gratification in the *embodiments of essences* that the mythological figures represent to us.¹⁰

“Depicting a rock is not a matter of representing its form, but rather of seeking out the vital (energetic) principle that prompts a rock to deploy into a rock.”¹¹ Thus, depicting a rock or bamboo has seemed to Chinese artists a greater technical challenge than reproducing a constant ahistorical form—an idealization, which the painted or sculpted nude has always tended to be.

8. Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, trans. W. H. D. Rouse and M. F. Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), bk. 1, ll. 670–71.

9. Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, in *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997), 66.

10. François Jullien, *The Impossible Nude: Chinese Art and Western Aesthetics*, trans. Maev de la Guardia (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 129.

11. Jullien, *Impossible Nude*, 74.

Change is inevitable, but not inevitably viable; to transform is to change without sacrificing viability. We are still there on the other side of the change—changed, but still there, remembering, because we were and remain resilient. And resilience is another kind of quietude. Form is most resilient when it is soft. In the real world, any form is a complex nonlinear system, massively interacting with other such systems. Soft form excels at this interactive adaptation. The softer a form is, the more conditions of existence it shares with the rest of its environment and hence the more resilient it becomes. A successfully soft form withstands every force in its environment not by superior rigidity but by fitting in quietly, drawing durability not from willful *conatus* but from convivial symbiosis. Thus does the softest thing in the world ride roughshod over the strongest; thus are the stiff and strong death's companions, the soft and weak life's companions (*Daodejing*, 43, 76).

Dao means “way,” though the oldest, philosophically most relevant image is not a road or path but a *waterway*—the path of least resistance taken by flowing water. Method (*methodos*) also means “way.” Method, as we understand it after Descartes, is the geometrically straight path of light or falling bodies. Method is the rational way to get what you want, or get where you want to go: the most economical route. Finding that efficiency belongs to a tradition of Western knowledge that extends priority to the observation of systems locally—isolating mechanisms, then adding them together, with the analysis crowned by hypothesis. An art and knowledge of the *dao* is not an alternative to method. It is art and knowledge at the limit of method. Method presupposes control and works, when it does work, through constant control. To transform with the *dao* is to overcome the need for what control—hypothetical, instrumental control—promises. Method presupposes obstacles and promises (loudly) to surmount them; *dao* is quietly without obstacles and prompts an ultimately irresistible transformation.

So what is it to *vanish into things*? Certainly not the old dream of metaphysical transparency or vicegerent adequation to the antecedently real. To vanish is to *mix*. The sugar vanishes into the water, not gone, merely imperceptible, yet the water is transformed with new potential. To mix is to mix well; what does not mix well is not mixed at all, remaining immiscible, persisting (noisily, unself-confidently) in self-identify. What becomes imperceptible offers no resistance to the mixing that distributes it; its form is a phase, its identity hybrid. We vanish into things when what things do, their economy, becomes indistinct from what we do, our life. We vanish by synthesis, symbiosis, synergistic transformation. We mix well and soften what contingently touches us, not losing ourselves despite losing the illusion that made us think we were subjects confronting objects, and despite losing the boundary that seems to separate one from another. We become more expansively complex, more integral and integrally effective—though not more dramatically powerful. Power is not the point; strength is not the point;

demonstrations of power and strength are not the point. The point is viability through adaptation and symbiosis. That trio (viability, adaptation, symbiosis) is problematic for us—and here I mean not us Westerners, but us human beings. For other species, viability, adaptation, and symbiosis are givens. Our viability as a species depends almost entirely on the wisdom of what we know. How do we know when our knowledge is wise? It renders our effectiveness quieter, and our quietude more effective.

— *Barry Allen*