

“new adjacent possible empty niche” (39) and “the adjacent possible” (40). We do not know ahead of time the new variables that will become relevant in the evolution of the biosphere and therefore we cannot develop probability measures for evolution. We cannot reason about life as we have most often reasoned about physics: “...evolving life is not only a web of cause and effect, but of empty niche opportunities, that enable new evolutionary radical emergence.” (41).

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Barry Allen, *Vanishing into Things: Knowledge in Chinese Tradition*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015. Pp. 304. ISBN-13: 978-0674335912, \$36.45 (hb).

Although technology and globalization are continually making the world more connected, different philosophical traditions can still seem worlds apart. Graduate programs specializing in non-Western philosophy remain rare in the English-speaking world. Among the twenty highest-ranked programs evaluated on the 2015 Philosophical Gourmet Report, the most widely-cited ranking system for philosophy graduate programs, only University of California, Berkeley boasts a program in Asian philosophy.

The neglect may be due in part to the unfamiliarity of the subject matter. A deep study of Asian philosophy requires philosophers in the English-speaking world to

become familiar with a second set of basic concepts and foundational texts—to say nothing about foreign languages. The supposed impropriety of judging another culture has probably not made matters easier for scholars interested in critically engaging other traditions. Attaining academic competence is challenging enough without these added hurdles.

Those few philosophers who are educated in multiple traditions are well-situated to point out paths not taken—and paths too readily taken—by the rest of us. Few books exemplify this better than Barry Allen’s *Vanishing into Things: Knowledge in Chinese Tradition*. Allen is the author of three previous books dealing with comparative philosophy. Here he synthesizes two millennia of Chinese thinking about knowledge, and contrasts it—favorably—with the dominant trends in Western thought.

Vanishing may be of particular interest to students of Michael Polanyi. Throughout his philosophical career and in his magnum opus, *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi challenged assumptions that Western philosophers, especially post-Descartes, almost invariably take for granted. Chief among them are: that paradigmatic knowledge lacks a tacit dimension, that knowledge can be acquired by the implementation of some mechanical procedure, and that there is no voluntary or subjective component to knowledge.

Allen shares many of Polanyi’s complaints. Modern Anglophone philosophers, he alleges, remain “curiously

incurious” about certain assumptions about knowledge (219). For instance, it has been assumed as early as Plato that knowledge must be explicit and capable of being expressed in statement form; hence, Socrates insisted that knowledge of virtue, courage and piety presupposes an ability to state the definitions of these things. But, as Plato’s dialogues and subsequent attempts at conceptual analysis show, satisfactory analyses of philosophically interesting concepts are elusive. Moreover, the emphasis on propositional knowledge sidelines technological knowledge, which “resists logical analysis into simpler concepts, seldom climaxes in demonstrable truth, and does not stand to pure theory as mere application or derivative ‘how-to’ knowledge,” Allen writes (4).

Allen characterizes the Chinese tradition as unfolding outside of the tangled web of Western assumptions:

The problem of knowledge is not how to get beyond perspective, a view from nowhere. The problem is to see deeper into the world, to know it more intimately than concepts and language allow—not to know what is in the world, but what the world is becoming. The Chinese worry is not access, but getting stuck...Instead of transcending perspectives we become skilled at never getting stuck in one, vanishing into things (10-11).

Remarkably, groups as disparate as Confucians, Daoists, Chan Buddhists,

and Neo-Confucians concur with this characterization, as does Sunzi and like-minded military strategists. Within this unity there is a great deal of diversity, so Allen dedicates a chapter to each of these schools. Here I will focus only on the two chapters dealing with Confucianism and Daoism.

Allen appropriately begins with the school of Kongzi, Latinized as Confucius, who is the veritable father of Chinese philosophy. According to Confucian myth, humanity once lived in an age of harmony, known as the Grand Unity, which ended when people became selfish. No messiah figure arrives to redeem humanity’s fallen state. However, wise ancestors ameliorated the situation by devising rituals to restore some semblance of harmony. Sincere performance of ritual is essential for the development of *ren*, or humane goodness, the cardinal virtue at the core of Confucian ethics.

This kind of apt behavior takes a lifetime of cultivation, but it comes as second nature to the perfected person (*junzi*), who alone can attain the highest summit of knowledge. Here the distinction between morality and epistemology is obliterated: “The Confucian ideal of knowledge, what gives knowledge its point and value, is ceremonial virtuosity, knowing how to conduct life in a way that is at once spontaneous and completely in accord with Heaven’s norm, tranquil among turmoil, maintaining perfect balance” (23). Polanyi likewise assimilates the epistemic to the moral, seeing science even at its most abstract as morally

pregnant. Science, Polanyi writes, “must claim that certain emotions are right; and if it can make good on such a claim, it will not only save itself but sustain by its example the whole system of cultural life of which it forms part” (*PK*, 134).

Not everyone is happy with this moralized epistemology, either now or in ancient China. In the generation after Kongzi’s death (about 479 BC), Confucianism would face a serious rival in Mohism, which among the schools of thought in ancient China bore the greatest resemblance to Western rationalism. The Confucian obsession with ritual did not impress the school’s founder, Mozi, who instead advocated a moral system that would today be classified as a kind of consequentialism. Like Socrates, his Greek contemporary, Mozi believed that knowledge was the source of morality—the inverse of the Confucian model.

Mozi’s critique of Confucianism was as comprehensive as it was scathing, but it did not win the day—indeed, Mohism would soon be forgotten even in China. Confucianism, meanwhile, continued to develop. In the century after Mozi, Mengzi (Latinized as Mencius), became the first Confucian to develop a theory of human nature (he famously thought it was good). In an anticipation of later Neo-Confucian developments, Mengzi took Confucianism in a metaphysical direction. It was he who introduced to Chinese ethical thought the notion of *qi*. The mundane meaning of *qi* is “gaseous substances,” but in Mengzi’s writings it refers to an effective force, accumulated

through righteous action, by which the sage influences, and even morally transforms, those around him.

The only indigenous Chinese school of thought to rival Confucianism’s influence in the long term is Daoism, whose name derives from the word for “way.” Whereas the morally perceptive sayings of Master Kongzi in the *Analects* seem meant to be understood by the mature reader, many of the brief, riddle-like chapters of the *Daodejing* seem to elude our feeble attempts to understand them. “The Dao that can be known is not the eternal Dao,” the *Daodejing* begins. “The name that can be named is not the eternal name.” Adding to the mystery, we do not know whether the *Daodejing*’s author, Laozi, was a real person, or whether “Laozi,” which means “old master,” is an honorary title conferred on many collaborating authors.

Without knowing the eternal Dao, we can observe that Daoism delights in turning binaries on their heads. The author of the *Daodejing*, whoever it is, extols qualities ordinarily shunned, and shuns qualities ordinarily extolled: Weakness is to be preferred over strength, emptiness over fullness, submissiveness over domination. Metaphysically, the world is not a collection of discrete substances, but rather an ongoing process in constant flux. And this has ethical implications: the wise person doesn’t resist change; he is flexible to the point of merging with the environment, vanishing into things.

Laozi’s most significant successor is Zhuangzi, a contemporary of Mengzi.

His book, *Zhuangzi*, is probably the most significant Daoist writing outside of the *Daodejing*. There, with vivid imagery, Zhuangzi articulates the contours of a Daoist epistemology, central to which is a distinction between little knowledge and great knowledge. Little knowledge is perspective-bound: “Mount Tai is large” is true for human beings, but would not be true from the perspective of an enormous creature. By contrast, “Great knowledge is an art of evading capture by a perspective altogether,” Allen explains (87). Note that the transcendence of perspective Zhuangzi urges is not ascension to some impartial “master perspective,” but rather the artful evasion of capture by any perspective.

Among Western philosophies, Daoism may have the most in common with Stoicism. The Stoics admonish us to renounce attachment to external things in order to attain a state of divine indifference to the vicissitudes of life. Daoism’s demand for renunciation is even more extensive, Allen explains: “It is not attachment to externals that is the problem; it is attachment plain and simple, including especially fondness for a ‘true self,’ something substantial which sets you apart from everyone else” (96). The epistemic upshot is that we should not remain attached to particular perspectives because doing so obstructs the acquisition of great knowledge.

Polanyi may beg to differ about how far this non-attachment should go. Polanyi approvingly quotes Augustine that “Unless ye believe, ye shall not

understand” and suggests that a return to some kind of “orthodoxy” may be the best remedy for modern scientism (*PK*, 264-268). Supposing that there is a true orthodoxy, being captured by *that* perspective hardly seems like something to be avoided. If Polanyi and Zhuangzi agree on one significant thing, it is that both reject the idea that a radically impartial “view from nowhere” represents some kind of epistemic ideal.

Allen goes on to provide thoughtful analyses of “The Art of War,” Chan Buddhism, and Neo-Confucianism. No mention is made of Han Fei or the influential legalist school, but those omissions probably help bring into relief the differences between Western and Chinese philosophies of knowledge. I have little to offer in the way of criticism, except this: in the book’s final chapter, Allen suggests that the problems that haunt Western epistemology are implicated in certain political problems. Thinking that knowledge is inherently good, we plunge headlong into the creation of dangerous technologies, like the atom bomb, which we do not have the wisdom to control.

This is a problem, to be sure, but does it originate with the philosophical problems that haunt Western epistemology? Perhaps not. After all, the Chinese invented gunpowder, whose destructive power is obvious, without any ability to predict the consequences of that invention. And China’s history, whose calamities include the An Lushan rebellion, the Taiping rebellion, and Mao Zedong’s forced collectivization, is no less

catastrophe-laden than that of Europe. Allen provides us with no evidence that the Chinese philosophy of knowledge has made the Chinese any less subject to this kind of instrumentalism than Western philosophy of knowledge has made Westerners.

That quibble notwithstanding, this book is impressive. Allen's deft writing makes *Vanishing into Things* an accessible read, as well as an enlightening one. It comes highly recommended to anyone with interests in either Chinese philosophy or epistemology.

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