

PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN AND EASTERN THOUGHT

What is impressive about the children's novels published by the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC) is that they situate student dialogue within the great traditions of Western philosophical thought. One can discover the ideas of Plato, Descartes, Hume, and James, among others, echoing through the words of characters like Harry, Lisa, Mark, and Suki. What I intend to suggest in this paper is that there are intimations of Eastern thought in these novels as well. An awareness of this can enrich our perception of the layers of meaning embedded in the Philosophy for Children literature.

Before I proceed to examine this topic, there are important caveats to be stated. First, I consider myself to be a beginner in the study of Eastern thought. That may actually be an advantage since openness and novelty are critical elements in some forms of Eastern thought. Secondly, it is important to recognize that the division between East and West is not to be interpreted as primarily geographical in nature. When we think of the East, we tend to call to mind what are for us the exotic cultures of China, India, and Japan, to mention a few. But, as Alan Watts points out in Nature, Man and Woman, "More and more 'the East' as a source of wisdom stands for something not geographical but inward, for a perennial philosophy which, in varying forms, has been the possession of traditional, nonhistorical cultures in all parts of the world." ¹ Thirdly, there are many dimensions to Eastern thought. It would be a mistake for me to propose that those dimensions are reducible to some fundamental unity. Therefore, the focus of my comments in this paper will be upon one form of Eastern thought, Taoism. Taoism is thought to have originated in China in the sixth century, B.C., with Lao Tsu. The main work of Taoism is the Tao Te Ching. Finally, the nations of the world have grown more and more interdependent as the twentieth century moves towards its end. It should not be surprising, then, that ways of thinking which I characterize as Eastern are found in some form in the writings of modern and contemporary Western philosophers. East and West are, therefore, not mutually exclusive domains of philosophical inquiry.

With these caveats in mind, let me begin with Chapter 14 of Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery. The first part of the chapter depicts two of the novel's characters, Anne and Suki, spending an afternoon together at an art museum. It is perhaps not surprising that aspects of the Eastern tradition appear in the comments, feelings, and attitudes of Suki Tong, an Oriental. These can be contrasted with what I would take to be a typical Western view represented by Anne Torgerson. There are, of course, a number of ways to describe the differences in attitude between Anne and Suki. Anne is the artist who sees the world around her as filled with subjects for representation on the canvas. Her attitude of detachment is exemplified well in her remarks about her father's butterfly collection.

"Oh, Suki," she exclaimed, "you've got to come to my home some time! We've got all sorts of interesting things there. My mother paints, and she has her paintings hanging all over the place, but you probably wouldn't like them. But my father has the most wonderful collections. You should see his butterfly collection. He's got them in glass cases, so carefully arranged and pinned---" ²

By way of contrast, Suki is a poet whose relationship with nature is direct.

"I love these plants," said Suki, "I love all plants. At home we have a garden. I like to see things grow and bloom. And I like digging in the ground. It's funny; sometimes when I'm upset, I'll work in the garden,

and I'll feel better afterwards." 3

Suki appreciates flowers growing in nature while Anne loves freshly cut flowers arranged in a vase.

The attitude I characterized above as typically Western is grounded in the belief that human beings are in some measure separate from and superior to the rest of nature. This justifies Anne's stance of detachment from other organic forms in the environment such as butterflies and flowers. Since human beings are superior to nature, it is reasonable to think that nature may be used to advance human aims. In this story, butterflies and flowers are removed from their natural settings in order to fulfill the human goal of collecting and arranging things in an aesthetically satisfying way. Suki's stance of involvement with the forms of life around her represents an Eastern attitude which is grounded in the belief that human beings are part of nature. Her poetry grows out of her organic connection with nature and her loving respect for nature. The following saying from the Tao Te Ching expresses well the Eastern argument against the Western point of view:

Do you think you can take over the universe and improve it?
I do not believe it can be done.

The Universe is sacred.
You cannot improve it.
If you try to change it, you will ruin it.
If you try to hold it, you will lose it. 4

What this saying implies in this is that pinning butterflies is a way of trying to hold on to part of the beauty of nature, but any such attempt is bound to be unsuccessful. If we see nature as sacred, we will reject the view that its beauty or utility can be enhanced by a detached manipulation of its elements.

Another source for consideration of Eastern thought is the novel entitled Suki. One of the central themes in Suki revolves around Harry Stottlemeier's struggle to overcome what he perceives to be his inability to write fiction and poetry. Suki attempts on a number of occasions to assist him in this process. In Chapter 2, Suki draws Harry's attention to the importance of seeing what is present in nature.

Harry looked at his hands. "I told you I can't write. And see, it's because I can't think of anything to say---except what's obvious!"

But Suki had no intention of allowing him to feel sorry for himself.

"Harry," she said.

"What?"

"Look up at the sky with your eye almost closed. That's right, squint. Do you still see the sun?"

"No."

"What do you see?"

"I see---I see---a shining."

"And now look down---over there, what do you see?"

Harry squinted at Belcher's Brook. "I see something moving."

"Moving?"

"Well, flowing---or running, maybe."

"So you see a flowing?"

He nodded, still perplexed.

"Harry, I'm just trying to get you to pay closer attention and to be more accurate when you say what happens. What I'm getting at is, first

you see a shining, right, and then you say it's the sun. Or first you see a flowing, and then you say it's the stream. So wouldn't it be more accurate to say, 'There's a shining that is the sun,' or 'There's a flowing that is the stream?'" ⁵

What this passage suggests is that our ordinary mode of perception leads us to overlook what is obvious. We immediately categorize what we see through the use of familiar conceptions like 'sun' and 'brook,' and as a result our past conceptions rule our present perceptions. Our thoughts determine what we see. When Suki urges Harry to pay attention, she is attempting to bring about in Harry the realization that we must experience nature anew in the present moment. The aliveness of nature in the present moment can become the source for poetic inspiration. But, this requires a change in our approach to nature, which is only hinted at in the passage above. Alan Watts gives a more explicit account of the nature of this change:

Now it should be obvious that classification is, again, a human invention, and that the natural world is not given to us in a classified form, in cans with labels. When we ask what anything is in its natural state, the only answer can be to point to it directly, suggesting that the questioner observe it with a silent mind.

Silent observation of this kind is exactly what is meant here by feeling (as distinct from particular feelings), the attitude and approach whereby nature must be explored if we are to recover our original sense of integrity with the natural world. In Taoism and Zen this attitude is called kuan, or "wordless contemplation." Just as one must sometimes be silent if it is to think about anything other than itself. ⁶

It is clear that Suki is not urging Harry to engage in wordless contemplation. But, we can interpret the shift from a focus on nouns to a focus on verbs as indicative of a transition from a static universe to a universe in motion. My contention is that this transition brings us closer to a wordless contemplation of the present moment. For experience in the present moment is dynamic and changing. As Lao Tsu says, "Stay with the ancient Tao, Move with the present." ⁷

The theme of our relationship to nature is more fully developed in Chapter 5 of Suki. The scene is question takes place at her grandparents' farm. In response to her husband's argument that "... sooner or later, everything turns to stone . . .," Suki's grandmother says: "Of course everything changes. That's nature. But what's this about everything turning to stone? Nonsense! Everything changes---vegetation turns to mulch, and mulch turns back into plants again. Only change is constant." ⁸ What this suggests is that nature is better viewed as organic rather than mechanical. The mechanical approach to nature is embodied in the lifeless image of the stone while the organic approach is embodied in the active image of the vegetation-mulch-plants cycle. This further suggests that the mechanism of modern scientific thought in the West is flawed and should be discarded in favor of an organic model which views nature as alive and as involved in a process of cyclical change. Alan Watts describes the difference between these two perspectives (one predominantly Western and the other predominantly Eastern) in the following way:

For from the standpoint of Taoist philosophy forms are not made but grown, and there is a radical difference between the organic and mechanical. Things which are made, such as houses, furniture, and machines, are an assemblage of parts put together, or shaped like sculpture, from the outside inwards. But things which grow shape

themselves from within outwards. They are not assemblages of originally distinct parts; they partition themselves, elaborating their own structure from the whole to the parts, from the simple to the complex. ⁹

Watts sees the Western view as rooted in the Christian notion of God as maker of the universe. By way of contrast, the Eastern view sees the spiritual as operating within the structure of a constantly changing nature.

Given the Eastern description of nature as alive, the question arises: what is our relationship to nature? Some hint as to how one might respond to this question is found in the continuation of the discussion cited above in Chapter 5 of Suki.

Suki's grandmother spoke up again, a flash of fire in her eyes. "What will be, will be. But don't confuse our job and nature's. Nature's job is to change---forever turning one thing into another, never knowing or asking why. But our job's turning the world into poetry!"

Startled, Suki looked up and found her grandmother looking at her.

"Your father tells me you write poetry, Suki."

Suki tried to say something, but she only murmured something unintelligible.

"I did too, when I was your age, and for a good many years afterwards." She glanced at her husband and sighed, "It's funny, though, I have a photo album full of snapshots, but I can't stand to look at them. When I see them, I shake my head and say, 'That's not me!' But I still go over the poetry --- I read it and reread it. It's just as fresh as when I first wrote it. And I say to myself, 'If I'm anywhere, it's here in these words.'" ¹⁰

The first point to consider in Suki's grandmother's remarks is her reflection upon the lack of purpose in nature. Nature simply is a continual process of change. Any effort to search for the ultimate purpose underlying this process is unintelligible because no such ultimate purpose exists. In this sense, nature is meaningless. The second point concerns the task of human beings. What Suki's grandmother proposes runs counter to the ordinary understanding of the role of human beings. We tend to see poetry as another specialized human task like auto mechanics or bridge-building. To say that we are all budding poets sounds strange. How are we to interpret this? We can say at least that our role is to create meaning. But, poetry is only one way of creating meaning. It is interesting to note that, when Suki's grandmother looks for herself, she does not find herself in past photographs. Rather, she sees herself in the poetry she has written. Thus, poetry is seen as a way of self-creation. Through reflection upon my own poetry, I am able to reveal myself to myself. I think this can be understood on both an individual and a universal level. The meaning of poetry is bound up with our identity as individuals and as human beings. A poetic work reveals something of the identity of its author on both levels to the author and to other human beings.

This is not to say we have exhausted the question of the meaning of poetry by proposing that poetry is in some sense autobiographical. It is important to balance what we have said thusfar by examining a different approach to this question as raised in another section of Suki. (Let me note in advance that this approach will not exhaust the question either. Perhaps the question is inexhaustible.) In Chapter 3, the students are talking with their teacher, Mr. Newberry, about the difference between deductive reasoning and poetry. One part of the conversation goes as follows:

"That's right." Lisa agreed, "Because when we were working out those reasoning arrangements, if we knew that the premises were true and that the arrangements were correct, we could count on the conclusions being true. But here we can't count on anything."

"I'm not so sure of that," replied Suki slowly. "In a poem, what you say doesn't have to be true, but it has to have the ring of truth. And each line has to follow from what went before, even though it doesn't follow in accordance with any rules of reasoning."

"When we reason," Lisa said, not wanting to let the matter drop, "we figure out from what was given something that wasn't given."

"Sure," assented Suki with a little smile. "But when you read poetry, you're not interested in drawing any meanings out of the poem. You're only interested in the meanings that are already in it."

"Are you saying," asked Mr. Newberry, "A poem should not mean, but be'?"

"No!" Suki replied. "Not at all! A poem should mean. And it should be. But these aren't two different things. Its meaning is its being!" 11

One idea that comes out of this passage is that there are similarities and differences between deduction and poetry. Both are forms of meaning. Their differences are analogous to the contrast discussed earlier in the paper between the mechanical and the organic images of nature. Deduction is like the mechanical in that parts are put together to construct a pattern of reasoning. Poetry is like the organic in that it has its own appropriate, inner mode of development. In addition, deductive reasoning is functional; its purpose lies in what it recapitulates or in where it leads us. By way of contrast, poetry is self-contained; it neither points backward nor forward. Its meaning is intrinsic rather than instrumental.

How does this discussion of the meaning of poetry relate to Eastern thought? Remember that Alan Watts associates Eastern thought with traditional cultures as opposed to the progressive cultures of the West. Traditional cultures attempt to live in harmony with nature and see nature as ultimately meaningless; progressive cultures seek to control nature through technology and believe nature to be intelligible. One way of understanding poetry as intrinsically meaningful is to recognize that the focus of poetic meaning lies in a full appreciation of the present moment. There are two passages I would like to cite in an effort to illuminate what I am trying to express. The first, by W. H. Auden, is contained in the instructional manual for Suki:

In a poem, as distinct from many other verbal societies, meaning and being are identical. Like an image in a mirror, a poem is a pseudo-person, i.e., it has uniqueness and addresses the reader face to face or person to person, but, like all natural beings and unlike historical beings, it cannot lie. 12

The poem is part of nature just as we are part of nature. Unlike us, its total essence is its meaning. Reading a poem is like looking into a mirror. Its meaning confronts us in the present act of seeing. When we turn away from the mirror, its meaning fades into the background. The second passage represents Alan Watts's attempt to characterize our understanding of nature in the present moment.

If we seek the meaning in the past, the chain of cause and effect vanishes like the wake of a ship. If we seek it in the future, it fades out like the beam of a searchlight in the night sky. If we seek it in the

present, it is as elusive as flying spray, and there is nothing to grasp. But when only the seeking remains and we seek to know what this is, it suddenly turns into the mountains and waters, the sky and the stars, sufficient to themselves with no one left to seek anything from them. 13

The insight that grows from the unity of the poem and myself in the present moment is the ground for its meaning.

What I have attempted to sketch in this paper is a brief outline of aspects of the Eastern perspective as they relate to selected arts of the IAPC literature. The aspects considered include the organic image of nature, the need for a harmonious relationship with nature, and the importance of attention to the present moment. I am hopeful that a growing awareness of this perspective will enable us as teachers and teacher-trainers to be open to interpretations of the novels which may not accord with our standard ways of thinking. In recent years, the significance of the critical thinking movement in education has led us to place great emphasis upon the ability of the program to develop in students methods of reasoning grounded in logic and science. The Suki materials provide a helpful counterbalance in that they open us up to the poetic side of our nature. I believe that an understanding of our poetic selves can be advanced by adopting what I have termed the Eastern perspective and that this perspective can be valuable to us and our students as we travel down the lifelong path of self-discovery.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Watts, A. W. (1970). Nature, man and woman. New York: Vintage Books. p. 15.
- 2 Lipman, M. (1985). Harry Stottlemeier's discovery. Upper Montclair, NJ: Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children. p. 71.
- 3 Lipman, M. (1985). Harry Stottlemeier's discovery. Upper Montclair, NJ: Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children. p. 70.
- 4 Tsu, L. (1972). Tao Te Ching. Translated by Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English. New York: Vintage Books. p. 29.
- 5 Lipman, M. (1978). Suki. Upper Montclair, NJ: Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children. p. 18.
- 6 Watts, A. W. (1970). Nature, man and woman. New York: Vintage Books. p. 35.
- 7 Tsu, L. (1972). Tao Te Ching. Translated by Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English. New York: Vintage Books. p. 14.
- 8 Lipman, M. (1978). Suki. Upper Montclair, NJ: Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children. p. 58.
- 9 Watts, A. W. (1970). Nature, man and woman. New York: Vintage Books. p. 39.
- 10 Lipman, M. (1978). Suki. Upper Montclair, NJ: Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children. p. 59.

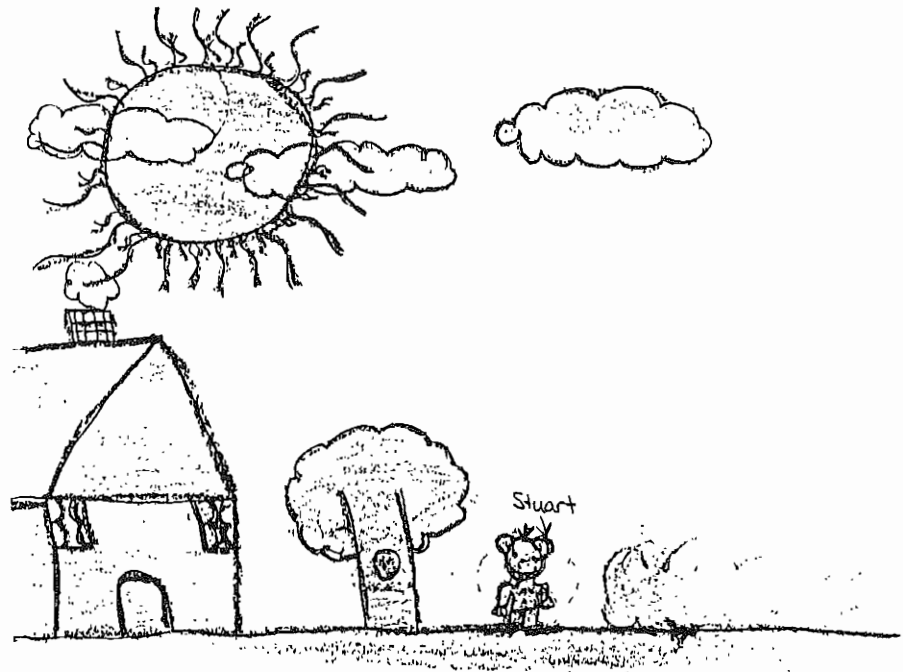
11 Lipman, M. (1978). Suki. Upper Montclair, NJ: Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children. p. 40.

12 Lipman, M., & Sharp, A. M. (1980). Writing: How and why. Upper Montclair, NJ: Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children. p. 109.

13 Watts, A. W. (1970). Nature, man and woman. New York: Vintage Books. p. 129.



Shere Economu
Age 10



Chris Medrano
Age 5

