

From Knowledge-Creation to the Perfecting of Action: Tao, Basho and Pure Experience as the Ultimate Ground of Performance

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Abstract

The idea of knowledge-creation and knowledge management has become an important area of research in management studies. This preoccupation with the creation and accumulation of knowledge in its written form is underpinned by the epistemological priorities of a literally-based Western culture which takes such prior established knowledge as the only justifiable basis for effective action. Knowledge necessarily precedes action and performance. This metaphysical orientation precludes the possibility of attaining *direct* unmediated understanding through the ongoing perfecting of action. In predominantly non-literal cultures such as in East Asia, knowing is more often achieved directly through the immediate engagement of tasks rather than through the acquisition of linguistic signs and symbols. Consequently, there is little systematic documenting and accumulation of knowledge in the explicit written form that one finds in abundance in Western cultures. Yet this apparent lack has not prevented these predominantly non-literal cultures from achieving exceptional levels of performance and productivity both in leisure and business. This, in turn, suggests that the presumed route of knowledge creation-application-performance can actually be bypassed if effective action, and not justification, is what is ultimately sought. Performance often depends upon direct sustained application and not on the acquisition of written knowledge. The implication of this for understanding the world of business practice is explored here in some detail.

Keywords: Ba, correlative thinking, trans-individual, absolute nothingness, inexchangeable productivity

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Introduction

'He who knows does not speak
He who speaks does not know'

(Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Ch. 56, in Chan, 1963: 166)

'Therefore, the Taoist teaches without words, transmitting through non-explanation'

(Chang, C. Y. 1968: 42)
Creativity and Taoism

Rapid and revolutionary changes in the global political, social and technological landscapes have transformed the rules of competition for businesses around the world. This trend signals the necessity for developing new theoretical frameworks and practical understandings of the strategic priorities, decisional imperatives and modes of management operating in diverse geographical locations throughout the world, and in particular within the emerging economies of the Asia-Pacific and China. Whilst America and Western Europe have registered impressive economic revivals over the last decade it is clear that such continued strengthening of the Western economies is inextricably linked to the economic fortunes of other global trading partners such as Japan, South Korea and the Asia Pacific countries. This, together with the immense potential of China as an economic superpower this century, necessitates an urgent conceptual re-assessment of the underlying metaphysical outlook and cultural formations shaping managerial attitudes towards self, knowledge, and performative action in the East. Here, whatever their manifest structural, cultural and ideological differences, the invisible, the tacit, the spoken and the implied are inevitably privileged over the visible, the explicit, the written and the articulated. This deeply ingrained predisposition relates more to the question of 'unconscious metaphysic' (Whitehead, 1933) than it does to superficial cultural differences. Conceptions of self, knowing, action and performance are viewed in radically different terms from that in the West.

A general awareness of such profound differences in metaphysical attitudes accounts for the recent attempts by some leading Japanese management scholars to deliberately

introduce local concepts such as 'Ba' to create novel spaces for addressing the perceived uniqueness of knowledge-management practices within the context of Japanese organisations (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Itami, 1996; Nonaka and Konno, 1998). 'Ba', alludes to a place or epistemological platform for advancing individual and collective knowledge. It is a 'shared space for emerging relationships. It can be physical, virtual, or mental space' (Nonaka and Konno, 1998: 40). Moreover, 'Ba exists at many levels and these levels may be connected to form a greater Ba known as a Basho' (Nonaka and Konno, 1998: 41). Nonaka and Konno also introduce in their important paper the concept of 'Pure Experience', subsuming it under the process of socialization and relating it to Zen learning. The recent preoccupation with 'Ba', 'Basho' and 'Pure Experience' point to a widespread Eastern impulse to ground all forms of knowing and acting in the immediacy of lived experience. In all such endeavour, the relentless search is for that moment of pure Zen-like encounter with reality where form, boundary, self-identity and distinctions are totally dissolved in a singular and uninterrupted field of spontaneous performative action. This existential urge to attain 'the form of the formless, and hear the sound of the soundless lies at the heart of all Eastern culture' (Shimomura, in *Nishida: A Study of Good*, 1960: 211). It is this deeply-rooted metaphysical orientation which fundamentally distinguishes the East from the West.

The initiation of terms and concepts such as 'Ba' into the Western-dominated management discourse is to be much welcomed. However, it is argued here that a full appreciation of the intellectual richness of such terms, and their implications for understanding performative action, can only be grasped against the backdrop of what is clearly an alternative set of ontological priorities (Heidegger, 1971; Needham, 1962; Nishitani, 1982). By rendering these metaphysical connections more transparent, we can then demonstrate how radically they differ from the dominant Western mindset of knowledge-creation, dissemination and application. Moreover, as we will show, such a form of thinking is not entirely alien to the West, even though it remains subordinate to the dominant literal culture of Western thought.

This essay begins by firstly charting out the metaphysical traditions shaping Western thought and the epistemological lines of debate that have emerged within this tradition. The assumptions underlying the current preoccupation with knowledge-

creation and management will then be examined. An attempt is then made to contrast this preoccupation with the priorities of an Oriental metaphysical tradition. Ancient Chinese philosophers such as Lao Tzu and more contemporary Eastern philosophers such as Nishida Kitaro, whose concept of 'Basho' has been appropriated by Nonaka and Konno in their recent work, will be analysed against a backdrop of concerns articulated by Western process philosophers such as William James and Henri Bergson and Alfred North Whitehead. Their thinking is seen to have some resonance with Oriental thought. By revisiting these issues it becomes much clearer what an alternative non-literal metaphysical attitude can really offer to our understanding of the relationship between knowing, action and performance. It also opens up the possibilities for a revised understanding of business, not as a self-interested system of economic exchange as observed by Adam Smith, but as a genuine wealth-creating social enterprise that elevates pure performance and productivity over and above self-gain, profits, growth, and market share.

Epistemological Representationalism: The Dominant Intellectual Tradition in Western Thought

'it is not only with a view to action but also when we have no intention to do anything that we choose....sight rather than all the others...sight is the sense that especially produces cognition in us and reveals many distinguishing features of things' (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book Alpha 1, trans. Lawson-Tancred, 1998: 4)

Modern Western thought owes much of its dominant method of knowledge-creation to the long-held Aristotelian-inspired belief that vision is the most reliable basis for knowledge and that linguistic signs are eminently suited to the task of representing reality. Aristotle, with his insistence on visual observation and linguistic precision, tended to take articulated language as the only real route to knowledge (*sophía*). His description of what counts as knowledge assumed that 'the world lends itself to the grasp of language, it has a "logical" or "discursive" character, (and) a systematic structure' (Randall, 1960: 7). So much so that, on this view, knowledge is ultimately a linguistic matter and not one of empirical experience. To know is to be able to define and say precisely the 'what' of a thing and to thereby identify and locate it in a pre-established system of classification and causal relations. As Carter (1990: 26) puts it, the Aristotelian act of knowing entails fixing the identity of phenomena in a system of

universals so much so that only the *fixed* within the *flow* of living experience and the *universal* in the *individual* becomes knowable according to this system of knowledge. Flux, change, process and the individual particularities of event-happenings do not feature in the Aristotelian scheme of things. There is thus ‘no place for the flow to be known as flow, nor the individual as individual’ (Carter, 1990: 26). Aristotle’s emphasis on fixity, ‘simple location’ (Whitehead, 1985) and universality can be attributed to his Parmenidean ‘thirst’ for the eternal and the unchanging as essential features of reality. This Aristotelian metaphysics continues to underpin the enterprise of knowledge-creation and management. Its three key philosophical assumptions are: (1) that language (including the language of mathematics) and precise definition are strictly adequate to a complete grasp of reality; (2) that that which is knowable is always the general or universal, never the particular; and (3) that knowledge is always about knowing the underlying causes and effects of things not their empirical manifestations. Thus, the ability to represent our understanding of these causes and their effects in precise linguistic terms constitutes what we mean by knowledge.

Following Aristotle, modern representationalist epistemology presupposes that all aspects of our lived experiences can be linguistically carved up and conveniently portioned into pre-existent conceptual categories for the purposes of systematic analysis and causal attribution. Within this framework of thinking the idea of explicit knowledge production and accumulation seems eminently appropriate. The task of research is therefore to render explicit the tacit dimensions of knowing and then to make these accessible and communicable to others in a written form. It also sets in place a sequential logic whereby knowledge-creation and accumulation precedes dissemination, application and ultimately effective performance. In an applied field such as management studies, therefore, the central task is to firstly make empirical observations of practice, theorise these practices in terms of established conceptual schemas and systems of explanations, and then offer them as written recipes to an eager practitioner audience. The literature on management theory is replete with typologies, factor analyses, conceptual proliferations and even ethnographic studies which purport to explain the going-on in organizational life and to offer rational advice and assurance for the world of practice. In this way, practices are first observed, documented and analysed in the research process. Explanations are then formulated, often in a causal language, and these are written up and published in

prestigious journals for a primarily academic audience. What then often happens is that management consultants, or academics acting as consultants, attempt to popularise these concepts and ideas by applying them to real-world situations. In all this translation is constantly going on right from the moment of observation and knowledge creation to its application via the written word. It is this epistemological priority of rendering explicit and in a written form the tacit understandings of practitioners that largely characterises much of management research. What is not recorded is not considered valuable knowledge.

Unsurprisingly, many of these academic concepts often appear remote from the lived experiences of the world of practice. Yet, despite this, such systems of representation, remote though they may be, appear to serve a vital function in the overall scheme of things. For within the context of the Western mindset, the *transparency* and *accountability* of actions and intentions are major concerns and preoccupations in their own right. Actions, intentions and outcomes have to be rendered explicit and made accountable in order to appease the various stakeholders involved. The underlying assumption being: 'If you are unable to explain coherently in clearly articulated terms what you are doing and the outcomes you intend to achieve, it follows that you cannot know what you are doing. Therefore, you must be incompetent'. Effective performance can only be attained if one is able to clearly explain the causal links behind otherwise disparate phenomena and to thereby persuade others to one's own point of view. In this regard, theories and representations serve a vital function that has little to do with actual performance. They are justificatory devices mobilised to fend off the concerns and criticisms of various stakeholders.

The pressure for justificatory explanation is overwhelming in the Western context and recourse to this metaphysics of representation almost instinctive. This has led to the creation of an epistemological gap between what Argyris and Schon (1974) perceptively called 'espoused theory' and 'theory-in-use'. However, contrary to Argyris and Schon's contention that the former and the latter ought to be more consistent with each other, the gap between these two is never bridgeable since they serve rather different functions. 'Espoused theories' and explanations are part of the retrospective sense-making process that is infused with justificatory overtones. They

serve to make sense of what has already happened and to enable us to lay out a logically consistent pathway between the past and the future; between what has happened and what *will* happen. 'Theories-in-use', on the other hand, are essentially embodied, performative actions. They are inarticulate and often inarticulatable forms of tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1962). Or better still they are a kind of knowing-in-action. In the former, little is done but much is said by way of justification. In the latter, nothing is said but many things are done!!! Perhaps we can paraphrase George Bernard Shaw's aphorism to read thus:

Those who can do,
Those who can't do, talk about it
Those who can't talk about it, report on it

This is also the real meaning of the quote at the beginning of this paper from Lao Tzu:

He who knows does not speak
He who speaks does not know

Just do it!!! says a recent Nike advertisement. This is something entirely familiar to genuine performers and doers in the world of practice. Those who are immersed in their daily activities and whose lives breath action and engagement not representation, description and analysis. The ability to perform and the ability to explain persuasively are two entirely different skills. In a literal culture the ability to do the latter is privileged over the former whilst in non-literal cultures, it is direct performative action not elaborate explanations that is valued. Actions speak louder than words. This prioritising of action over words is deeply ingrained in the Oriental mindset.

The Non-Literal Oriental Mindset

'...there is a deep-seated awareness of the incompetence of utterance as the mode of man's being in regard to that which should remain unspoken, and the insight that utterance and human thinking can return to and rest in its own nature only when that awareness of incompetence is truly gained, have been, I think, common tenets throughout Indian Brahminism, Chinese Taoism and Japanese Shinto' (Nishitani, 1982: 31).

The tradition of Eastern thought has always remained sceptical or suspicious of the capacity of language in general and rational analysis in particular to adequately

capture the deeper aspects of the human condition. For the Chinese, in particular, ‘reason is for questions of means; for your ends in life listen to aphorism, examples, parable and poetry’ (Graham, 1989: 7). Thus, in place of the insistence on straight-line clarity and distinctiveness in logical argumentation, the Oriental mind prefers to ‘circumnavigate an issue, tossing out subtle hints that permit only a careful listener to surmise where the unspoken core of the question lies’ (van Bragt, in Nishitani, 1982: xl). Communication of thought is often indirect, suggestive, and symbolic rather than descriptive and precise. This awareness of the limitations of language and analysis is deeply entrenched in the collective psyche of East Asian countries. Consequently the Oriental mind has opted to privilege as more fundamental and profound that which lies beyond the ordinary grasp of language and logic and which is only approachable through a complex, spiralling form of paradoxical utterances that merely allude to an ultimate reality beyond the realms of intellection. For the Oriental mind, there is a general antipathy to overly direct and assertive language in everyday discourse. Hence the emphasis is not on literal meanings. Words are mere pointers to what lies beyond. As the eminent Buddhist monk Kao-seng Chuan puts it:

‘Symbols are to express ideas. When ideas have been understood, symbols should be forgotten. Words are to interpret thoughts. When thoughts have been absorbed, words stop... Only those who can take the fish and forget the net are worthy to seek the truth’ (Kao-seng Chuan, in Chang, 1963: 43).

In matters of deep comprehension one must be able to grasp the absolute by arriving at an unmediated penetration into the heart of things: a primitive state of pure unself-conscious experiencing in which the boundaries between knower and known, subject and object have been completely dissolved.

A number of eminent sinologists and philosophical commentators have noted significant differences between the Western and Oriental mindsets. Needham (1962) for instance, in his monumental treatise on *Science and Civilisation in China* observed that while the Aristotelian world-view dominates Western thought, the East and China in particular developed a philosophy more akin to what Whitehead calls a ‘philosophy of Organism’ (Whitehead, 1929). According to this organismic way of thinking, things do not so much react externally to one another in a system of causal relations, but rather are moved by internal resonances and the correlative harmonising of wills.

Chinese *correlative thinking* differs from the essentially Greek-inspired *linear causal thinking* of the West. The former emphasised iterative movement, change and transformation, the latter, stasis, form and permanence. For the Aristotelian-inspired Western mind, what matters is 'a world of static form which remained when the world of crude reality was dissolved away'. For the Chinese, however, the real world is 'dynamic and ultimate, an organism made of an infinity of organisms, a rhythm harmonising an infinity of lesser rhythms' (Needham, 1962, Vol, 2: 292).

Correlative thinking is emphatically dynamic, non-discrete and urges the 'harmonising of internal wills' through concrete-existential engagement rather than external causal relations. It is intimately linked to the ideographic character of its writing. Ideography, and calligraphy in particular, is a kinetic art consisting of the choreography of human gestures. Language, thus, takes on the semblance of performance rather than static representation. Speaking and writing for Oriental cultures are performances in themselves, forms of exploratory self-expression, not attempts to represent an external reality. Eastern systems of knowing, therefore, cannot be fully understood without a deeper awareness of this inextricable relationship between ontology and utterance/inscription as performance. Such reticence towards overt expressions and articulate explanations stem from a tradition which elevates the invisible and the inarticulate over the visible and the literal. This is something that often puzzles the Western mind. As Carter (1990) observes:

'It may be that a tradition of analysis and verbalization finds it less obvious that preconceptual and prelinguistic awareness is possible, and that a tradition of meditative silence and skepticism with regards to the adequacy of language, would find the preconceptual and prelinguistic necessary to a correct understanding of any and all discursive activities' (R. Carter, 1990: 14)

Yet, such preconceptual and prelinguistic awareness is not entirely alien to all of the Western culture. A number of philosophers and art critics including William James, Henri Bergson and John Ruskin have been acutely aware of the fundamental importance of prelinguistic experience in the development of knowledge: a form of radical empiricism emanating from the ground of pure experience.

Radical Empiricism and Pure Experience

‘The whole technical power of painting depends on our recovery of what may be called the *innocence of the eye*;a sort of childish perception of these flat stains of colour, merely as such, without consciousness of what they signify, - as a blind man would see them if suddenly gifted with sight’

(John Ruskin, *Works*, Vol. XV: 27).

Radical empiricism is based upon the insistence that true knowing, spontaneous action and hence inspired performances issues from being in touch with the ground of 'pure experience' (James, 1912/96: 39-91; Nishida, 1921/90, 3-10), 'pure duration' (Bergson, 1913) or 'pure intuition' (Chang, 1963). For James, as for Bergson, Nishida and Chang, what we generally call empiricism is actually a kind of 'false empiricism' because it uncritically relies on prior linguistic categories and hence is already at one remove from the empirical facticity of lived experience. To be truly radical, empiricism must, therefore, begin from the flux of experience. Reality as directly encountered before conscious thought, and before the separation of subject from object, is a continuous and indiscriminate flow and it is the recovery of this pristine reality that provides the only reliable and authentic basis for self-understanding, knowing and effective performative action. It is this concern for starting from the ground of pure experience that unites the concerns of Bergson, James and Nishida. Thus for James, pure experience is 'that instant field of the present'. It is 'plain, unqualified actuality... a simple *that*' (James, 1912/96: 23). Likewise for Nishida to truly experience is 'to know facts just as they are...by completely relinquishing one's own fabrications. What we usually refer to as experience is adulterated with some sort of thought' (Nishida, 1921/90: 3). Although there are significant differences in the approach taken by these philosophers, it is the insistence on the primacy of immediate experience as the starting point for genuine knowing and subliminal performances that unites their philosophical concerns.

To know and to be able to act in harmony, in its deepest, richest sense, therefore, is to experience reality – directly, immediately and purely. Pure experience is the only reliable empirical basis for a genuine empiricism and in proposing radical empiricism

as an alternative approach to knowledge, James was merely giving voice to what was already well understood by poets, artists and literary critics as well as by much of Oriental thought. The art critic John Ruskin, for instance, understood the importance of pure experiencing well when he insisted that the teaching of *Sight* was what was quintessential to Art education.

'To be taught to read - what is the use of that, if you know not whether what you read is false or true? To be taught to write or to speak -but what is the use of speaking, if you have nothing to say? To be taught to think - nay, what is the use of being able to think, if you have nothing to think of? But to be taught to see is to gain word and thought at once, and both true' (Ruskin, *Works*, Vol. XVI: 180)

The eye needs to be re-educated to regain its 'innocence' so that it is able to register the limitless potential of pristine lived experiences before symbolic interpretations intervene. Only then can it really begin to intimately appreciate that which it apprehends and act accordingly to produce great works of art in all walks of life. Thus in his discussion of the kind of appropriate teaching in the craft trades Ruskin writes:

'we shall obtain no satisfactory results...unless we set ourselves to teaching the operative, however employed - be he farmer's labourer, or manufacturer's; be he mechanic, artificer, shopman, sailor, or ploughman - teaching (them)... one and the same thing...namely Sight. (Ruskin, *Works*, Vol. XVI: 179).

For Ruskin, as for James, Bergson and Nishida, to arrive at the ability to *see* and *experience* directly and purely in an unmediated manner is a necessary precondition for genuine understanding and hence an ultimate mastery of one's art. And, it is only on this unifying basis that great works of art, outstanding action and the flawless performances that we instinctively recognise as special, are achievable.

Such a concrete and intuitive knowing, however, must not be confused with the consciously intellectualised knowledge that we acquire of things. It is a knowing prior to the creation of the subject/object distinction. In this pristine state, there is no separation of knower and known. Separation of knower and known only occurs when a given "bit" is abstracted from the flow of experience and retrospectively considered in the context of other categories. This form of radical empiricism is, thus, vastly different from orthodox empiricism which relies uncritically on language and ready-made symbols, concepts and categories in describing and explaining reality itself. This insistence on a return to the immediacy of the flux of life as the starting point for

human comprehension provides us with an alternative metaphysical foundation or *Weltanschauung* for understanding Oriental attitudes towards self, knowing and performative action.

Tao and Basho: Pure Experience as the Ultimate Field of Absolute Nothingness

In his seminal work *An Inquiry into the Good*, Nishida Kitaro, arguably the foremost modern Eastern philosopher, sought to develop a unique philosophical system synthesizing both Eastern and Western forms of logic and understanding. Nishida writes approvingly of Bergson's attempts at starting from the immediacy of experience:

'From the first there were those whose philosophies took their start from reason and those who took their start from experience. Bergson belongs to the latter. But while those who claim to be starting from experience do not usually mean true pure experience....Bergson strove to eliminate everything dogmatic and to penetrate deeply to the true form of experience itself. What he got hold of in that process was pure duration' (Nishida, in Nishitani, 1991: 83).

For Nishida, most attempts to theorise the idea of pure experience, including those of William James (see especially Nishida, 1921/90: 13, 33, 52), are predicated upon the assumption that experience is ultimately individual and hence conforms to the categories of time, space and causality. Such an assumption, Nishida argues, does not however truly reflect our direct experience for it already presupposes the existence of the individual self as the unchanging locus of experiencing. For Nishida, experience, in its real form, is not such that first the self exists and then it experiences something as an object. Rather *the self itself is only realised through the act of experiencing*. The individual is not an a priori category but an emergent property of experience. True pure experience is therefore 'trans-individual' rather than a property of individuals. This trans-individuality of experience is not something that comes easily to the Western mind. When we commonsensically think about experience we almost instinctively assume that it is 'an individual' that experiences. However, this is exactly contrary to what Nishida means. For him experience precedes individual identity and consciousness.

'it is not that there is experience because there is an individual, but that there is an individual because there is experience...experience is more fundamental than individual differences' (Nishida, 1921/90: 19)

In presenting the individual as an 'effect' of experience and hence relationships, Nishida was expressing a deeply-held Oriental assumption that the individual self is a secondary phenomenon and not a primary unity of reality. This Oriental formulation of pure experience harbours three essential characteristics. Firstly, Pure experience is realized prior to self-awareness and the subject/object distinctions. Secondly, pure experience is active and constructive not passive, discrete and static as is generally understood in ordinary empiricism. Such experience grasped from within is systematically self-developing and self-unfolding - the self in ceaseless construction and reconstruction. Thirdly, in pure experience, knowledge, feeling and volition remain undifferentiated. Ultimate reality is not merely registered cognitively but also felt emotionally and volitionally. These three propositions provide the necessary philosophical grounding for understanding the kind of intuitive metaphysics that underpins the Oriental system of self, knowing and performance.

Nishida identifies three increasingly more encompassing fields of reflexive awareness or Basho that returns us ultimately from our everyday encounters to this ground of pure experience as the fertile starting point of consciousness. Firstly, there is the Basho of Being. In this Basho ordinary empirical judgements are made unreflectively. For instance we may make an observation that 'this table is brown'. Such a statement seems to express pure objectivity because the observer making this judgement has been so neutralized in that statement that he/she is not even aware of his/her presence entering into the judgement itself. It assumes an unproblematic subject/object distinction. Statements only refer to the object of observation and not the observer him/herself. These are statements of what "is" and what "is not" that form the basis of Aristotelian logic. However, as Nishida points out to neutralize the role of the observer in this way is to say something about the observer - that its role can be ignored. This is actually an arbitrary judgement to make, since what is really being said is 'I see a brown table and since what I see is real and external to my self, I can ignore any reference to myself'. This arbitrary denial of a subjective presence allows a seemingly objective statement to be made. Nishida points out that this Basho of Being, within which such empirical judgements are made, itself stands implicitly within a wider field of judgement about the significance and role of the self. Since empirical judgements of the form advocated by Aristotle treat the self as nothing, this

wider and more encompassing Basho must be one in which the self cannot be denied. Nishida calls this second Basho the Basho of Relative Nothingness.

From the standpoint of this Basho of Relative Nothingness the self is very much something. In fact the very thing that ordinary empiricism ignores. This insight, when taken literally, becomes the basis for idealism and subjectivism where the self is given an exaggerated prominence. Thus, in the preceding discussion we have pointed out that 'experience' is usually thought of as a property of individual selves. Experience is experience 'of' an individual 'I' that pre-exists the encounter. Such a form of thinking resides in this Basho of Relative Nothingness. Thus, Sartre's 'nothingness' (in *Being and Nothingness*) is one example of this form of extreme subjectivism which insists on the primacy of the 'I' and which remains thereby glued to the ego. Sartre's nothingness even if it initially appears to be a negation of Being in fact makes itself present as 'an *object* of consciousness in representative form' (Nishitani, 1982: 33). Nothingness for Sartre, is immanent to the ego. It is what Buddhism and Zen repudiates as the 'emptiness perversely clung to' (Nishitani, 1982: 33). It is nothingness conceptualised within the Basho of Relative Nothingness. According to Nishida, the mistake of the idealists is that they tend to think of the self or 'I' as 'something' that is 'substance-like', an 'agent'. For Nishida, however, the 'I' that makes the judgement "I see a brown table...." is not a thing or an agent but an action or *acting intuition*. This acting intuition is never objectifiable or representable because it is always at the background of consciousness. It is the ground of the self as 'no-self' that sees but itself cannot be seen. Therefore, the idealistic Basho of Relative Nothingness is itself encompassed by a third and ultimate Basho, the Basho of Absolute Nothingness or pure experience. This is the ultimate ground on which all judgements, including distinctions such as subject/object, truth, beauty, and the good are grounded. It is the 'place, the openness, the emptiness in which all particular occurrences are to be found, and yet is known only through their very occurrence' (Carter, 1990: 45).

The Basho of Absolute Nothingness is therefore not so much a physical space or place or anything locatable as Nonaka and Konno (1998) seem to imply, but rather a potentially *fecund and pro-generative field of primordial knowing* that invites intervention, consciousness and understanding. It is an 'open field' (Cooper, 1976) of

pure living experience where facts are encountered just as they are prior to our own conceptual fabrications. Contrary to Nonaka and Konno's (1998) claim, terms such as Basho do not so much refer to a 'shared space' as a realm of ultimate potentiality arising from our encounter and fusion within the field of pure experience. The idea of a shared space presupposes meaning and identity and meaning and identity are predicated upon conscious thought and symbols. Meaning and identity are always already consequent *effects* of the subject/object division that Nishida, James and Bergson strove to overcome. As Nishitani (1991) insists, 'In direct experience there is no self, no thing, nothing separate or individual at all' (p. 54). True immediacy is that metaphysical ground of pure experience from which consciousness and thought, identity and difference, individuality and meaning, self and other emerges.

Such an open field of Absolute Nothingness is not something that can be readily conceptualised since it is prior to consciousness and words. It forever eludes our conceptual grasp yet is somehow known or revealed as that background 'lining' of everything known and knowable. Nishida likens it to the hidden lining of a kimono that serves to keep form and shape yet itself always remains unseen and unsayable. It is none other than what the Chinese call Tao or the Way.

'Infinite and boundless, it cannot be given any name;
It reverts to nothingness...
It is the Vague and Elusive...
Hold on to the Tao of old in order to master the things of the present...

(Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, in Chan 1963: 146).

Within this field of Absolute Nothingness, or Tao, ultimate reality is intuitively grasped as a unified moment in a pristine encounter with the here-and-now. It is that moment of the sublime where the knower, the actor and the acted-upon are fused in a unifying instant of spontaneous action that transcends time, space, individuality and performance. This is the elusive ultimate Zen-like experience sought by many within the Oriental tradition. It accounts for the relentless and uncompromising attitude towards perfecting action through relentless application and self-criticism that is so very deeply entrenched in the Oriental psyche. 'Continuous improvement', Asian Dynamism, Kaizen, and so on, are mere manifestations of this interminable impulse

to attain that fleeting moment of pure perfection. It is well illustrated in the art of archery.

Pure Performative Action

In his introduction to Eugene Herrigel's *Zen and the Art of Archery*, D. T. Suzuki writes: 'One of the most significant features we notice in all the arts as they are studied in Japan and probably also in other Far Eastern countries, is that they are not intended for utilitarian purposes only or for purely aesthetic enjoyment, but are meant to train the mind...to bring it into contact with the ultimate reality' (Suzuki, in Herrigel, 1953/85: 5). To be a master of any Eastern art, one has to transcend technique and arrive at that Tao or Basho of Absolute Nothingness where art becomes seemingly effortless: an 'artless art'. Thus, in the case of archery, for example, the relentless perfecting of action through practice is aimed at achieving that moment where the archer and the target are no longer experienced as two opposing objects, but form one reality. 'Bow, arrow, goal and the ego, all melt into one another, so that I can no longer separate them. And even the need to separate has gone. For as soon as I take the bow and shoot, everything becomes so clear and straightforward and so ridiculously simple' (Herrigel, 1985: 86). As the Zen Master advised Herrigel, it is not 'I' the archer that shoots, rather 'it' shoots!!!. The 'it' signifies the trans-individuality of pure performance.

This example in Zen archery illustrates the underlying motivation, discipline and training involved in perfecting the arts and in seeking directly that moment of pure encounter when: 'Even the thought of emptiness is no longer there' and from whence 'comes the most wonderful unfoldment of doing' (Takuan, in Herrigel, 1953/85: 101). For the Oriental world, attainment of that moment of pure absolute encounter which conjoins us with a fecund and pro-generative reality constitutes the ultimate aspiration of any and all human activity. Great works of art, flawless performances and timeless events take place in this moment of encounter where all mediation of words and knowledge are rendered irrelevant and the immersion of the self in a seamless flow of actions is all there is. True excellence in performance and genuine creativity does not come by way of linguistic mediation but by a direct unmediated encounter with the concreteness of a specific situation. Contrary to the widely-held view that better decisions and enhanced performances can only be achieved by the acquisition of more and more knowledge, information and conceptual

understanding, within the Oriental tradition it is the purging of all such mediated forms of knowing that constitutes the ultimate aim of learning. As Lao Tzu in the *Tao Te Ching* says:

The pursuit of learning is to increase day after day
The pursuit of Tao is to decrease day after day
It is to decrease and further decrease until one reaches the point of taking no action
No action is undertaken, and yet nothing is left undone

(Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Ch. 48, in Chan, 1963: 162)

How is it possible for understanding to be achieved by decreasing learning and equally, how is it possible for 'non action' to achieve anything? This is a typical reaction of a Western mind steeped in the literal tradition. What is meant here is firstly that information and knowledge can often clutter our minds and prevent us from acting spontaneous according to the immediate needs of each specific lived situation. T.S. Eliot understood this well when he lamented about the condition of our modern world:

Where is the Life we have lost in living?
Where is the Wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the Knowledge we have lost in information?

T.S. Eliot, *The Rock*

Information flushes out knowledge and knowledge flushes out wisdom. From this understanding, only when information and knowledge have been purged from our system can pure unmediated action be possible. Unlearning is the genuine path towards true insightful action and enlightenment. Action becomes immanent not transcendent. It is internally motivated by an existential urge for the 'harmonising of will' rather than for any other external gains. Perfect action, for the Oriental mind, is *undirected* action that flows from the immediacy of the body and transcends all thought processes. The body reacts instinctively and spontaneously to each concrete situation without any prior distinction and discrimination because it has been systematically emptied of perspectives and conceptual biases. This is what those practices of meditation and self-criticism serve to achieve. It is also what Ruskin meant by the phrase the 'innocence of the eye'. In this moment of Zen-like encounter,

the actor and the acted upon are fused together in a process of mutual transformation well exemplified in Chuang Tzu's vivid description of the master butcher.

'A good cook changes his knife once a year - because he cuts. A mediocre cook changes his knife once a month - because he hacks. I've had this knife of mine for nineteen years and I've cut up thousands of oxen with it... What I care about is the Way which goes beyond skill. When I first began cutting up oxen, all I could see was the ox itself. After three years I no longer saw the whole ox. And now - now I go at it by spirit and don't look with my eyes. Perception and understanding have come to a stop and spirit moves where it wants' (*The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, trans. Burton Watson, 1968: 51).

Such obsessive aspirations to achieve that moment of unconscious perfection where the self loses itself in an uninterrupted flow of activity is well encapsulated in the perfecting of art, martial arts, archery, swordsmanship, calligraphy, origami, the tea-pouring ceremony, and even in such an apparently mundane activity as cutting up oxen. They exemplify the traditional Eastern (but as we have seen not exclusively Eastern) orientation towards self, action, performance and productivity in all aspects of human activity including especially leisure and the world of business.

Pure Productivity and Business Performance

Business performances are generally theorised on the basis of principles of self-interested economic exchange and rational calculation. According to this dominant perspective goods and services are produced with a view to achieving a maximum exchange value that is ultimately determined by its reception in the marketplace. The market acts as arbiter and ensures a kind of 'allocative efficiency' for the product or service being provided. Allocative efficiency denotes the form of rational calculation where a 'zero-sum' assumption in economic exchange is generally maintained. Exchange dictates the value or otherwise of a product or service. Such a restricted view, however, does not exhaust the possibilities for explaining genuine inventiveness, productivity and performance in the world of business. Productivity, innovation and performance are often driven by a more fundamental existential need for expression, externalisation and self-transformation. Such a need transcends the preoccupation with economic exchange and the kind of allocative efficiency associated with it. It is, instead, a 'pure productivity of the inexchangeable' (Derrida, 1981: 9) since all such genuine outpourings of achievement cannot be properly appreciated by a restricted conception of economic exchange. Derrida (1981)

maintains that poetry, art and spontaneous performative action are special forms of production that do 'not enter into the economic circle of commerce' (Derrida, 1981: 9). They are extravagant 'gifts' in a system of 'immaculate commerce'. Wada (1997) calls this extravagance 'x-efficiency'. X-efficiency alludes to the possibility of achieving far more than is expected in terms of products, services and performances: a certain breathtaking expression of productive extravagance that takes us by surprise and overwhelms us. It denotes a kind of uncalculating productivity and inventiveness that unifies all forms of human activity, exchange and communication to our most basic human instincts. Derrida's identification of such performative action as a kind of 'pure productivity' not yet defined by exchange but from which value and judgement spring forth resonates deeply with the kind of resolve and commitment exemplified and aspired to in all forms of Oriental fine arts. In these events, something entirely dramatic, new, novel and indeed extravagant is attempted and whose success inevitably leads to an irreversible need for redefining the entire domain of endeavour. It is these all-too-rare moments of performative extravagance that more authentically underpins the otherwise banal rhetoric of 'excellence' in business performance.

This is precisely what Ruskin meant when he admonished artists and craftsmen for being too driven by narrow commercial interests even in his own time.

'The very primary motive which we set about the business, makes the business impossible. The first and absolute condition of the thing's ever becoming saleable is, that we shall make it without wanting to sell it; nay, rather with a determination not to sell it at any price, if once we get hold of it. Try make your Art popular, cheap - a fair article for your foreign trade; and the foreign market will always show something better. But make it only to please yourselves, and ever be resolved that you won't let anybody else have any; and forthwith you will find everybody else wants it....Art has only been produced by nations who rejoice in it; fed themselves with it, as if it were bread; basked in it, as if it were sunshine; shouted at the sight of it; danced with the delight of it; quarrelled for it; fought for it; starved for it; did, in fact precisely the opposite with it of what we want to do with it' (Ruskin, *Works*, Vol. XVI: 184)

This is the reason why in art, drama, musical performances, and even in sports as in business, there are, at times, levels of productivity and performance achieved that go far beyond that expected in any form of rational economic exchange. What is actually offered or displayed is lavish and extravagant exceeding what is promised or expected. The customers, spectators, audiences or stakeholders are surprised,

'delighted' and often awe-struck by what they encounter: immaculate presentations, novel inventions, great art, truly spectacular performances and outstanding products and services.

Sports is a good example of this. In athletics, for instance, we are immediately reminded of Bob Beamon's amazing Olympic long jump record in Mexico. In soccer, we relish those magical moments in the 1970 World Cup that captivated the imagination of a massive following of the 'most beautiful game'. As Botting and Wilson (2000) in their fascinating analysis of the final game between Brazil and Italy maintain, Pele's pass that set up the final goal scored by Carlos Alberto was an 'exquisite moment of timeless poetry' (p. 3). It has been hailed as the greatest goal ever to be scored. In that moment of spontaneous performative action, Pele rolled the ball 'seemingly to nowhere into an empty space with no receiver in sight'. But by doing so, 'in slicing across empty space the pass anticipates and creates, out of nothing, a move of exquisite precision' (Botting and Wilson, 2000: 2). Pele's pass is an act of pure spontaneous productivity: an immaculate form of commerce where beauty is efficiency at that singular moment of execution. It is not just Carlos Alberto's goal that matters in the overall result, but the exquisiteness of Pele's pass that counts as a memorable experience. There is a lavishness, style and extravagance that cannot be strictly explained or accounted for by the restricted language of economic exchange. In that instance actor and pass are fused together in a flow of spontaneous unthought action.

What typifies the Oriental attitudes towards business and much of performances in art and sports is this similar relentless perfecting of action and the unwavering determination to produce performances and services that exceeds all expectations. Contrary to commonly-held views, it is not just the cost of labour that makes East Asia an attractive place for investment for multinationals seeking to make their products and services more attractive and competitive, but the eagerness and willingness of locals to forgo immediate gratification in pursuit of perfection and hence ultimately value-creation in performance. The idea of the relentless perfecting of action in all fields of endeavour is deeply ingrained in the Oriental psyche but best exemplified in the Japanese mentality. Perhaps this may explain why Japanese executives are famously known for their obsession with perfecting their golf strokes

as they are with their manufacturing techniques. The example cited in *Zen and the Art of Archery* illustrates the inordinate care and perseverance taken in attempting to realise that moment of pure spontaneous action. This idea of an extravagance and lavishness in productive action and performance that transcend the realms of a restricted allocative efficiency provides another way of appreciating what it is about the enterprising spirit that that actually contributes towards genuine wealth-creation.

Reconceptualising Enterprise and Capitalism

In a landmark publication entitled *Wealth and Poverty*, George Gilder convincingly argued that contemporary capitalism, contrary to a widely held view, is no less animated by the spirit of giving than the primitive tribes studied by Marcel Mauss. For Gilder, the current popular notion of a self-interested, parsimonious capitalism, motivated only by the attainment of material self-gain, widely portrayed by Western theorists, is extremely one-sided and erroneous. Instead, at the roots of capitalism is a primitive urge for giving lavishly and without prior expectation. This is the real spirit of capitalism and enterprise that has been conceptually lost in much of Western theorising, though it remains very much alive in practice in both the West and the East. Contrary to the common perception of the entrepreneur as an opportunistic and exploitative individual, 'The unending offerings of entrepreneurs, investing jobs, accumulating inventories - all long before any return is received, all without any assurance that the enterprise will not fail - constitutes a pattern of giving that dwarfs in extent and in essential generosity any primitive rite of exchange' (Gilder, 1981: 30). For Gilder, it is precisely because capitalism is grounded in this irrational attitude of 'giving without prior assurance', and of giving more than is expected (as exemplified previously by great art and Pele's pass) that it is superior to all other regulatory forms of society. Enterprise capitalism consists not so much of the kind of 'individualised self-interest' that Adam Smith (1776/1991: 20) spoke of, but in the risk, chance and dogged determination associated with undertaking any unknown venture. The genuine entrepreneur must invest an endless amount of energy concentrating on the perfecting of his/her product or services and supply first and then hope to obtain a profit only much later. Capitalism, thus is viewed not in terms of a secular rationalist goal-driven mentality, but in terms of an essentially indeterminable outcome. The capitalist entrepreneur is thus cast as a noble and glorious 'gambler' who 'sacrifices in order to "supply" with always an uncertain result: wealth or bankruptcy' (Goux, 1998: 204). In

other words, when the entrepreneur, the business manager, the ordinary 'workmen' that Ruskin was seeking to educate: when all these individuals elevate performance and productivity over profits, saleability and status; when they single-mindedly aspire to perfection in action in whatever they do, that is the moment when genuine wealth-creation takes place. Gilder's claim points us to the fact that the genuine capitalist entrepreneur; the dogged but hopeful artist, inventor or aspirant footballer and the Olympic hopefuls who put in interminable hours of practice to achieve that perfect time, timing or throw; the dedicated employee; the socially-responsible employer who revels in providing innovative product and services or in creating the necessary conditions for individual fulfilment at work; these are all responding to a universal primordial urge for the 'harmonising of wills' beyond the narrow concerns of a restricted system of economic exchange.

It is this very obsession for perfection and the ontological restlessness it precipitates that provides the real driving force behind what we really mean by popular phrases such as Asian or 'Confucian Dynamism' (though we must insist it has hardly anything to do with Confucianism and much more to do with Taoism, Zen and pure experience) and 'continuous improvement'. Constant innovation, change and risk-taking are viewed as normal and part and parcel of everyday life if the process of perfecting oneself is seen as interminable. This metaphysical attitude offers a much better way of explaining the evident energy and drive of Asian-styled capitalism and explains the doggedness and endurance of some of the most admired and successful Eastern corporations including especially Sony, Canon, Singapore Airlines and the Matsushita corporation.

Concluding Remarks

Eastern management practice, despite much recent interest has remained an enigma in much of the West. There have been numerous attempts to trace the roots of this difference. Our foray into the philosophical domain and our attempt to clarify the significance of 'Ba', Basho and Pure Experience is merely intended to show how the overwhelming urge to attain an unspeakable Absolute Nothingness from which 'artless art' and flawless performances emanate, provides us with an alternative metaphysical grounding for understanding performative action. One that relies far less on the written word and more on direct experimental action than that expected in the

literally-based cultures of the West. The overriding concern in the Orient is that unless our structures of understanding are rooted in the primordial richness of pure, concrete living experience we will be unable to achieve genuine productivity and value-creation in all our endeavours. We will not be able to achieve the kind of quality goods, services and delightful 'customer experiences' that approaches the memorable extravagance exemplified by Pele's pass.

What unites Oriental attitudes towards business and many spectacular performances in art and sports is this attitude of the relentless perfecting of action and the unwavering determination to produce a flawless performance, an extravagant product or lavish services that exceeds all expectations. It is by now common knowledge that the level of customer service and response available in Asian countries such as Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan especially far exceeds what one expects to find in most countries in the Western world. This is not just a question of cheap labour¹. Rather it is more about the extreme competitiveness and prevailing 'ontological restlessness' fuelling entrepreneurialism in Asian countries. As many business travellers to the Asia Pacific will know, a full suit can be tailored and made ready in a matter of four hours, hotels are relatively cheap and affordable even though land prices are astronomical. Taxis cost a fraction of what they are in Europe and the United States even though the cost of vehicles in Singapore, for example, is the highest in the world. And, the food is readily available 24 hours a day at budget prices.

The underlying reason for this remarkable level of service performance is simply a tradition which hinges on an ontological principle totally neutered and obscured by glib terms such as 'Continuous Improvement' and 'Asian Dynamism' that gloss over the predominant metaphysical orientation. Continuous improvement in its more authentic sense is fundamentally predicated upon the rejection of an ultimate end-point or perfect state of being. The Western privileging of 'being', 'fullness' and 'completeness' means that improvement is always construed as a means and not as an end in itself. For the Oriental mind, however, the interminable search for perfection through an encounter with absolute nothingness provides the *raison d'être* for ceaseless innovation

¹ As a matter of record, the GDP of Singapore and Hong Kong for 2000 in particular exceeded that of many European countries including especially Britain, France and Spain (*The Economist*, 2001)

and entrepreneurialism. Life is all about the ceaseless and relentless perfecting of actions, products and services, nothing more. It is this ontological restlessness which underpins the Oriental attitude towards work and leisure.

This deeply imbibed spirit of ceaseless improvement, spontaneous performative action honed by a relentless disciplining mentality provides the most convincing explanation for how Japanese and other East Asian corporations such as Singapore Airlines continue to dominate the world in their respective fields of operation. *Instead of trivialising these rich cultural traditions by glossing over their external manifestations, management practitioners and scholars would do well to cultivate a deeper appreciation of how such metaphysical imperatives have come to shape and direct Japanese and Oriental management attitudes and priorities in business.*

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