

COMMITTEE VI
Eastern Approaches to the
Unity of Spirit and Matter:
Qi and Science

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QI AND THE WESTERN MIND

by

Henryk Skolimowski
Professor of Humanities
University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, Michigan

The Sixteenth International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences
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We have great difficulties when we approach Qi with the Western mind. For either we must declare that, since it does not meet our rational criteria, it is some kind of bogus phenomenon; or it we are extremely audacious we accept Qi by a leap of face on some kind of mystical grounds. None of these strategies seems to be very satisfactory for comprehending this mysterious Qi which is so important to so many oriental people. We know in minimal terms that Qi is a form of vital energy. But what it is specifically a problem, as it has so many manifestations.

Instead of attempting to render Qi in familiar Western terms, I'll sketch a model of mind which attempts to pinpoint the source of the difficulty and which also suggests how we could resolve this difficulty in the long run.

While contemplating Qi we must be aware that what is at issue is not an understanding of one concept or one phenomenon. We face cosmological difficulties - how to understand a different world view within which Qi plays such a crucial role.

My model of the mind assumes that there is a close fit between the cosmology of a given people or a given society or a given culture and the knowledge which this culture has produced for the understanding of the world as it assumed it to be. If we imagine the

cosmology (or the world view) as being delineated by a cone opening upward, then within this cone there resides the spiral of understanding which very closely matches the shapes and the dimensions of the cone. At one point the two are indistinguishable - the cone of our cosmos determines the spiral of our understanding and visa versa.

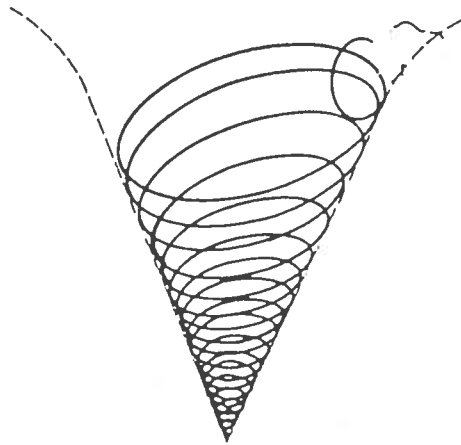


Figure 1

We consider our world view superior because we were so taught by our culture. We consider our world view as the only true one because our culture has conditioned us to think so. We are happy victims of our culture's perspectives because we acquired them with the milk of our mothers. When we meet radically different cultures we are faced with some surprises. We know how disquieting and unsettling it can be -- the way those other people view the world and some specific phenomena.

Until the 20th century most Western anthropologists, both European and American, while trying to understand other cultures, did so in their own terms: they tried to translate the various other cultures into the language, categories and stereotypes of their own. They imposed their matrix, their spiral of understanding on different matrices and different spirals of understanding. This often led to all kinds of misunderstandings and misinterpretations. So often they

declared, when the other matrices did not fit our own, that these other cultures were stupid, irrational, primitive, not sufficiently developed.

Only in the 20th century, and particularly the second part of the 20th century, did the anthropologists start to understand other people in their terms: by submerging themselves within these other spirals of understanding, by seeing from within. And then things started to appear differently. Many of these 'primitive cultures', when we understand them from within exhibit an extraordinary degree of unity and connectedness; they also have a great capacity of integrating man with the cosmos, so that the two are seen as aspects of each other.

Let us notice that when two radically different cultures meet each other, their universes and consequently their spirals of understanding do not match each other. They usually partly overlap. But there are areas in which there is no overlap.

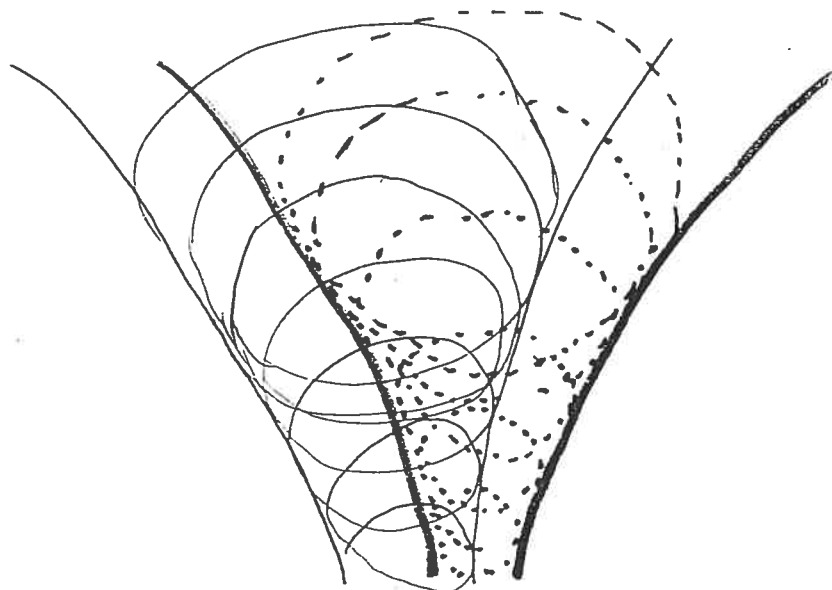


Figure 2

The areas that do not overlap are usually difficult for each culture to comprehend. These are the phenomena which are "beyond the cosmos" of a given culture, beyond its categories of its understanding.

Many white people in North America have now sufficiently acquainted themselves with the cosmology of Native Americans. They learned how different these cosmologies are from our scientific cosmology. After all these differences are granted, we still have enormous difficulties in accepting precisely these aspects of their cosmologies which our spiral cannot handle. We like the idea of reverence for life -- for all life -- which is postulated in many of these cosmologies. We like the idea that the fox is my brother and the birds are my sisters and nieces. After all Saint Francis proclaimed similar ideas. But when we go deeper the trouble begins, particularly when we witness such pronouncements as: "There is a sacred spirit behind every bush and every tree. It is a living force." We have great difficulties in accepting such statements. The first reaction (of our scientific mind) is that they really do not mean it. When we are assured that they do, we try to say to ourselves: they must mean it in some figurative way -- not in a concrete palpable sense when we say that something exists out there.

Our spiral of understanding attempts to manipulate the situation and convey it in its own distinctive terms. To accept the meaning of the statement uttered by Native Americans that there is a spirit behind every tree and it is a continuous living force, requires much more than the understanding of particular words and of the whole statement made of them. After we have understood the statement linguistically, we still do not accept it. It doesn't square with our spiral of understanding, with the reality this spiral represents. So to accept this statement concerning the presence of invisible spirits behind every tree and behind every living form requires a reconstruction of our spiral of understanding. And this is a difficult task indeed.

We, Western people, often defend ourselves (sometimes surreptitiously, or in our subconscious mind) by maintaining that after all they are talking about something invisible. We do not want to be taken for a ride too easily. We do not want to populate the universe with unnecessary entities. There is a presumption at the

back of our minds, if dimly held, that our world is not populated by unnecessary entities and that we do entertain as existent only the things that are palpable, concrete, touchable, visible. We think that in our universe there is no place for invisible phenomena, for some kind of ghosts behind the scene. This is our presumption. But it is far from the truth. For we do populate our universe with invisible entities as well. The electrons, the protons, the quarks, the whole legion of other invisible entities, through which we explain the visible, is part of the Western legacy, and part of Western rationality.

In every culture there are invisible forces and presences which interact and interfere with the visible realities. They are the deep underlying matrix. They are a part of our mythology which nourishes and controls. We all live by the invisible. It is the invisible that is controlling the visible. And it is so in all known cultures. It is the nature and the quality of the invisible that determines the nature and the quality of our lives. Whether you are an Amazonian tribesman or a nuclear scientist the invisible is there, behind the scene, manipulating your existence.

Now we have the stage set for considering the phenomenon of Qi which is a real problem for our spiral of understanding. The phenomenon of Qi is celebrated in China, Korea and Japan alike and completely woven into the culture. Acupuncture is a manifestation of it. For a long time the Western mind would not even consider that there is any true validity to the phenomenon of acupuncture. On empirical grounds we have been forced to admit that acupuncture works, and therefore that there must be something to this flow of energy on which it is based. We cannot make sense of acupuncture in Western terms yet. Even less can we make sense of the flow and the nature of energy called Qi. Within the Chinese culture, as well as in the Korean and Japanese cultures, Qi is taken as much for granted as the existence of electrons in our culture. Certainly you cannot see or touch electrons. But they manifest their presence everywhere -- in the invisible reality. Equally certainly (to the Chinese, Korean or Japanese mind) you cannot touch Qi. But it manifests its presence

everywhere. If you would remove the concept of Qi and its derivatives from the Chinese dictionary, you would make a complete havoc with the Chinese language.

Who is rational? And in what terms is this rationality to be assessed? By what kind of trans-rational and yet rational criteria?

Almost from the beginning of its recorded history, the Chinese culture, the Chinese medical system, the Chinese concept of health and healing is connected with Qi and woven around Qi. What shall we say -- from the standpoint of Western mind set -- that it is another mythology? If so, it is a very powerful mythology which is actually capable of creating a palpable reality; just as our scientific mythology has done it; and as other prescientific mythologies have done it. Each has created a reality corresponding to its myths.

This cannot be right, we want to protest. Reality is not a figment of our imagination, and is not at the mercy of our mythologies. The first part of this statement is correct: reality is not a figment of our imagination. But it is at the mercy of our mythology, and especially of our spiral of understanding.

We have to liberate ourselves from the straitjacket of Western cosmology (read: mythology) which maintains that it is the only true one. Each cosmology has made such a claim.

How should we then look at the phenomenon of Qi so that we do not mystify it and do not lose our rational faculties on the way to apprehending it? Incidentally, we may be a touch too touchy about our rational faculties. We don't have to become mad to comprehend other cultures -- although some people have advocated this route. But we have to release ourselves from the continuing constraints of our assumptions, of our spiral of understanding.

We have to realize that what we witness in the phenomenon of Qi is this part of their spiral of understanding which our spiral does not convey and has so far no means of conveying. What can we do? Obliterate their spiral of understanding and declare it non-existent

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PART II

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QI AND THE WESTERN MIND

(Part II)

by H. Skolimowski

In order to comprehend the vicissitudes of Qi in some depth, I will introduce the idea of the cosmological shift. A cosmological shift occurs when a given cosmology (world view) moves out of its boundaries.

A cosmological shift has occurred in China as the result of introducing Marxism as the main ideology. This was indirectly an introduction of Western rationality with its no-nonsense attitude toward all non-physical phenomena.

As a consequence of the westernization of the Chinese mind via the precepts of Marxism (which is a Western materialist ideology par excellence), the Chinese mind has been losing its sensitivity to and its touch with the great ancient Tao, including the phenomena which are specific to it; and Qi is one of them.

Thus toward the end of the 20th century there is a waning of appreciation of Qi in China itself. In the Spring of 1987 I met with a number of Chinese scholars and thinkers who were visiting San Francisco straight from mainland China. Their opinions about Qi were divided. Some claimed that Qi is still very important. Some claimed that it is not so important any more. Both respective parties equally emphasized that the appreciation of Qi is a matter of upbringing of aculturation: you have to be steeped in the phenomenon of Qi, and its manifestations, from early childhood. The secret of Qi is to practice it.

This conclusion should not strike us as surprising. You have to practice your cosmology (whatever it is) in order to make it a reality; you reaffirm your cosmology in your modes of being and in your daily practices, and then it becomes a reality. Cosmologies are not just abstract pictures of the world. They are immensely powerful participatory schemes.

Now, with the cosmological shift in China towards the standard Western rationality, the phenomenon of Qi is taking a back seat.

On the other hand, let us clearly recognize that a cosmological shift has been occurring within the Western mind-- and in the opposite direction. We, in the West, are now more and more inclined--particularly those of us who seek an alternative to the rigid, deterministic, mechanistic Western cosmology--to be more and more tolerant to transphysical phenomena, to the phenomena which cannot be easily measured by present physical yardsticks, but which nevertheless manifest themselves in different ways; or whose admission in our universe makes it more coherent, more illuminating, more meaningful. As human beings we inevitably seek coherence and meaning in our lives. And this meaning cannot be obtained by relying on physical parameters of the world alone.

Thus the recognition of Qi in the West (through the recognition of acupuncture, ~~Ti~~^{Qi}-Qi, Qi-Gong; as well as the recognition of the various forms of meditation and practices of Eastern yogis) is an attempt, on the part of Western man, to fill the spiritual vacuum which has been created in the wake of pursuing a materialist world view. This is what I mean by the cosmological shift in the West toward the paradigms which accommodate spirituality; at any rate tolerate spiritual quests as a part of the quest for meaning.

Let us ask ourselves another important question. What is the status of Qi from an epistemological point of view? Are we likely to find a reasonably coherent and rationally satisfying justification for the existence of Qi? This seems to be an innocent, rational, unbiased question. But it is not. Incidentally, upon closer scrutiny we shall find that most if not all epistemological questions are biased in a subtle way. They

are asked within a larger cosmological framework which assumes a certain architecture of the universe; which assumes, in other words, what can or cannot be found there--in the universe. This is very important to bear in mind.

The question we have posed (about the rational justification for Qi) assumes--in the Western framework--that we do not have this justification so far. On the other hand, we don't need this justification within the traditional Chinese framework, within which the existence of Qi is self evident... and pervades it all.

Let us probe the question further. Is it possible to find a rational trans-cosmological framework? This is a good question. But not so easy to answer.

The idea of a trans-cosmological framework as a possible arbitor of the existence of Qi immediately leads to more fundamental questions, such as: what is the relationship between cosmologies and the structure of the world as it is? Can we ever grasp the structure of the world as it is independently of our cosmological schemes--(if we wish to remain in a rational not a mystical frame of reference?) Or are we always bound to some cosmology? Or is our cosmology a man-invented and man-imposed order on the structure of the universe which^{is} inscrutable-as-it is can never be deciphered with certainty? Those questions are too fundamental to answer them on this occasion. But they point out to real problems which we face while attempting to justify Qi.

Those fundamental questions make it difficult not only to justify the existence of Qi but as well to justify rationally the existence of energy. I am throwing now the gauntlet in the Western courtyard and suggesting that the kind of difficulties they have with the concept of Qi--in the Orient--we have with the concept of energy, if we care to look into the

problem deep enough. Let us ask point blank: what is energy?

We somehow assume that we know what it is. We are even ready to say that energy is to be measured by useful work we can do with it. But is that all there is to all forms of energy even within one single atom?

The Newtonian concept of energy (useful work) is one way of looking at it. Besides, it is not a definition of what energy is. It only points out at what energy does. The energy of Qi does wonderful things too...if we assume its existence.

More importantly, while we expect a physical justification of Qi, we are not prepared to give a physical justification of energy in our own framework. To say that energy does physical things is not the same as to give a justification of it in physical terms.

The entire problem of the existence of energy is a wonderful enigma. Perhaps William Blake's conception is as illuminating as any:

Energy is eternal delight.

Perhaps Qi is one way of tapping the energy of the universe. Perhaps the Hindu conception of Prana and the Buddhist conception of Pana is another way of tapping the energy of the universe. Perhaps the Western conception is another way of channelling the energy of the universe. Perhaps the energy of love is another way of acknowledging the energy of the universe.

What is energy itself, is a wonderfully open and wonderfully tantalizing question. We must have the humility and wisdom to withhold our judgement in the realm where the angels fear to tread.