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A Tao Perspective on the Rank and Tenure Process

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PURPOSE

THE purpose of this interpretive essay is to explore certain features of the rank and tenure review process from a Taoist perspective.

Procedures

Selected faculty members at a western university were asked to record their personal impressions of the rank and tenure review process. All who responded wrote narratives of their impressions. Obviously, no interviewing was done because the idea was to collect samples of self-talk around the personal experience of rank and tenure review. These narratives were then read and thought about in the context of philosophical Taoism. To be simple, only a few selected texts of philosophical Taoism were used to construe the narratives; namely, the Gia-fu Feng and Jane English (1972) translation of the **Tao Te Ching**, Burton Watson's (1964) translation of the Basic Writings or Inner Chapters of the **Chuang Tzu**, and Thomas Cleary's (1991) translation of the **Wen-tzu (Further teachings of Lao-tzu: Understanding the mysteries)**. The use of philosophical Taoism to construe self-generated narratives also allows us to consider this Chinese philosophy more generally as an intrapersonal perspective.

Participants

A Chinese hexagram consists of six lines. Some are broken and some are solid. The solid lines are said to be male. The broken lines are said to be female (cf., Wilhelm, 1960). Consequently, three women and three men were selected for this study. Five responded with personal narratives — two women and three men. The lines also stand in relation to one

another. Some are higher and some are lower. Consequently, two persons experiencing third-year review, two persons experiencing fifth-year review, and two persons experiencing seventh-year review were selected and asked to provide their personal impressions of the rank and tenure review process — a man and a woman at each level of review. The woman at the third-year level of review did not submit a narrative. Finally, certain lines of a hexagram can move; that is, a solid line may become broken and a broken line may become solid. Therefore, a hexagram may become something other than what it initially is. Consequently, self-talk can be transformative and lead from one understanding of experience to another.

Philosophical Taoism

A vast amount of scholarship attends philosophical Taoism. There are numerous translations of the **Tao Te Ching/Lao Tsu** and the Inner Chapters of the **Chuang Tzu**. This is especially the case regarding the **Tao Te Ching**. These two texts are generally recognized as the classics of philosophical Taoism.

A comprehensive introduction to philosophical Taoism, customarily distinguished from religious Taoism, is far beyond the scope of this essay. Instead, a few informal comments are offered here to suggest the nature of this philosophy, and to prepare the way for its application as an interpretive perspective to the process of rank and tenure review.

Philosophical Taoism values simplicity, quietism, and non-interference (wu-wei). The texts used for this study portray this Chinese philosophy as suspicious of privilege and hierarchy, and partial to yin or the female principle. A number of adages are attributed to Taoism. Popular sayings, paraphrased here, include: “A journey of a thousand miles begins beneath one’s feet,” and “The person who speaks does not know, the person who knows does not speak.” Less well-known, perhaps, is the idea that it is important to take just as much care at the end of an endeavor as at the beginning.

Some time ago, Robert T. Oliver (1961), quoting the University of Chicago sinologist H.G. Creel, noted that the principal teaching of philosophical Taoism is to be in harmony with the fundamental laws of the universe, not in rebellion against them. Philosophical Taoism, then, may be an interpretive frame of reference for making sense of personal experience. It may also serve our purposes as an etic perspective for interpreting the reported experiences of rank and tenure review. The ideas of harmony, non-interference, quietism, and simplicity convey a sense of this Chinese philosophy and provide a starting point for our inquiry.

THE NARRATIVES

Selected excerpts from the narratives are provided here. These excerpts illustrate some of the themes that were identified to be interpreted from a Taoist perspective. Descriptive comments and interpretive commentary accompany these narratives.

FIFTH YEAR WOMAN

The woman experiencing fifth-year review begins her narrative of personal impressions by pointing out that when the process was complete her evaluation was “clearly favorable” in the traditional three areas of teaching, scholarship, and service. This acknowledged, she then provides what for her was the theme of this experience. She states, “My overall impression is one of vulnerability.” She then proceeds by identifying “three main sources of this anxiety.” This is what she writes about the first of these three sources:

I discovered, upon taking my (rank and tenure) file over to the academic vice president’s office for my first review, that a senior colleague

in my department had placed a recommendation form in my file. This was marked unsatisfactory for the scholarship category, recommended against tenure, and was signed by him. I was flustered, to say the least. I asked the administrative assistant who was nearby what it meant. She simply said "it didn't belong" and took it out, noting she would send it to my dean.

When I later asked (the dean) about it, it was clear he had not seen it. After a phone call, he informed me it had apparently gotten lost in the mail. I assume now that (the administrative assistant) simply "filed" it in the wastebasket.

I knew immediately this was not an official recommendation and assumed no one who examined my file would think so either. Nonetheless, it certainly set a negative image for any members of my review committees who might have seen it.

She continues her story by offering a guess to explain why this incident may have occurred:

My best guess is that I offended this individual because a middle-aged female student who was suing him hung around my office. H.C. was clearly an unbalanced woman who once told me, for example, that our secretary had left a coin purse in the bathroom for her to find so that H.C. could be set up on a drug charge. (Later, she also sued all of us in the department.)

She then asks:

Why are the files left open in this manner? More importantly, my experience was not unique. Two other junior (female) colleagues... preparing their first file for review one year later also found a "surprise" negative letter placed in their files by a senior colleague (in this case, the same individual). These were also removed, but one begins to wonder if this is a pattern (especially for junior female faculty).

Finally, the woman experiencing fifth-year review notes that perhaps she should add that the senior colleague who placed a negative recommendation in her file "was not in a position to do (her) significant harm" because he was in the other "section" of her two-section department. And she ends this portion of her narrative by indicating how she elected to interact with this individual: "I continued to be friendly when we happened to meet, mostly because I assumed he'd counted on enjoying my anger and frustration."

Clearly evident in this portion of her narrative, in addition to the theme of vulnerability, is the issue of gender and the matter of power. More precisely, the manner in which she implicates gender and power in her story seemingly furnishes a partial explanation for her overall impression of vulnerability while undergoing the rank and tenure review process; that is, her vulnerability is associated with her gender and her position. Her remarks about how "junior female faculty" appear to be subject to a "pattern" of "surprise" negative recommendations by senior male colleagues signal a special case of vulnerability based on gender and low status. In higher education, she implies, women must play the game differently. Others agree, but this is a topic we cannot pursue here. See, for a start, the work of Robin Tolmach Lakoff (1990), Deborah Tannen (1990), Susan Faludi (1991), and Fontaine and Hunter (1993).

The woman experiencing fifth-year review describes the second source of her anxiety this way:

The second source of anxiety for me was my involvement in several of the more exciting projects which make (name of institution) such a wonderful place to teach, but also challenge the status quo. Numerous senior faculty..., specifically chairs and deans who carry out the review process, do not participate.

She immediately elaborates:

The Writing Across the Curriculum program is a superb way to infuse the classroom with student energy and enthusiasm, and hence make the learning process far more productive. However, it is distinctively junior faculty who use these teaching techniques in my college. A second area of participation for me was the creation of a Women's Studies minor. Again, it was predominately junior faculty and women on campus who were engaged. I am on other committees to "internationalize" our campus, and promote "diversity".

Once again, she contributes her view of these circumstances:

What was crucial in my perception of the effect on my tenure evaluations was the support given all of these efforts by the administration, specifically the academic vice president and the President.... Otherwise, I fear these sorts of programs would be at a logjam on campus, and the junior faculty who supported them in a vulnerable position regarding tenure.

At this point in her narrative, she has added the idea of challenging the status quo. Now, in concert with the vulnerability associated with gender and lower status, she acknowledges the risk that accompanies questioning the established ways of her department, senior members especially, by participating in unorthodox programs and activities. She also recognizes how crucial her perception of administrative support for these programs and activities has been as far as her progress toward tenure is concerned.

Finally, she expresses the third source of her anxiety and what she intends to do about it:

My final anxiety source is my own inadequate performance in scholarship. I have invested my time and energy elsewhere, as indicated. Now I need to make a concerted effort to publish in referred journals to be respectable regarding scholarship. I do attend conferences, and am submitting papers to journals. Presently, I am at an NEH Summer Seminar in my area of Human Rights. While I have published five (15-page) articles in HR and Nobel Prize Encyclopedias and a couple of book reviews, I need to be more productive. To this end, I am practicing saying "no" to other sorts of activities, at least for the coming academic year.

The theme here is the notion of being "productive," and the importance of being "respectable regarding scholarship." It is probably the case that most academics are vulnerable in this way. This vulnerability apparently depends on the extent to which we base our professional competence on the judgments of our peers and other colleagues, a kind of comparison and evaluation procedure that, superficially, seems reasonable and legitimate. However, bell hooks (1992) asserts that "A culture of domination like ours says to people: There is nothing in you that is of value, everything of value is outside you and must be acquired" (p. 56). The vulnerability Fifth Year Woman feels concerning "inadequate

performance in scholarship” seems connected to this kind of oppression. She must demonstrate her worth by acquiring outside approval of her efforts as a scholar. It seems that much of a successful academic career centers on the opinions of others at the possible expense of one’s inner inclinations and intrinsic worth. So, on the basis of these excerpts, three themes appear evident in the personal impressions narrative of Fifth Year Woman—vulnerability, challenging the status quo, and the interdependent issues of productivity, respect, and oppression. What comment can we find about these matters in the **Tao Te Ching**?

Vulnerability

It can be argued that feeling vulnerable may be associated with one’s place in the social and political scheme. This experience of vulnerability may arise when one somehow becomes conspicuous. The rank and tenure review process can make one marked and noticeable. The person being evaluated is singled out and made prominent. In other words, rank and tenure review sets apart the person being reviewed for the one-way, power-privileged gaze of others, a situation that may be uncomfortable for the person gazed at and that may thus engender an experience of oppression and vulnerability.

The **Tao Te Ching** cautions against conspicuousness. In Chapter 7, for instance, we find, “The sage stays behind, thus he (she) is ahead./He (She) is detached, thus at one with all” (p. 9). There are, of course, structural constraints (e.g., the hierarchy of most educational systems) influencing the academic game that make it difficult to be inconspicuous and to remain detached during the rank and tenure review process. But a low profile and detachment, both in the form of internal thought and external behavior, are, it seems, possible. To a large extent, it appears to be a matter of perspective, how exactly one frames one’s circumstances, and one need not be a Taoist sage to take this view. In fact, as an example (and cognizant of the sexist implications of inserting it here), the personal impressions narrative of the man experiencing seventh-year review appears to express this perspective of detachment. He writes:

When I applied for the position I now hold... it was very difficult to obtain a job teaching in a college or university. There were many applicants, often between one and two hundred per job. In my second year... there were extensive budget cutbacks and consequently the university dismissed some faculty. At this time I remember asking another colleague who was in the tenure process how important receiving tenure was to him. He replied that he was not worried about the process and that he might look for a job somewhere else or maybe even get out of teaching. To me this was sort of like whistling past the graveyard. Yet I felt that he had a healthy attitude and was keeping things in perspective. I don’t feel that he didn’t respect the system but that he didn’t want to give it more importance in... life than was warranted. I think it is important to keep a clear perspective of what is important in our lives. A university job doesn’t make me a more important person or a better artist, it doesn’t necessarily make me a better teacher; it does however provide income, although usually not a large amount. With tenure the income is guaranteed.

What Seventh Year Man labels “perspective” may be thought of as a cognitive device, a particular mode of thinking, a variety of self-talk. The perspective he describes appears compatible with the detachment suggested by the **Tao Te Ching**; it is a way of thinking and behaving that could be useful when undergoing rank and tenure review. Detachment based

on awareness is probably an effective method of diminishing the experience of vulnerability. And the act of staying “behind” with the effect of being “ahead” is apparently a paradoxical bonus that accompanies the perspective of detachment.

Fifth Year Woman indicates her awareness of the usefulness of perspective as well when she offers explanations for some of the incidents she describes in her personal impressions narrative. For instance, her account of why the negative letter may have been placed in her file suggests some distance or detachment as far as this issue is concerned because she was able to consider her predicament in a way that positioned her as an entity of her own a observation and cognition. Consequently, Fifth Year Woman possesses a means of diminishing her vulnerability.

Productivity, Respect, and Oppression

Once again, the process of rank and tenure review is a very conspicuous procedure. The ritual of preparing one’s tenure file might be considered a kind of self-aggrandizement exercise whereby “professional achievement” is duly noted and communicated for the scrutiny and judgment of others. These others supposedly represent the collective wisdom of the academic community and are thus given the responsibility of determining the merit of what the person being reviewed has accomplished. These characteristics of the rank and tenure review procedure make it somewhat at odds with philosophical Taoism. The business of calling attention to one’s achievements and purported knowledge seems, from a Taoist perspective, extreme and insensitive to Tao. The very act of claiming understanding or insight into the nature of the universe according to the erudition or received notions of any of our academic disciplines can be construed as an inappropriate kind of arrogance as far as philosophical Taoism is concerned. For instance these two well-known lines discourage conspicuous knowledge claims, “Those who know do not talk./Those who talk do not know” (Feng & English, 1972, p. 58).

The vulnerability and oppressiveness that resides in the very mechanics of rank and tenure review by virtue of assessing someone’s worth and expecting this person to speak conspicuously as though knowledgeable is cautioned against by philosophical Taoism. This caution also occurs, “Too much success is not an advantage./Do not tinkle like jade/Or clatter like stone chimes” (p. 40). These lines bear directly on Fifth Year Woman’s concern about productivity and respect and the oppressive nature of this concern when others are in the position of making judgments in this regard. It may be, therefore, that the rank and tenure review process engenders an unhealthy kind of self-consciousness that distracts one from appreciating Tao. To be overly concerned with one’s position in the academic hierarchy may undermine one’s sensitivity to the more subtle influences that make for artful scholarship. The counsel provided by philosophical Taoism in this case seems to be something like, “Treat praise and criticism the same. Do not be overly affected by either. Learn to quiet yourself so you are still. No tinkle or clatter.” Of course, many people hearing this advice will immediately dismiss it. It seems far too incompatible with academic ways. Nevertheless, this approach appears to be potentially helpful as a way of framing the concerns about productivity, respect, and oppression expressed by Fifth Year Woman.

Challenging the Status Quo

The second theme identified in the personal impressions narrative of Fifth Year Woman concerns challenging the status quo. By now it is evident that the philosophy of Taoism, again distinguished from the religious school of Taoism, does not value the established ways or conventions of institutions. In fact, it openly encourages confronting institutional practices by challenging the status quo, and challenging the status quo is usually resisted by those

identified with institutional life who benefit from its practices. It is little wonder, then, that Fifth Year Woman acknowledges the risk that may be involved in the matter of her rank and tenure when she enthusiastically and openly participates in unorthodox programs and activities that senior faculty seem to avoid. But when she does so she appears to be firmly in accord with Tao. It is conceivable that the reward of her unorthodox activities exceeds the possible gain that might come from involvement with traditional institutional life and the stifling of one's spirit that is implied. In a way, when Fifth Year Woman openly takes part in campus programs and activities shunned by senior faculty, she is withholding her support for the institutional inertia and "old ideas" they hold in place by practices that may have become obsolete. Furthermore, she is probably bringing a vitality to her particular academic sphere that would be missing without her and that could infuse into the larger institution. Fifth Year Woman's challenge of the status quo and Chuang Tzu's reputed contempt for high office (Watson, 1964, p. 109) both seem premised on a distrust of established and unquestioned ways. They seem to recognize the enormity of Tao and how this enormity may be made petty by the self-constructed conditions of our existence and the triteness of our behavior. Here, once again, we encounter the importance of perspective as an intrapersonal frame of reference or style of self-talk that may be useful for construing human experience, including rank and tenure review.

Since we have already mentioned Seventh Year Man, let's now consider some excerpts from his personal impressions narrative.

SEVENTH YEAR MAN

The personal impressions narrative provided by Seventh Year Man contains details about the procedures of rank and tenure review. He thoughtfully considers the various levels of review and offers remarks about his perceptions of the process. Seventh Year Man asks a number of questions during the course of his narrative. For example, he wonders, "How many professors are hard working scholars, inspirational teachers, and dedicated to service five or ten years after receiving tenure?" "How does the methodology of the tenure process not only measure but also shape the person being evaluated?" "Do student evaluations provide useful information?", and so on. Seventh Year Man uses these and other questions to guide the direction of his narrative. By responding to these questions he conducts a personal assessment of the rank and tenure review process. One of the conclusions he reaches is the recommendation that the category of service should be subordinate to teaching and scholarship.

A passage that seems pertinent from a Taoist perspective occurs early in his narrative. He writes:

Tenure adds the possibility that you will spend the rest of your teaching career at this institution. Not that this prospect is bad but it does strike the chord of mortality, which can be unsettling. I have known several faculty members who have searched more vigorously for a job in those last two or three years of tenure review.

The theme here is mortality and philosophical Taoism provides relevant commentary.

In the **Tao Te Ching** (Feng & English 1972) there are these words, "The wise are impartial..." (p. 7). From this it can be inferred that life and death are perceived impartially, that one is not valued more than the other. It seems no small matter to experience embodiment in this way and to engage in self-talk that appreciates and fully integrates the conditions of death and life in a truly impartial manner. Philosophical Taoism appears to embrace the full spectrum of human experience so that each moment of awareness is to be a moment of

mindfulness and contentment — so that each moment of awareness is long enough. Death and life, therefore, are apprehended and accepted equally without desire or aversion for either. “And though the body dies,” we are told in the **Tao Te Ching**, “the Tao will never pass away” (p. 18).

Further expression of impartiality with regard to death and life is found in the **Chuang Tzu** (Watson, 1964):

The Great Clod (Tao) burdens me with form, labors me with life, eases me in old age, and rests me in death. So if I think well of my life, for the same reason I must think well of my death. (p. 76)

This positive impartiality, once again, does not appear to be an easy task. The world of appearances is exceedingly seductive. The manifestations of Tao that arise because of desire can arrest one’s attention so that it is difficult to keep in awareness what is behind the world of appearances when desire has dropped away. The rank and tenure review process may represent achievement that fosters desire, and it may bring about a sense of mortality that is tied to the mundane and gross aspects of human experience. The extent to which a person is victimized by rank and tenure review may be associated with how closely identified she or he is with so-called academic advancement, as well as how distant he or she may be from the impartiality of philosophical Taoism.

The theme of mortality isolated for discussion from the personal impressions narrative of *Seventh Year Man* took us immediately to the idea of impartiality. The Taoist adept is described as impartial when it comes to matters of life and death, but this impartiality doesn’t appear to be a lack of engagement or involvement with the conditions of living and dying. Instead, human experience is construed as a vehicle for deeper understanding. It is a means of elevating the mind. Thomas Cleary (1991) writes:

The legend of Huang Ti in particular represents the subordination of earthly dominion to the quest for freedom and perfection of the spirit. This did not mean complete relinquishment of concern for the world, but a vision of individual and social life as vessels of a higher and broader development. (xii)

This is hardly what often seems to be the case in terms of rank and tenure review, however, a process that can be divisive and debilitating for the persons who are being evaluated.

Seventh Year Man ends his personal impressions narrative with a reference to a print by Paul Klee titled **Two Men Meet, Each Supposing the Other to Be of Higher Rank**. “The individuals are hunched over,” he writes, “in a sort of simian pose, each eyeing the other suspiciously.” He suggests by this reference that the rank and tenure review process may, to some extent, be characterized by the distrustful posturing depicted in Paul Klee’s print. Philosophical Taoism, on the other hand, proposes a very different way whereby rank and tenure review would be devoid of suspicion and divisiveness and become, instead, a means for the collective and cooperative advancement of academic quality and community; that is, the evaluative process itself is conceptualized and communicated intrapersonally in a manner that makes it a “(vessel) of a higher and broader development.” This aspect of philosophical Taoism, as an intrapersonal frame of reference, positions one away from the vulnerabilities of self-interest and petty concern that may accompany the process of rank and tenure review and leads, instead, toward a more expansive and humane vision of academic living.

SEVENTH YEAR WOMAN

Seventh Year Woman perceives a “lack of consistency between committee reviews” as problematic, noting how her evaluations differed from committee to committee at the various levels in the institution’s hierarchy when supposedly the same criteria of evaluation were being applied. “I wondered,” she writes, “how each of the committees were seemingly basing their judgments upon criteria established in one document, yet interpreted the outcome differently.” She softens her criticism a little, perhaps, when she adds that the discrepancies weren’t more than one increment; for example, one review committee gave a mark of “good,” yet another committee gave a mark of “excellent” in the same category. On the other hand, her report that the dean of the school ranked her according to a “channel” of evaluation that technically didn’t exist for her situation is probably more telling in terms of illustrating the inconsistency of evaluation procedures, not to mention the apparent incompetence of this particular administrator. Seventh Year Woman also remarks about the procedural difficulty campus-wide concerning exactly what constitutes “scholarly activity,” with the exception of publication record, and intimates that this is another inconsistency that makes the rank and tenure review process problematic.

Seventh Year Woman became her most doubtful about certain features of rank and tenure review, however, when she was recommended for early promotion. She gives us this partial account of the experience:

In the Policy and Procedures Manual it states that the reviewers will evaluate the candidate in each of the categories and compare the results with the standards established in each (evaluation) channel. A candidate’s evaluation in each category must meet or exceed the standards in any one channel. It was during this review process that I became more frustrated, angry, embarrassed, and disillusioned... and questioned this process more than any other time. It also affected how I felt about my seventnth-year tenure review and my promotion review the following year.

She continues:

To this day, it remains unclear to me as to why I was denied early promotion. I was recommended for promotion by the first two review committees, but then was stopped at the school and dean levels. The school committee had given me marks of “excellent” in all areas, but stated the circumstances surrounding the request did not warrant such action. Since I had not made the request, I felt frustrated that I was being denied based on a “request” made on my behalf from someone else. I assumed that a faculty member was evaluated on the content of the file and according to the established criteria, and since I had received “excellent” marks a year early, the denial for promotion was perplexing. Further, the dean’s review stated that I was “one of those superior performers, but... there must be some extraordinary reason for such a promotion.” I don’t know what those extraordinary reasons might be and I couldn’t give any guidance to another faculty member going through early promotion.

Seventh Year Woman did request a further review from the university committee and she did make an appointment to discuss the matter with the vice-president for academic affairs, but the decision stood and she was not granted an early promotion. And she still had no “clear understanding” of the requirements for achieving an accelerated change in rank.

An important outcome of this experience is the manner in which it affected Seventh Year Woman's attitude about the rank and tenure review process. She writes, "This event in my life caused me to stop and ask myself if this was something I needed to invest a lot of time and emotion in and the answer was no." But she didn't become cynical. Instead, she came to appreciate her professional efforts even more, and her confidence was strengthened. In her words, "I felt discouraged, but good about me and the investment and contributions I was making and that was an important issue."

Seventh Year Woman resumes her personal impressions narrative with another procedural observation concerning rank and tenure review. She points out that "the further your file goes in the committee review process, the less amount of feedback is offered." She remarks that there were no "specific comments" about any of the categories of evaluation once her file left the dean's office for review by the university committee and the academic vice-president. Even though she received a majority of "excellent" ratings and was informed that she was making "satisfactory progress," nothing further was provided such as a "rationale" for her ratings of "excellent" at these levels of review. She represents the process as quite impersonal.

One would think that after being evaluated so many times and after being granted tenure, a person would be quite knowledgeable about the rank and tenure review process. But Seventh Year Woman indicates that this is not the case. There seem to be institutional or structural constraints operating that make it virtually impossible for a single individual in the system to fathom its proceedings and to make sense of its decisions. She states that she really doesn't know why some faculty are promoted and/or granted tenure and some are not. She offers the "seemingly inconsistent interpretation of the documents" as one explanation, and she also introduces an ethical dimension to the rank and tenure review process when she writes:

I will say that I have been made aware of various circumstances surrounding questionable ethical behaviors of other faculty, and yet I see them remain on schedule regarding tenure/promotion decisions — perhaps these don't affect that process. These situations do, however, affect the respect and value I have for the tenure and promotion review process.

The apparent irrelevance of what Seventh Year Woman perceives to be ethical matters with regard to rank and tenure review is another troublesome dimension of this process. To observe others behave in a manner that seems professionally inappropriate without any apparent consequences as far as rank and tenure are concerned undermines her respect for the review procedures used to make these decisions. This kind of duplicity may be difficult for Seventh Year Woman to accept and may make intelligible, to some extent, what she writes in the final paragraph of her personal impressions narrative:

When I received my final letter of receiving promotion and tenure this year, I can't say I was elated. I just filed it with the other letters I had received. I feel that I should be more satisfied with these accomplishments. Perhaps the whole process over the last three years made this seem anti-climatic; perhaps it was the time of the year when my schedule doesn't seem to leave me any free time to stop and reflect; or perhaps it was just competing personal interests. Maybe I just haven't absorbed it all in yet.

Whatever the case, Seventh Year Woman gives us another perspective of the rank and tenure review process as she experienced it. The text she has provided expresses some of her thinking at the time and suggests some of the cognitive structures or intrapersonal com-

munication mechanisms that she used to make sense of what was happening during the various episodes when she was evaluated for rank and tenure. For example, the introspective tone of the final paragraph of her narrative above illustrates, it seems, the prevalence and significance of self-talk as she enumerates explanations for her lack of elation when she received notice of her tenure and promotion. The manner in which she seeks out a way of understanding her lack of enthusiasm models what most of us probably do when it seems necessary to come to terms with an event that possesses personal relevance.

We are now in the position to ask, What themes can be identified in the personal impressions narrative of Seventh Year Woman that may be relevant to philosophical Taoism as an intrapersonal perspective during rank and tenure review? At least three are suggested. First, there is the matter of “inconsistency” when she discusses how the same evaluation criteria seem to lead to different decision and ranking results. Second, there is the matter of “timeliness” with regard to the early promotion episode she describes. And third, there is the matter of “emotionalism” that she refers to when she mentions how she was not elated when she was informed of being granted tenure and promotion. Let’s consider each of these themes, beginning with the third.

Emotionalism

Gia-fu Feng once said, “I’m so happy I could just stand still.” The sentiment expressed in Gia-fu’s statement of happiness is far deeper than the apparent paradox it contains, a paradox that is especially the case for those of Western cultures where happiness is typically demonstrated through overt behavior. In the United States, for example, happiness is more likely to be associated with some variant of jumping up and down rather than just standing still. But the sentiment expressed in Gia-fu’s statement of happiness, it can be argued, connects to a deeper understanding of human awareness so that one’s sense of self, however experienced and conceptualized, is not disturbed by the surface structure of emotions. Philosophical Taoism seems to caution against the kinds of emotionalism that make one vulnerable to the superficial side of human nature. Instead, this Chinese philosophy appears to encourage the cultivation of an even-handed yet deeply felt compassion that permeates every moment and interaction, while also engendering a sense of detachment from what is happening.

The following quotation from the **Chuang Tzu** (Watson, 1964) represents a perspective of philosophical Taoism that may be pertinent to the absence of elation reported by Seventh Year Woman. It is attributed to a person identified as Master Yu on becoming ill:

I received life because the time had come; I will lose it because the order of things passes on. Be content with this time and dwell in this order and then neither sorrow nor joy can touch you. (p. 81)

It is possible that a lack of expectations and an active acceptance of present circumstances takes one closer to a more enlightened way of “being an academic” without relinquishing the human qualities that make one effective in the profession. It is conceivable that the rank and tenure review process is a vehicle for escape, that the very procedures of evaluation that can make this process such anguish for some of the people who experience it also contain exactly what is needed to transcend the suffering side of this academic ritual — realizing, of course, how privileged we are to suffer like this instead of in more destitute ways. Perhaps Seventh Year Woman, however inadvertently, moved beyond the potential pettiness of this ritual, and the joy and sorrow that often accompanies it, to a manner of communicating intrapersonally that made her stronger. Her lack of elation, in these particular circumstances, might have been a sign of strength.

It is quite likely, of course, that Seventh Year Woman was simply “burned out” psychologically and beyond the point of caring very much about her rank and tenure review when she experienced the absence of elation she reports, and one certainly wonders whether her response would have been this low-key had she been denied promotion a second time. But it is also possible that Seventh Year Woman sensed, if for only a moment, the detachment valued by philosophical Taoism.

Timeliness

The early promotion episode described by Seventh Year Woman introduces the idea of timeliness into her personal impressions narrative. East and West alike possess expressions about time. For instance, “Everything in its time,” is a familiar expression in our culture and seems to depict a commonly accepted notion about the presence of a natural unfolding or rhythm to the events we perceive and experience. Similarly, the expression “It wasn’t to be,” is another commonly heard phrase that implies that something didn’t take place because it wasn’t the “right time.”

This idea about the “timeliness” of events may have been part of the reason Seventh Year Woman was denied early promotion. When her dean stated in the review document that Seventh Year Woman was “one of those superior performers, but. . . there must be some extraordinary reason for such a promotion,” more than just the extent of her accomplishments may have been implicated. It is possible that part of what was operating during this decision-making process concerned the timing of what was being decided. Apparently, the procedure of “early promotion” is designed to recognize the reward outstanding performance, but it may also contains a counter-force — what some Chinese refer to as the “seed of its opposite” — that resides in the very idea of being promoted early in the first place; that is, despite the stellar achievements of Seventh Year Woman noted while she was being considered for early promotion, it was just “too soon” for her to advance in rank. It just wasn’t the “right time.” It just wasn’t “to be.” The counter-force prevailed.

Inconsistency

Seventh Year Woman reported her concern with the inconsistencies that seemed to occur during the process of her evaluation even though the same standards were supposedly being applied at each level of her review. There is, it seems, some naiveté on her part in this regard because it is highly unlikely that judgments of this sort are going to be invariable across different evaluators. Nevertheless, her expectation is not completely unfounded. It appears sensible to anticipate a reasonably high degree of consensus when one is being reviewed for rank and tenure.

In the **Tao Te Ching** (Feng & English, 1972), we find these words, “Knowing constancy is insight/Not knowing constancy leads to disaster. Knowing constancy, the mind is opening” (p. 8). Each of these lines seems useful, but it is the last of these three lines that appears to offer the most exciting option for communicating intrapersonally and for fathoming the rank and tenure review process. Naturally, what is meant by an “open mind” is subject to interpretation. For our purposes, an open mind is a “beginner’s mind” (Suzuki, 1978), a mind that is not already filled with ideas so that it is almost impossible to perceive and experience in new and unusual ways. A beginner’s mind is less encumbered with the cognitive inertia of obsolete ideas and established patterns of thinking. It is, instead, constant in the spontaneity of present-centered mindfulness.

Seventh Year Woman may have been less troubled by the inconsistency she observed “outside” during her rank and tenure review had she been more aware of the constancy available “inside” (putting aside, for a moment, the troublesome dichotomy of “inside” and

“outside”) in the form of self-talk premised on the practice of an open mind. An open mind seems more still and more tranquil and less subject to the capriciousness of daily experience, including the deliberations of rank and tenure review committees. In the *Tao Te Ching* (Feng & English, 1972), it is recorded that “(s)tiltness and tranquillity set things in order in the universe” (p. 47). It also is observed that “(She) who stays where (she) is endures” (p. 35). Seventh Year Woman may now be more comfortably in place “where she is” because she has confronted the outward inconsistencies of rank and tenure review.

FIFTH YEAR MAN

Fifth Year Man begins his personal impressions narrative acknowledging the necessity of the tenure review process. He writes, “Tenure is a necessary process, and the three categories used to assess the performance of the faculty — teaching, scholarship, and service — are quite relevant.” He states that a “good teacher” is a “good researcher,” and that service to the community is important. And he declares in his narrative that he would like to excel in all three areas of assessment.

In addition to his acceptance of the rank and tenure review process, however, there are certain questions that prevent Fifth Year Man from totally accepting the entire procedure as it is practiced at the university where he teaches. He recognizes, for instance, the primacy of teaching at a “metropolitan” university, but he also expresses confusion concerning how much “weight should be given to publication in an undergraduate, teaching institute....” He is, in his words, “hearing conflicting signals about publication.” He continues his personal impressions narrative by pursuing this theme:

Reading professional journals to keep abreast of the developments in a field and doing research in the field are an integral part of teaching. I can’t be a good teacher without reading professional journals in my field and doing research. Reading and research keep my teaching current and classes alive. But I find it difficult to maintain quality teaching and publishing in refereed journals, especially when I routinely teach 12 hours of writing or writing intensive courses each quarter.

These “conflicting signals about publication,” in conjunction with demanding teaching requirements, place Fifth Year Man in an uncomfortable situation because he must try to apportion his effort in a way that is going to accomplish the greatest gain as far as rank and tenure decisions are concerned without neglecting or being indifferent to the people who enroll for his classes. In his narrative, there appears to be the implication that Fifth Year Man thinks he must focus on teaching or publishing because integrating the two, in his present circumstances at least, just seems too difficult. This is a “major concern” for him with regard to rank and tenure review.

But at the same time, Fifth Year Man also suspects that there is an informal side to this teaching and publishing dilemma that exists outside the stipulations of the formal rank and tenure review process. It is an impression he has formed on the basis of his experience in the system, one that suggests that tenure isn’t just a matter of publications, recommendations, and instructor evaluations. “I am also given the impression,” he observes, “that if I do my best and if I am likable, I will get my tenure.”

One reason the rank and tenure review process may seem so onerous to a good many people who experience it may be related to the comparatively long period of time they are evaluated. Fifth Year Man states unequivocally that the “seven year tenure process is too long.” He believes that a shorter period of time would be adequate for determining whether a person should be tenured. His suggestion is five years, which he believes would be sufficient

to take into account persons who need more time to demonstrate their competence, the unexpected occurrence of a low-performance year, and disciplines that are especially demanding. He points out that the seven-year time period has never been explained to him. As far as he is concerned, a five-year period is a “more reasonable” time interval for rank and tenure review.

We consider here two identifiable themes in the personal impressions narrative of Fifth Year Man — his concern about the inordinate length of time for rank and tenure review, and the dilemma he mentions pertaining to publishing. Both of these themes may be interpreted from a Taoist perspective.

Publishing

The publishing issue may be considered in light of these words from the **Tao Te Ching** (Feng & English, 1972) “...the sage works without recognition./He [She] achieves what has to be done without dwelling on it./He(She) does not try to show his [her] knowledge” (Chapter 77). The sentiment expressed in this passage is markedly different from the intent underlying rank and tenure review where one of the apparent and principal purposes of the process is to enumerate and evaluate one’s competence on the basis of achievements gained and knowledge claimed. For instance, the task of preparing a “professional file” for review at the various hierarchical levels of the system is precisely for a purpose that the **Tao Te Ching** cautions against. So is publishing. Consider, for example, this excerpt:

Keep your mouth shut,
Guard the senses,
And life is ever full.
Open your mouth,
Always be busy,
And life is beyond hope. (p. 54)

In other words, the conspicuous promotion of one’s purported knowledge through publication, conference presentations, etc., is quite clearly contrary to Tao. “When wisdom and intelligence are born,” we read in the **Tao Te Ching**, “(t)he great pretense begins” (Chapter 18). The prerequisites of rank and tenure review (i.e., publishing and other professional activities) tend to solidify the illusions of wisdom and intelligence and facilitate the deceit that often follows.

Inordinate Length of Review

The inordinate length of the review process may be a feature that works against the reasonable and appropriate evaluation of persons being considered for tenure and advancement in rank. To be subject to this kind of scrutiny at various intervals throughout a seven-year period may be unreasonable — there is simply too much time for too much “drama” to take place. Fifth Year Man may be alluding to the following state of affairs depicted in the **Tao Te Ching** (Feng & English, 1972):

He (She) who stands on tiptoe is not steady.
He (She) who strides cannot maintain the pace.
He (She) who makes a show is not enlightened.
He (She) who is self-righteous is not respected.
He (She) who boasts achieves nothing.
According to followers of the Tao, “These are extra food

and unnecessary luggage.”
 They do not bring happiness.
 Therefore followers of the Tao avoid them. (p. 26)

The image of a person on tiptoe seems apt as a portrayal of the personal experience of rank and tenure review. It suggests moments when one's balance is precarious. It implies that it is probably hard to maintain this posture for very long with any sense of comfort, which will influence how well one is able to do. Perhaps this is one of the reasons Fifth Year Man suggests that the traditional seven-year period be reduced to five years instead. He intimates that less time on one's tiptoes may make for better evaluation and greater satisfaction for everyone involved with the process of determining rank and tenure.

A similar sentiment is expressed in the opening lines of Chapter 23 in the **Tao Te Ching**:

To talk little is natural.
 High winds do not last all morning.
 Heavy rain does not last all day.
 Why is this? Heaven and earth!
 If heaven and earth cannot make things eternal,
 How is it possible for man (woman)? (p. 25)

Reticence is a common theme in the classical writings of philosophical Taoism. On numerous occasions we are encouraged to refrain from speaking and to cultivate quietism. By now it seems obvious that the fundamental assumptions underlying the various procedures of the rank and tenure review process are essentially incompatible with certain tenets of philosophical Taoism. Not only are we encouraged to be more still and to settle our hearts, but we are also reminded to be mindful of the natural order and to pattern our lives accordingly. “High winds do not last all morning. Heavy rain does not last all day” (p. 25). If these conditions of wind and rain cannot be sustained beyond a certain spontaneous point in the natural world then it is folly, according to the **Tao Te Ching**, to expect the social conditions consciously constructed by human beings, such as rank and tenure review, to be sustained beyond what is natural as well. Apparently, this is what Fifth Year Man is referring to when he asserts that the seven-year review period is excessively long; he seems to be suggesting that it extends beyond the natural order of things.

THIRD YEAR MAN

The personal impressions narrative of Third Year Man conveys a growing disappointment with the rank and tenure review process. He experiences some resentment because of the time and effort required to prepare his professional file. At each stage of review, Third Year Man expresses an increasing perplexity about what is happening as the various committees examine his file and make their judgments. He seems to become progressively discouraged with each set of responses to his professional work.

Despite these frustrations, Third Year Man acknowledges the usefulness of preparing his rank and tenure file for critically examining his professional activities. “It forced me,” he writes, “to reevaluate my goals and consider exploring new directions for my career. It gave me the opportunity to assess where I had been and plan where I needed to go.”

After turning in his file for review, Third Year Man experiences what seems to be an estrangement because of the process itself. He is confident that his “closest colleagues” will appreciate his work and recognize the importance of his professional accomplishments, but he is uncertain about what will happen as his file makes its way up the levels of review. He

wonders whether those higher in the hierarchy will understand “what it all meant” as far as his file is concerned. He writes, “My description of my work seemed to disappear into a black hole.”

At this point, the personal impressions narrative of Third Year Man records an account of increasing disillusionment as he receives his ratings from each of the reviewing committees or administrators. The overall effect of this disillusionment is a gradual desensitization to the ratings he receives in the three areas of scholarship, teaching, and service. The anger and confusion he initially experiences is replaced with indifference so that by the time he receives the final evaluation of his third year review he is nonchalant about the results. At first, he is “angry” and “confused,” but eventually he is “no longer very concerned about the ratings.” At first, he is unable to understand how a subsequent committee can drop the ratings he receives from his department committee when they know so little about him or his work. But eventually he is asking himself, “If I don’t know these people, why am I so concerned about the ratings they give me for my work?” And he decides, “It means absolutely nothing in relation to what I am trying to accomplish.” The rank and tenure review process becomes too arbitrary to be taken seriously, and the explanations of his colleagues about why the system works the way it does do not help Third Year Man “understand what (he) was doing for the University and what more (he) needed to do.”

Finally, when he receives his ratings from the last committee to review his file — “good in all three areas” — he “barely glanc(es)” at them. He discovers they mean “very little” and that he has “very little reaction” to these concluding judgments of his professional competence. Although he believes he is making satisfactory progress with regard to tenure and rank because his ratings are certainly adequate, commentary such as “The committee is pleased to have professionals of Dr. (name)’s caliber on the faculty,” do not ring true and leave him feeling empty and confused about rank and tenure review. After experiencing the entire process of his third year evaluation, Third Year Man comes to the following conclusion:

The conclusion I have come to concerning the tenure review system, is this. I am not one who is motivated by rating systems, so I will continue to do the things I believe are necessary and important. I am disappointed that I cannot rely on the system for any real feedback on how the university views my work, but the process so far has only been confusing and meaningless. Many of my colleagues advised me that third year candidates are never given excellent ratings in order to spur them on to greater things. If this is the thinking of these committees, it doesn’t work.

This final, concluding paragraph may be considered a kind of personal manifesto which has evolved from the experience of third-year review. In this paragraph, Third Year Man asserts a particular frame of mind or intrapersonal perspective that will now serve as a script for his self-talk as he continues his participation in his tenure-track position. Both he and Seventh Year Woman have come to the realization that it may be inadvisable to be overly invested in the proceedings of rank and tenure review. Both have been discouraged by the process and both have apparently taken a mental or self-talk attitude that will probably make them less vulnerable to the capriciousness of academic life. Third Year Man, like Seventh Year Woman, has seemingly recognized the play of forces at work in the academy and has come to discern his allegiances. His final, concluding paragraph gives us the themes of “motivation” and the reality of “competing influences” during rank and tenure review.

Competing Influences

Jacob Needleman, in the Feng and English (1972) translation of the **Tao Te Ching**,

observes that “(t)he wise understand all of life amid the ten thousand things as basically a play of forces” (p. 87). Third Year Man, during his third-year review, appears to have experienced this realization and he seems to have made important choices in terms of how he will attempt to harmonize the influences of these forces over the subsequent course of his professional career. His personal impressions narrative reveals that he will concentrate on those activities he believes necessary and important despite the rank and tenure rating system and certain advice from his colleagues. He has elected to emphasize what will strengthen him from the array of contingencies that surround him. He seems cognizant of the universal complementarity described in the **Tao Te Ching** and embraced by philosophical Taoism as a crucial understanding of human experience:

Under heaven all can see beauty as beauty only because there is ugliness.
All can know good as good only because there is evil.

Therefore having and not having arise together.
Difficult and easy complement each other.
Long and short contrast each other;
High and low rest upon each other;
Voice and sound harmonize each other;
Front and back follow one another. (p. 4)

The personal impressions narrative of Third Year Man — his final, concluding paragraph especially — voices his choices from the competing influences around him without implying a rigid rejection of everything contrary to his personal inclinations with regard to his profession and his career. He appears to comprehend and appreciate this passage from the **Tao Te Ching**, “The ten thousand things carry yin and embrace yang./They achieve harmony by combining these forces” (p. 44). Third Year Man seems mindful of this perspective and appears to have incorporated this way of thinking or conversing with himself into his approach to managing the multitude of contesting forces that comprise his responsibilities as an educator.

Motivation

In the beginning, but not without some reluctance, Third Year Man participates in his third-year review with good faith and seems to expect that the process will be informative and rewarding overall. This attitude gradually changes as the various levels of reviewers make their evaluations known to him and he becomes discouraged with their apparent lack of understanding of his work. His personal impressions narrative traces a progression towards a different kind of commitment to the university where he teaches and enacts his professional life. Third Year Man seems to become more inner-directed and less concerned with outward appearances. He seems to realize the possibility of a different kind of motivation and attainment that is not premised on the visibility of his actions or the recognition of others. In the **Tao Te Ching**, we find these words:

Not exalting the gifted prevents quarreling.
Not collecting treasures prevents stealing.
Not seeking desirable things prevents confusion of the heart. (p. 5)

The “attitude” depicted in this passage is not easily experienced and cultivated as an intrapersonal perspective in an academic setting, but it doesn’t seem entirely out of the question to entertain the possibility of assuming this attitude while undergoing the process

of rank and tenure review. "Not exalting the gifted.... Not collecting treasures.... Not seeking desirable things..." all possess the potential of moving one's focus of attention and activity outside the reach of judgment and evaluation that undergirds the essence of the rank and tenure review process. It seems as though Third Year Man, to a considerable extent, has quieted his mind and settled his heart. If he persists despite the setbacks and discouragement he describes in his personal impressions narrative, he may represent a more refined way of participating in the professional activities of academic life.

CLOSING COMMENTS

There is much that can be learned from philosophical Taoism regarding rank and tenure review. Even though this Chinese philosophy seems incompatible with this ritual of academic life, it has been argued that certain concepts of Taoism can complement the personal experience of this evaluation process so that one is strengthened rather than weakened; that as an intrapersonal frame of reference, philosophical Taoism may offer a potential point of sanity. Certain texts of philosophical Taoism have been used to interpret the personal narratives of persons experiencing rank and tenure review with the intent of providing a vantage-point and some comprehension of this ubiquitous predicament in academia. The narratives themselves are also valuable for this purpose.

As already mentioned, Third Year Woman did not submit a personal impressions narrative of her experiences while undergoing third-year review. By electing to not participate in this informal survey she released herself from an external commitment, the perennial nemesis of academic life. I like to imagine Third Year Woman, an accomplished pianist, at the keyboard of her instrument much more absorbed in the harmonies of her world than occupied with the concerns of rank and tenure review. In the quiet of her mind, she performs, while many of the rest of us wonder how we are doing and labor to add an entry to our vitas.

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