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*Being and Nothingness in Greek and Ancient Chinese Philosophy**

IT IS COMMON KNOWLEDGE THAT THE Greek philosophers were greatly concerned with metaphysics. The pre-Socratics pursued the subject almost to the exclusion of the other branches of philosophy. Aristotle made metaphysics the cornerstone of his philosophical work—and quite rightly, I believe, since the problem of the nature of man and his relation to the total universe is the problem out of which all other philosophical problems grow.

Writers on Chinese philosophy in the past have tended to concentrate on Chinese ethics and political theory. An adequate introduction to Chinese metaphysics has not yet appeared in English. In this paper, therefore, I shall try to introduce the reader to Chinese metaphysics by comparing it to, and contrasting it with, its Greek counterpart. I shall show that Chinese Taoist philosophers and certain Greek philosophers agreed with respect to the following: (I) Metaphysics is the study of Substance or Being; (II) Substance or Being is prior to individual or particular existence; (III) Substance or Being is ultimately transcended in the concept of nothingness. By this comparison I hope to clarify a subject which is now unfamiliar to most Western minds and thus to narrow the gap between Chinese and Western metaphysics.

I

Metaphysicians and scientists are both concerned with investigating objective nature. The main difference between the ancient Chinese and Greek thinkers, on the one hand, and modern scientists, on the other, is that the former operated from the point of view of the whole, treating nature as integral—reaching a view of the whole, or simplicity¹—whereas the latter

* For the sake of clarity, this article was extensively revised in the process of editing. [Editor's note.]

¹ Simplicity is the fundamental principle in both philosophy and science. The ultimate purpose of simplicity is to discover in the multiplicities of the universe the nature of the unity, consequently, to achieve the ultimate principle of the One. The principle of the One is what the

start with particulars and derive definitions and laws by way of induction or generalization. These laws and definitions are then generalized, and more comprehensive laws are derived from them. Although the demand for systematic simplicity is fundamental in science, the scientist, concerned as he is with particular areas or aspects of reality, does not achieve integral unity and absolute simplicity. At most he attains simplicity in the generalization of particular areas of fact. The distinction between science and metaphysics propounded by Aristotle therefore holds:

Philosophy is the science of universals, for every real science is, or at least should be, a view of the whole, a general theory; hence the special sciences are partial philosophies, as well as general theories concerning one or more groups of given facts, theories which are summarized and systematized by general philosophy. Conversely, philosophy proper or the first science is a separate science; it is coordinated with other sciences (second philosophy), and has a distinct matter of its own, being as such, the absolute or God, embracing and containing the principles of all sciences and the first causes of all things that exist.²

What Aristotle calls "first philosophy" is the study of nature as a whole; it culminates in absolute simplicity—Being as such or God. The more profound and comprehensive the simplicity, the nearer we approach Aristotle's "first philosophy." The less profound and comprehensive the simplicity, the greater the multiplicity, and the nearer we approach science.

The attainment of absolute simplicity was the goal of ancient Chinese and Greek metaphysicians alike. In the most ancient Chinese work on metaphysics, *The Book of Changes*, there is simplicity in the Absolute. In Chinese Taoism, the teaching of Lao-tzū, there is the simplicity of the Tao or the One. In the Greek tradition, the founder of the principle of the One is Parmenides. With Plato, simplicity is found in "absolute Goodness." Aristotle finds simplicity in the "Unmoved Mover." Plotinus sees simplicity in the "intellectual principle," and goes on to the ineffable One, which is transcendental in nature.

Let us now analyze the true meaning of simplicity—the One. Greek and Chinese philosophers were so deeply interested in simplicity because the

ancient philosophers called Being. So, the principle of simplicity is very closely connected with the principle of Unity or the One.

But how can we simplify multiplicities into general laws or principles? Nature is a divine Being and already has harmony and regularity. In other words, nature is already integral, so that everything, in order to exist, possesses a certain order under the One. We have the possibility, therefore, of tracing these orders to their leading order, thus attaining the principle of the One or Being. The attainment of the principle of the One is the last step of simplicity.

This theory about simplicity is not arbitrarily set up by philosophers, nor is it my own opinion. It is recognized by modern science. (See H. Poincaré, *The Foundation of Science*, trans. George Bruce Halsted [Lancaster: The Science Press, 1946], "The Introduction of the Value of Science," and "Science and Hypothesis," pp. 130, 133, 207–209.)

² Alfred Weber, *History of Philosophy*, trans. Frank Thilly (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925).

systematic or generative principle is of primary importance. Without unity things could not be produced and disorder would prevail. But order is natural and necessarily requires a directing principle, for it is unimaginable that order is produced by the ordered individuals themselves. If there were no directing principle, how could there be proportion, symmetry, and the adaptation of one thing to another? There must, therefore, be an organizing power which orders—as, for example, in the seasons. The principle of seasons from which the seasons proceed in an orderly and never-failing fashion must exist before the seasons themselves. The ultimate principle is, therefore, of prime importance, and it is this that Lao-tzŭ calls the Tao. In his words: "There exists a completing thing before the birth of nature—I know not its name, but characterize it as the Tao."³

This leading principle is what the ancient Chinese book, *The Book of Changes*, calls the "Ultimate Absolute": "In the fundamental principle of change there is an unchangeable Ultimate Absolute. From this Ultimate Absolute are derived the two types, from these two types the four symbols, from the four symbols the eight forms, and from the eight forms all things."⁴

Thus, Lao-tzŭ asserts the priority of the Tao, which is the same as the Ultimate Absolute of *The Book of Changes*. It is agreed that the ultimate principle must exist before all else. Everything that comes into being comes into being in accordance with the order of the leading principle or Being.

The same idea is to be found among the Greek thinkers. We find it in the second part of the poem of Parmenides:⁵

You shall know, too, the heavens that surround us, whence they arose, and how necessity took them and bound them to keep the limits of the stars.⁶

The narrower bonds were filled with unmixed fire, and those next to them with night, and in the midst of these rushes their portion of fire. In the midst of these is the divinity that directs the course of all things; for he is the beginner of all painful birth and all begetting, deriving the female to embrace the male, and male the female.⁷

In this passage Parmenides postulates a divinity that directs the course of all things, a divinity which is identical with the ultimate principle or the ordering power of all things.

³ Lao-tzŭ, *Tao Têh Ching*, ch. 25. All translations from this work are my own.

⁴ *The Book of Changes*, Hsi Tz'ŭ, ch. 11. My translation.

⁵ Parmenides, in the first part of his poem, deals with the absoluteness of truth directly. He talks of the One that is all and the true reality of the "is." The second part deals with multiplicity and its tendency toward unity. That is, from the multiplicity to return to the "is" or One there is no doubt that there is a certain connection in these two parts.

⁶ John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy* (4th ed.; London: A. and C. Black, Ltd., 1930), Frs. 10 and 11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, "Parmenides," Fr. 12.

A similar idea is found in Plato, where the leading principle is the cause of all things by way of participation. Thus, in the *Phaedo*, Plato tells us that "there is an absolute beauty, goodness, greatness and the like . . ." and that there is "no way in which anything comes into existence except by participating in its own proper essence. . . ."⁸ The importance of the leading principle is not overlooked by Aristotle, for whom the purpose of philosophy is to ask the question *why*? The answer to the *why* is the cause; and the concept of cause involves the concept of the ultimate principle, for all things need an ultimate cause in order to move, to be ordered, and to receive their existence.⁹ Aristotle's ultimate principle is the Unmoved Mover. Individual things receive their order and motion from the Unmoved Mover. All things are "for the sake of which"—"which" being the leading principle or teleological cause.¹⁰

II

What has been said indicates the importance of the ultimate principle or the principle of the One, emphasized by both Greek and Chinese philosophers. To sum up what has been said about the principle of the One, I shall again call upon Lao-tzŭ:

The Tao produced the One; the One produced the Two; the Two produced the Three; the Three produced all things.¹¹

Once there was a time when all things were harmonized through the One; the heavens receiving the One became clear; the earth receiving the One became calm; spirits receiving the One became divine; valleys receiving the One became full; all things receiving the One began to live; princes and kings receiving the One were able to adjust their empires. All these are the effects of receiving the One.

Without the One to clarify, the heavens would be rent; without the One to give calm the earth would be dissolved; without the One to make divine, the spirits would be extinguished; without the One to make full, the valleys would be exhausted; without the One to give life, all nature would suffer destruction; without the One to adjust, princes and kings would lose positions and honors.¹²

These statements show that, according to Chinese Taoist philosophy, the Tao or the One is prior to all things, and from the Tao or One all things derive their order. We may say, therefore, that the Tao or the One, like Substance or God postulated by Greek philosophers, produces all things.

But here we must be particularly careful, for the Tao or the One of

⁸ *Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Random House, Inc., 1937), Vol. I, pp. 484-485.

⁹ *Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (7th printing; New York: Random House, Inc., 1941), pp. 248-251.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 248, par. 35.

¹¹ *Tao Têh Ching*, ch. 42. My translation.

¹² *Ibid.*, ch. 39.

Chinese metaphysics is not outside of nature. It is nature itself. The fact that we call it the Tao indicates that it is something other than the totality of the universe. Totality means that the whole is only the aggregation of its parts without an ultimate principle. Unity, therefore, does not mean totality, nor does unity rise out of totality. Unity must exist before everything else, and everything presupposes unity as the condition of its individuality and rank within the whole. Thus, the Tao or the One is unity, but not totality, and is prior to all things.

The unity and priority of this ultimate principle are formulated in China by Lao-tzŭ, as has been indicated above. Both Chuang-tzŭ and Huai-nan-tzŭ of the later Taoist school write of the priority of the Tao or the One. Thus, Chuang-tzŭ holds: "The Tao is not formed from any external thing; it creates itself. It existed before heaven and earth; indeed, the earth and heaven as well as the spirits and Gods were created by it."¹³

Huai-nan-tzŭ writes: "In the Tao the One orders all. It nourishes the four oceans as well as the heaven and earth. Once its guiding principle is realized all things tend toward it."¹⁴

A similar view was expressed by Greek thinkers. Parmenides tells us: "One path is only left for us to speak of, namely that it is. In this path are many tokens, that what 'is' is uncreated and indestructible; for it is complete, immovable and without end."¹⁵

Thus, the nature of unity and the priority of the ultimate principle itself are epitomized by the word *is*. This *is* symbolizes the very nature of the indivisibility and wholeness of Being. In a similar fashion, Plato asserts that the soul is not a harmony or totality and is different from the aggregation of its parts. It is absolute unity and is prior to all individuals.¹⁶ Aristotle tells us that Unity itself or Being itself must be substance, which is not different from what is universally predicated of things that are and are one. Consequently, Aristotle agrees with Parmenides, for he says that "according to the argument of Parmenides . . . all things are, are One, and this is Being."¹⁷ Aristotle also asserts the priority of Being or Substance: ". . . and those who study these properties err not by leaving the sphere of philosophy, but by forgetting that substance is prior to these other things."¹⁸

We have shown, now, that unity is not totality, but is an indivisibility that is fundamentally different from totality. We have shown that unity is

¹³ Ch. 6, the inner volume of *Chuang-tzŭ*. My translation. This is a sum of the meaning of the text; it is not a complete translation.

¹⁴ *Huai-nan-tzŭ*, Vol. I, ch. 1. My translation.

¹⁵ *Early Greek Philosophy*, Fr. 8.

¹⁶ *Plato*, Vol. I, pp. 479-490.

¹⁷ *Basic Works of Aristotle*, pp. 728, 732.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 734, par. 5-10.

prior to individuality, for it is the leading power or universal law of nature from which all things receive their existence and order. The final goal in the metaphysics of both Eastern and Western schools is the attainment of simplicity and the establishment of the system of the One or Being.

III

The idea of the One, Unity, or Being has been developed further by both Western and Eastern philosophers. Three schools in particular have attempted to go beyond the One. These are the schools of Lao-tzŭ in China and the schools of Gorgias and Plotinus in Greece. Other schools give only a hint of moving in this direction.

In China, Lao-tzŭ develops the idea of Being to its culmination in nothingness, regarding the "nameless" as the origin of nature. He writes:

The Tao that can be expressed is not the unchangeable Tao. The name that can be named is not the unchangeable name. The nameless is the origin of nature (heaven and earth). The named is the mother of all things. . . .¹⁹

The pattern of man is earth, the pattern of earth is heaven, the pattern of heaven is Tao, the pattern of Tao is spontaneity.²⁰

The movement of the Tao returns [to the source], but its function is weakness. All things in the world come from existence and existence from non-existence.²¹

This idea of namelessness or nothingness is further clarified by the later Taoists, Chuang-tzŭ and Huai-nan-tzŭ. Chuang-tzŭ tells us:

The concept of nothingness existed before the beginning of the universe; it is nameless, undefinable in its nature. The concept of oneness is inextricably entwined with nothingness. All things derive their existence only in terms of the One from which they derive their reality. I call this "the Tê."²²

And in like manner Huai-nan-tzŭ writes:

The concept of the One and the idea of nothingness have the same implication. The Universe is of the nature of the One. . . . Therefore, existence is generated from non-existence; the real from the non-real.²³

Among the Greeks, Gorgias expresses the same idea:

Nothing exists,²⁴ for if Being existed it would be eternal, as was proved by Par-

¹⁹ *Tao Têh Ching*, ch. 1.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, ch. 25.

²¹ *Ibid.*, ch. 40.

²² Ch. 12, the outer volume of *Chuang-tzŭ*. My translation.

²³ Vol. I, ch. 1. My translation.

²⁴ In Gorgias, the interpretation of "nothing exists" as nihilism is misleading. He infers that because of its nature we cannot grasp reality, not that it does not exist. This point is taken up by F. Ueberweg, in his *Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie* (12th ed.; Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1926), Vol. I.

menides. Now, an eternal Being is infinite. But an infinite Being cannot exist in space or time without being limited by them. Hence it is nowhere, and what is nowhere does not exist. And even if, assuming the impossible, something did exist, we could not know it; and even if we could, this knowledge could in nowise be communicated to others.²⁵

And this idea occurs again in the philosophy of Plotinus:

Since the nature of the Hypostasis of the One is the engenderer of the all, it can itself be none of the things in the all; that is, it is not a thing; it does not possess quality or quantity; it is not an intellectual principle, not a soul; it is not in motion or at rest; not in space, not in time; it is essentially a unique form or rather no form, since it is prior to form as it is prior to movement and to the rest; all these categories hold only in the realm of existence and constitute the multiplicity characteristic of that lower realm.²⁶

No attribute can be affirmed of it; we penetrate to it only by mystic contemplation, the senses sealed.²⁷

We cannot make any statement about it, since all else we may say of it is said by negation.²⁸

From these quotations, it is evident that Lao-tzŭ, Chuang-tzŭ, Huai-nan-tzŭ, Gorgias, and Plotinus are all concerned with transcending Being or the One and thus reaching nothingness. But, we may ask, why attempt to transcend Being?

Being itself transcends both time and space, since it endures for eternity and is the source of all things. We cannot even imagine that Being or the One has either beginning or end. For if Being began to exist, it must have come from either Being or non-Being. In the former case, it is its own product; it has created itself, which amounts to saying that it is not created. Consequently, there is no beginning. In the latter case, it is assumed that something can come from nothing, and this is absurd. Consequently, there is no beginning to the existence of Being. For similar reasons, Being can neither change nor perish, and therefore has no end. Without beginning, without end, and incapable of change, Being transcends time.

Being also transcends space and is quantitatively infinite. It is unlimited by anything and is boundless. In this sense it is infinite. These two attributes, eternity and infinity, represent supreme existence and are the summit of absolute perfection. Thus, Being can be the source of all things. Other kinds of existence, being spatial and temporal, are relative to one another and limited. They represent imperfection and cannot constitute the source

²⁵ Alfred Weber, *History of Philosophy*, p. 17.

²⁶ Plotinus, trans. Stephen Mackenna (London and Boston: Medici Society, Ltd., 1917-30), Vol. I, p. 141.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 144.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 141.

of all things, since the source of all things must be self-contained and self-sufficient, in need of nothing other than its own self. Only Being, which transcends space and time, can be the source of all things.

Let us now look into the real existence of eternal and infinite Being, which transcends space and time and is unlimited in its nature. What can the nature of such existence be? Regarded from the standpoint of its lack of limitation, it is completely independent, that is, absolute. "Absolute" means that it is relative to nothing and is self-sufficient. Thus, it excludes all desires, wants, and feelings. It transcends consciousness, forgetting itself and its own existence. Being is thus equivalent to non-existence or nothingness, just as we seem to be nothing when we are sound asleep.

That the *nature* of the One is forgetfulness, nothingness, is testified to by Chuang-tzŭ:

When one forgets both external things and heaven, he is in the state that I call true self-forgetfulness. When he is in this state, his nature is the same [forgetfulness or namelessness] as that of heaven [universe].²⁹

Confucius, although not a Taoist, also recognizes this principle of nothingness. In his *Analects*, he says:

I [Confucius] would prefer not speaking. His student Tzŭ-kung asks, "If you, O master, do not speak, what shall we, your disciples, have to record and follow?" The master replied, "Does the universe speak? The four seasons pursue their own course and all things are produced in their order; but does the universe say anything?"³⁰

Out of the nothingness of not speaking arises the spontaneity of continuous production. This is the true nature of the universe. As Confucius says again:

Among the appliances to transform the people, sound and appearance are but trivial influence. It is said in another ode: "His virtue is light as a hair." Still a hair will admit of comparison of size. The doings of the supreme heaven [universe] has neither sound nor smell. [No size at all and equal to nothingness.] This is the perfect virtue.³¹

From these quotations it is clear that Confucius recognizes the metaphysical principle of nothingness. But here we must examine more carefully the meaning of nothingness, for nothingness has to do not with the quality or quantity of Being, but only with the nature of Being. For the nature of Being is said to be nothingness because Being is absolutely complete, in need of nothing, conscious of no wants. This is why the principle of nothingness in the philosophy of Lao-tzŭ is "nameless"; and why in the philosophy

²⁹ Ch. 12, the outer volume of *Chuang-tzŭ*. My translation.

³⁰ Confucius, *Analects* XVII. 19.

³¹ Confucius, *Doctrine of the Mean*, ch. 33.

of Huai-nan-tzŭ the concept of nothingness and the idea of the One have the same implication—for the One is the Absolute, and, if it is absolute, it is nameless and equal to nothingness. In the writings of Confucius, the principle of nothingness is represented by "not speaking" and "having neither sound nor smell." In the philosophy of Gorgias, "infinite Being is not limited in space and time, and consequently is nowhere, and therefore nothing exists." And in the philosophy of Plotinus we are told that the "One is the engenderer of all, and is therefore not a thing, possessing neither quality nor quantity."³²

Thus, Being or the One is not the ultimate metaphysical principle. In other words, the term *Being* does not represent the ultimate nature of reality or Being-in-itself. Being is still namable, and in this respect it is related to something and is less than ultimate reality. Reality must transcend Being, must be related to nothing. It must be lost in itself and remain nameless.

To sum up, then, it has been asserted that the full development of metaphysics both in ancient Chinese Taoism and in Greek philosophy culminates in nothingness. Nothingness is the nature of Being-in-itself, which is absolutely transcendent and nameless. Only in the namelessness of nothingness is the nature of ultimate reality discerned. If we give it a name and call it Being, then it is limited and loses its nature of absoluteness and self-forgetful unconsciousness. When we reach this step, we have gone as far as metaphysics can go in investigating the ultimate nature of reality. This is the merit of Lao-tzŭ in the East and of Gorgias and Plotinus in the West.

³² Plotinus, Vol. 1, p. 141.