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HERACLITUS, PARMENIDES, LAO-TZU,  
AND THE UNITY OF ALL THINGS\*

In this short paper I would like to explore some possible points of similarity among Heraclitus, Parmenides, and Lao-Tzu on the question of the unity of opposites. I shall continue by sketching four questions for further interpretation. It will develop that the contrasts between Heraclitus and Parmenides, Parmenides and Plato, East and West, are perhaps not so great after all.

When thinking about the unity of opposites, one has to distinguish at least two senses in which that unity might occur. First, one might think that opposites were one in the sense that two opposites were part of a larger whole which manifested itself through the opposites. *God is day night* does not mean that day *is* night or that it is day in Ephesus when it is night in Ephesus. It does mean at least that day and night are complementary parts of a cycle which includes both, and that day does not make sense except as the opposite of night, and vice versa, so that, even though the two are opposed, they do not stand without each other and have no identity except in their mutual opposing interrelationship. What is striking about this is that it violates common sense. It also violates ordinary piety, if that piety would have us identify the divine with only one of the opposites. But note that it does not do away with the opposites themselves. They remain, and God is nothing without them. God does not manifest itself except in the cycle where one opposite successively replaces the other. The unity of opposites is *in* the opposites themselves.

On the other hand, if one is told that Being is *ungenerable unperishing*, one is hearing about a unity which rejects opposites and is indifferent to them. Being has no beginning in time and no end in time. The opposites are derogated to a lower realm, the realm of mortal opinion, a realm excluded by and from the realm of truth. The central route-markers in Parmenides all work this way: there is no earlier/later, bigger/smaller, more/less, here/there, now/then, fire/night. And yet what is surprising is that these opposites are not fundamentally different from the Heraclitean opposites just described: each requires its opposite for contrast, for intelligibility, for its very being. Why then does Parmenides not conclude, with Heraclitus, that Being manifests itself in and

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through a cycle of opposites? Why is being distant from the cycle, aloof from it, isolated? Why does it reject the very opposites whose being it is?

I shall call the first model the *upward* model: the opposites are one, and the unity of opposites is visible, is manifested, in and through the opposites themselves. The unity does not exist apart from them. The second model is the *downward* model: the unity is above the flux of opposites, separate from them, holding them in contempt.

These are not the only models there are. Another model is visible in Plato's *Sophist*. If I may tell a fictional story about Plato's development, the *Phaedo*-model of the forms is one in which the forms follow the downward model, for good Eleatic reasons: the realm of being, of the forms, is separate from the flux of opposites, and Plato thinks that he can keep a Parmenidean model for the forms and a Heraclitean model for the sensible world. But the *Sophist* combines the upward and downward models even in the realm of the forms. For the form of Oneness, for example, *is*, because it participates in the form of Being, and yet also *is not*, because it is not identical with the form of Being. In a sense the forms of the *Sophist* follow the downward model, for they are not parts of a rotating temporal cycle. But in another sense the forms of the *Sophist* follow the upward model, for, like the opposites of Heraclitus, they are what they are only by not being what they are not. Negation, contrariety, opposition have now infected the forms, yet without subjecting them to temporality and flux. The forms of the *Sophist* no longer exhibit purely Eleatic characteristics: they, like the primary entities of Anaxagoras, Empedocles, and Democritus, are both Heraclitean and Parmenidean. Yet in spite of this the forms can continue to transcend the spatiotemporal matrix which contains their participants. One can see the young Aristotle asking himself the question: why retain transcendence if even the forms now are and are not? Why not have an immanence in which the essence of each thing is now within the thing instead of being separate from it? Why not restore dignity to nature as an object of theoretical investigation on a par with mathematics and abstract universals?

The question at issue in the contrast between upward and downward models is this: whether the unity of opposites exists *in* the opposites or whether it transcends them. Plato in the *Sophist* tries to have both: the forms remain transcendent while now being the abode of opposites. Aristotle sees in this an opening for a revised, dynamic notion of species and genera. Hegel, it could be argued, tries to join sameness and difference in his own way. And so the story would go.

But I wonder whether the story is true. I wonder whether it might be possible for the upward and downward models to be joined at the beginning, even (or perhaps especially) in the Presocratics. The question here would be this: is it possible for the unity of opposites to be immanent in the opposites themselves and also transcendent of the opposites?

Consider the ancient Chinese yin-yang diagram. Yin and yang are opposites: both go together to form a larger whole. And yet each in a sense *is* the other. They differ, not in configuration, but merely in orientation, and if you rotate the one by 180 degrees, you get the other. Moreover, they are

defined in terms of each other: if you do not have yin, you also do not have yang, and vice versa. Mortals like to think that they are separate ultimate powers which alternately dominate the universe. They may even prefer yin over yang, or yang over yin. But the secret is that they are one in their difference. Indeed, they are one because of their difference, different because they are one. In a sense their unity transcends both of them, for, if you merely juxtapose them, you do not yet have their unity. You have to see through the difference to the unity, and the unity is something over and above the component parts. Yet, in another sense, the unity is an immanent unity, for it depends on the presence of the components and on their being thought together in a certain way. The transcendent unity manifests itself in the immanent parts and in their rotatory sequence. And, yet, the parts, taken just as parts, go together to form an immanent unity which is nothing without the parts.

The transcendent approach at its purest produces a tautology – *Being is* – or a formal pattern, a mathematical object, an abstraction, unity without opposition: it is changeless, contentless, Apollinian. The immanent approach, if it could be found in its purity, would generate contradiction, flux, borderless material embodiment, the opposites in opposition, the Dionysian. The first approach is a Platonic array of separate forms without any interconnections; the second, a purely relational web of changing things which exist only because they are connected to each other. Thus, on the surface, transcendent and immanent are opposites, just like day and night – but what I am suggesting is that they are one. I correlate the transcendent approach with metalanguage, language in quotes, the setting of norms, language about language. I connect the immanent approach with the first-order language itself. Either could be taken as basic, and an ontology constructed on that basis, but it is impossible in the end to isolate either in its pure form without the other: for what are norms without mutual interconnections, or what is change without norms to govern it? Such change and such norms would be neither Heraclitus, nor Parmenides, nor Plato. I cannot know the limits of my immanent knowledge without standing outside those limits, but then I know something transcendent. On the other hand, the transcendent manifests itself to me through the immanent, and not apart from it.

Have I just described Heraclitus? Or Parmenides? Or Lao-Tzu? At any rate there is now a field of questions which have opened up. I would like to pose a few of them and then conclude with a few general observations.

First, we used to be accustomed to a traditional model about Parmenides and his successors, one which has lately come under attack. In this model, Parmenides offers rigorous criteria for serious knowing, criteria which cannot be met by the existing Ionian natural philosophy. So Empedocles, Anaxagoras, and Democritus soften the criteria and come up with basic entities for theoretical explanation which are at best quasi-Parmenidean. This is one possibility. Or – and this is the attack – we reinterpret Parmenides in order to allow him to permit the inclusion of these later basic entities. But what if there is no necessary contradiction between an immanent unity and a transcendent unity in the first place?

Second, there appears to be a contradiction in Heraclitus between the immanent opposites, which go through the rotatory flux, and a separate, transcendent ultimate principle: *Wise, Zeus, thunderbolt*, the child at play, and so on. But what if the transcendent *Logos* and the immanent flux were thought together by Heraclitus himself?

Third, if it often objected against Plato (most notably by Plato himself, but also by Aristotle) that Platonism (at least at some stage in its development) is unable to handle the question of the participation relationship between forms and particulars. We hear either that the forms are split into many pieces or that they are in many places at once without being separate from themselves, or that Socrates is split into two things rather than one, or that the genus is split by its species, or that contradictory things are true of the genus, or that participation is merely a metaphor, and so on. But suppose that particulars are simply the universal as immanent, while form is simply the universal as transcendent. Surely there would be no contradiction between these two roles.

Fourth, Westerners often adopt either a patronizing attitude towards traditional Chinese philosophy, or an attitude of glorification. We hear very positive or very negative things about it. But what if the fundamental insight at the beginning of both traditions is the same, the insight being that ultimate reality manifests itself both as a union of opposites and as a unity transcending opposites?

I do not have the answers to these questions. But I would like to suggest that perhaps the way of Parmenides' goddess, far from the beaten track of humanity, may not be so far distant from the way of Lao-Tzu, which is *not a way* because it is never travelled by mortals. From the mortal point of view, we prefer either the repetitive immanent cycles of our lives, both a comedy and a tragedy, or the abstract perfection of transcendent inquiry. We never realize that the two are the same, a contradiction and a tautology in one.

Consider how the same problem appears in Protagoras or in contemporary French philosophy. One hears that we have access only to an interpretation of the world, that we always stand within the limits of a particular point of view. But how is it that I know that the human is the measure of all things? If I stand within the ambit of a particular world-view, I have endorsed it: it is mine, I am not going to admit that other world-views might have the same status. Where, then, am I standing if I have endorsed *homo mensura*? If Protagoras is correct, one cannot escape one's particular limits. But Protagoras' own statement is totalizing: it is about all world-views, including itself, and must be so if it is not to be just yet another parochial attitude. Relativity is relative. One must stand both inside one's own world-view – the immanent position – and outside all world-views – the transcendent position – if one is going both to have a world-view and to admit the limits of world-views in general. Socratic dialectic, indeed, is an exploitation of this very situation – Socrates traverses each view, encountering a contradiction or an incongruity, and then, unlike Protagoras, humbly admits that he does not know. But, in order to know that he does not know, he must occupy a transcendent point of view. Neither Protagorean relativism nor Socratic humility is possible unless one can occupy

both the transcendent point of view and the immanent one. Socrates is a post-post-modern philosopher.

Another example is the by now classic one about language and meta-language found in the Gödel incompleteness theorem. If you consider a sentence which says of itself that it is not provable, and then ask whether that sentence itself is provable or not, you encounter an antinomy similar to Russell's paradox: if the sentence is provable, then it is not provable, and the system has an inconsistency; but if the sentence is not provable, then the system is not capable of proving everything that is within itself, and so is incomplete. Wittgenstein, indeed, followed the Russellian strategy of simply refusing to form certain sentences within the system, in particular some of those sentences which commented on themselves. But another approach might be to see that every system must contain a part which is immanently within the system and also transcendently outside the system, that there must be at least one sentence which is both linguistic and metalinguistic.

Consider Lao-Tzu's statement that the way which is a way is not a way. Translations usually attempt to soften the harshness of the statement through disambiguation: one hears that the way which can be travelled is not the true way, or that ordinary ways of thinking are incapable of reaching the way's goal. But one should not overlook the paradox: if the way which is a way is not a way, what of Lao-Tzu's own statement? Is it a way or is it not? The conclusion would appear to be that if we wish to travel on Lao-Tzu's way, we must abandon the principle of non-contradiction on which normal journeying depends.

But what kind of a way is that? It is a way, one way among others, if Lao-Tzu has travelled on it and can return to bring us tidings. Yet it is also a way which, not being a way, lays claim to being part of the meta-discourse of ways, to be a way about all ways. Should the way, then, be travelled in silence? Why, then, does he speak? Once again reason, when it encounters its limits, produces tautology, contradiction, paradox, incongruity, antinomy, self-referentiality, a mixture of immanence and transcendence. How, then, do I set foot on the way? If the canons of reason, which normally guide travelers along the way, are canons which violate themselves in their very utterance, then what ground does reason itself have, if reason is the search for grounds? Or is all reason a noble lie? If *God is day night*, that is certainly a slap in the fact to those who think they know a comfortable, well-trodden path to divinity. On the other hand, if Being is *ungenerable unperishing [...] not divisible [...] immovable [...] not incomplete*, then in what sense is the way to Being a way of positivity instead of a way of negation? Or, to pose the question as it appears in the *Charmides*, does the science of all sciences know itself as well as the other sciences? Does Socrates, in knowing that he does not know, then know something or not? One can attempt to calm the storm of such questions by drawing a firm distinction between language and metalanguage. But in what language is that distinction to be drawn?

The earliest monuments of ancient thinking that have come down to us are far from primitive. They do not grope in a darkness, illuminated only by transient moments of clarity, towards notions and distinctions brilliantly

visible at some later point in philosophy's developmental history. Instead, they wrestle with problems which are perennial, by no means simple, to be taken seriously today, and common to all views, traditions, and cultures. There does not exist a catalogue of philosophical knowledge, a cosmic *Wikipedia* or *Stanford Encyclopedia*, to which time makes accretions, and those who are philosophers are not necessarily members of any profession or school. They are recognizable, perhaps, only by being blind in broad daylight, or, perhaps, by seeing perfectly well at night.