

Questioning the One and the Many with Aristotle and Zhu Xi

Is there a single question of being which can take various forms like ‘what is being/*ousia*?’ and ‘why is there something rather than nothing?’ Or do these different formulations indicate multiple questions of being? One way of addressing this topic of whether the question of being is singular or plural is to examine how Aristotle and the Neo-Confucian, Zhu Xi (1130-1200), responded to it as both of their metaphysics focus on a first principle/being of everything, and theorize about how it relates to multiple beings. Both discourse about ‘substance’ and ‘function,’ and substance as the cause/reason for why particulars are what they are.¹ Despite their affinities about the one and the many, differences in their accounts are rife. E.g., whether first principle is inherent in everything or transcendent; whether first principle is an ultimate of nonbeing *and* being or only being; whether it is tranquil or always active, and whether it is material or immaterial, just to name a few. If I can show that even their different answers to the question of the one and the many are attempts to resolve the question, ‘*what is being?*’, there’s compelling evidence for a single question of being for them. How else can we account for their similar questions despite their being from radically disparate philosophical, historical, geographical and linguistic backgrounds?

More elaborately, even though Zhu Xi asserts that the Principle of creation is one,² he distinguishes it into an ‘ultimate of nonbeing’ (*wuji* 無極) and the ‘great ultimate’ (*taiji* 太極). Whilst the former (*wuji*) is tranquil and unmanifested, the latter (*taiji*) is active and manifested.³ Zhu Xi distinguishes the one first principle into two ultimates to explain change and transformation for he thinks that transformation cannot issue from a unity. Yet, he doesn’t think that there are two first principles, saying, “Therefore ‘the Ultimate of Nonbeing and also the Great Ultimate’ [quoting Zhou Dunyi]. It does not mean that outside of the Great Ultimate there is an Ultimate of Nonbeing.”⁴ Contrasting Zhu Xi’s analysis of the two ultimates with Aristotle’s *ousia*/God (who is always active,⁵ and a unity⁶ that moves

¹ Aristotle says, “the primary and unqualified definition (*haplôs horismos*) and the essence (*to ti ên einai*), belong to substances (*tôn ousiôn*)” (*Met.* 1030b5-6, see 1032a1-2 for the identity of essence, substance and *logos*). Speaking of the mind of Heaven and Earth which produces and reproduces all things, Zhu Xi says, “When it is tranquil and has returned to its original state, it exists as substance before it is manifested. When it is active and penetrates everything, it exists as function after it has manifested itself.” *Reflections on Things at Hand: The Neo-Confucian Anthology compiled by Chu Hsi and Lu Tsu-Ch’ien*, (“*Reflections on the Things at Hand*” hereafter) translated by Wing-Tsit Chan, Columbia University Press (1967), 12. Again, Zhu Xi says, “Permeating the world there is a single mechanism which vitalizes things. It flows out and issues forth as function and not for a moment does it cease.” *Further Reflections on Things at Hand*, translated by Allen Wittenborn, University Press of America (1991), 70.

² *Reflections on Things at Hand*, 10.

³ Tranquility, for Zhu Xi, “is not non-being as such. Because it has not assumed physical form, we call it non-being. It is not because of activity that there is being. Because (activity makes) it visible, we call it being” (Wing-Tsit Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, Princeton U. Press (1963) 629, 44:6b-7a).

⁴ *Reflections on Things at Hand*, 5.

⁵ God is always active by thinking of His own thinking (*Met.* 1074b35).

⁶ Aristotle says that God is “one both in formula and number” (*Met.* 1074a37).

everything else), I'll show that both authors are concerned with the same question, 'what is being?' Because they understand being as immaterial and the first cause, each explains how immaterial being can cause material things. The fact that both stress the oneness of being in causing the many, shows that the problem of being is one for them. Moreover, I'll show that their concerns regarding the substance, function and goodness of the many, and our knowledge of them are traceable to being as a first principle.⁷ In other words, all questions about the norms and natures of things lead to the one question, 'what is being?' for Aristotle and Zhu Xi, showing again that this is the question of being for them. If these two philosophers are agreed on the singleness of the question of being despite their different views about the one and the many, a comparison of their views can help us understand why there's one question of being and yet multiple manifestations of it.

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⁷ As Aristotle puts it, "it is from the concept of substance that all the other modes of being take their meaning" (*Met.* 1045b29-30). And Zhu Xi says, "Principle is one. It is called destiny in terms of what Heaven has imparted to the myriad things, and is called nature in terms of what they have received from Heaven. Actually, the different names express different points of view. That is all." (*Reflections on Things at Hand*, 10)