

Questioning the One and the Many with Aristotle and Zhu Xi May Sim (College of the Holy Cross)

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 when they’re from radically disparate philosophical, historical, geographical and linguistic backgrounds?

More elaborately, even though Zhu asserts that the Principle (*li* 理) 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 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’s analysis of the “two” ultimates with Aristotle’s *ousia*/God (who is always active,⁵ and a unity⁶ that moves 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. Since both stress the oneness of being in causing the many, it 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

¹ Aristotle says, “the primary and unqualified definition (*haplôs horismos*) and the essence (*to ti ên einai*),

² RTH, 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*, (Chan, hereafter). Princeton U. Press (1963) 629, 44:6b-7a.

⁴ RTH, 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).

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 says, “Principle is one. It is called destiny in terms of what

and natures of things leads to the one question, ‘what is being’?, showing again that this is the question of being for them. If these two are agreed on the singleness of the question of being despite their different views about the one and the many, comparing them can help us understand why there’s one question of being and yet multiple manifestations of it.

Let me begin with Zhu’s first principle of nature (*tian li* 天理) or *dao* (道). Zhu speaks of a heaven-endowed nature or principle that is in all things, making them what they are, which is the form or essence of *dao*. He says, “The essence of *dao* is an all-encompassing wholeness which contains everything, and which is contained in everything.”⁸ That everything contains the principle of *dao* is clear when Zhu says, “principle is not something generated forcibly from outside; rather, the principle of *dao* is the principle which is innate in ourselves.”⁹ The pervasiveness of *dao* is evident when he says, “*Dao* exists in the world in all places and at all times, and that’s it.”¹⁰ Again, he says, “Like flying hawks and leaping fish, the substance of *dao* is everywhere. You need not forget it or help it, for the universal principle of *dao* just flows along. This is simply the way it is.”¹¹

More specifically, Zhu maintains that the *dao* in everything is one principle that is universal and the same even though its manifestations are many.¹² He says, “The universal principle of *dao* is the same, but its manifestations are different. Therefore, there is a principle for ruler-subject relationships as well as for father-son relationships.”¹³ Put otherwise, the particular principles that govern particular relationships and things are different, e.g., how sons are to relate to fathers are different from how subjects are to relate to rulers, even though they are caused by the same principle of *dao*, which effect is that things are what they are because of the principle of order. For instance, Zhu claims that Cheng I’s remark, “Humanity (*ren* 仁) is the correct principle of the world. When the correct principle is lost, there will be no order and consequently no harmony,” is too general. Instead, Zhu says, “humanity is the perfect virtue of the original mind and consequently there is the principle of nature (*tian li* 天理) in it. If the principle of nature is absent, human desires will run wild. How can there be any order or any resultant harmony?”¹⁴ Zhu means that *tian li* is ultimately responsible for any order and harmony in the human mind or the world.

Even though Aristotle has a functional equivalent of Zhu’s principle of nature in his form that causes everything to be what it is,¹⁵ unlike Zhu, Aristotle’s form is not universal and the same in everything.¹⁶ Aristotle’s form is neither an encompassing wholeness that contains the different manifestations of everything, nor is it the same form

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.” (RTH, 10)

⁸ FRTH, chapter 1, “The Essence of *Dao*,” no. 2, p. 59. All substitutions of Pinyin for Wade Giles, and minor modifications are mine.

⁹ FRTH ch. 2, “On Learning,” no. 35, p. 78.

¹⁰ FRTH, ch. 1, “The Essence of *Dao*,” no. 65, p.69.

¹¹ FRTH, ch. 1, no. 64, p. 69.

¹² FRTH, ch. 1, no. 3, p. 59.

¹³ FRTH, ch. 1, no. 74, p. 70.

¹⁴ RTH, no. 17, p. 17.

¹⁵ 1032a22-23.

¹⁶ 1033b20-22.

contained in everything. Rather, form as the principle of nature of a thing, is particular to the thing. He says, “formal [*logos*] causes coexist with their effects.”¹⁷ Form (*eidos*), for Aristotle, is the shape (*morphê*) which in a material thing or a form-matter composite, makes it what it essentially is. E.g., the shape of a plate makes the clay matter into a plate while the shape of a bowl makes it into a bowl. In each case, the form of plate or bowl is not just a manifestation of one and the same form or nature that exists in everything else. But like Zhu, form for Aristotle is the principle of order that exists in each thing that organizes it into what it essentially is.

For Aristotle, to the extent that the form that causes this plate and others can be generalized into a kind of thing, it is a universal form or definition of plate, and qua kind is common to all plates. It is this formula of plate in the craftsman's mind that causes each plate to be a plate. Aristotle says, “essence will belong to nothing except species of a genus, but to these only; for in these the predicate is not considered to be related to the subject by participation or affection, nor as an accident.”¹⁸ Put otherwise, only the species has a predicate that expresses the essence rather than its accident. The form of plate in the craftsman's mind in an artificial production, or the form of man in the parent in a natural generation, is not one in number with the generated plate or man, respectively, but one in formula or definition for Aristotle.¹⁹ He says, “Moving causes are causes in the sense of pre-existent things, but formal [*logos*] causes coexist with their effects.”²⁰ Because the form used to generate the particular thing is not one in number with the form in the generated thing, Aristotle's form is unlike Zhu's. Put otherwise, Aristotle's universal form isn't like Zhu's for it is a generalization of particular plates or men, expressing the species in a definition, rather than Zhu's principle of nature that is the Great Ultimate (*taiji*) that actually inheres in all things, or the Ultimate of nonbeing (*wuji*) which though unmanifested, contains the concrete principles of all things.

Just as Aristotle contrasts the particular form in something with its species form that is universal, let's examine Zhu's contrast between the universal principle of *dao* with the particular principles in things. Contrasting the particular principles in things with the universal principle of *dao*, Zhu says, “*Dao* means a roadway. Roughly speaking, it is that road which all men travel on. Each principle has a linear system and circumscribed limits . . . *Dao* is the Way. It has no form, though when we travel it we can see it in affairs.”²¹ The universal principle of *dao* has no form in the sense that it doesn't have a particular order, nor is it a particular path even though its essence of order in general is present in each particular principle, making each thing what it is. Zhu tells us that the principles for particular things and relationships exist before these concrete particulars, and they originate from the same source. He says,

Before the existence of things and affairs, their principles are already present. All our handlings of affairs and responses to things, however momentary, are manifestations of this principle. A track is a path on which one should travel.

¹⁷ 1070a22.

¹⁸ 1030a12-14.

¹⁹ 1033b33.

²⁰ 1070a21-22.

²¹ FRTH, ch. 1, no. 53, p. 67.

Such things as deep love on the part of the father and filial piety on the part of the son are but one track. They all come from one source.²²

In short, *dao* is the one universal principle in everything, giving rise to the particular principles that manifest the one order of everything.

Aristotle would agree with Zhu about the determinateness and limits of his particular principles specifying the particular orders of everything as this is akin to the way that particular forms work. He would even agree that the principles of particular things must in a sense exist before the concrete things. E.g., the form of bowl must already exist in a craftsman's mind before he can make a clay bowl. Likewise, the form of man must already exist in a parent before a child can be generated. But he'd disagree with Zhu that the particular principle of the generated thing is the same as, or one in number, with the principle in the craftsman's mind, the parent, or the *taiji*. Rather, Aristotle holds that the particular form that organizes each particular thing is individual to the thing. In his words, "the causes of things in the same species are different, not in species, but because the causes of individuals are different: your matter and form and moving cause being different from mine, although in their universal formula they are the same."²³

Aristotle would also disagree with Zhu's characterization of the universal principle of *dao* as being devoid of any form or order even though it is the cause of order in all things. Whether we compare Zhu's *dao* to Aristotle's universal species form, or more appropriately, to Aristotle's first cause or unmoved mover/God, their accounts are quite different. Whilst Zhu thinks that his *dao/li* cannot have any form in order to be the encompassing wholeness that contains the particular principles of all things, or inhere in them, Aristotle's species form is determinate and limited. Only by being limited can universal form be definable to specify the essence of something. An examination of Zhu's *dao/taiji/li*, and its functional equivalence in Aristotle, i.e., God, will reveal more differences than similarities.

Just as Zhu's *dao*, Aristotle's God is the cause of the natures/substances of all things. They differ in that *dao* acts as a cause by inhering in everything and containing their concrete principles even before they exist, whilst this isn't God's way. Rather, God works by being the primary substance that causes everything else; by being an unmoved mover that is an actuality that exists necessarily. Unlike *dao* that is directly related to everything by inhering in each, Aristotle's God is indirectly related to its effects by being transcendent. For concrete things that are combinations of form and matter to exist for Aristotle, we need some sort of matter, form, and an efficient cause that instills the form into the matter to make the resulting thing. Additionally, there must be something else, that is neither the matter nor form of the thing, but which causes the motion, say, of the efficient cause. He says,

The cause of a man is (i) his elements: fire and earth as matter, and the particular form; (ii) some external formal cause, viz. his father; and besides these (iii) the sun and the ecliptic, which are neither matter nor form nor privation nor identical in form with him, but cause motion.²⁴

²² RTH, no. 32, p. 26.

²³ 1071a27-29.

²⁴ 1071a14-18.

More specifically, the sun and movements of the heavenly bodies are responsible for the generation, growth and motion of everything in the universe. However, because these celestial bodies are themselves moved, Aristotle thinks that there must be an unmoved mover, a first complete reality (*to prôton entelecheia*),²⁵ a principle (*archên*) which substance (*ousia*) is an actuality (*energeia*) that exists eternally²⁶ and necessarily, to move them. Aristotle insists on the actuality of an unmoved mover to explain the movement of the universe for he denies that a mover that is moved can be the first principle. This is because a moved mover, like the first heaven (*prôtos ouranos*) requires a mover to move it.²⁷

Apart from being an unmoved mover that causes motion in the universe and everything in it, and is thus prior in causality and time, Aristotle's God also causes by being the one primary substance by which all other substances are defined, for they are more or less united as substances depending on how nearly they can approximate God's characteristics. Even though physical substances have the sources of motion in themselves, they aren't prior in motion and causality because they depend on a prior mover. Similarly, although mathematical substances are immovable, they aren't like God for they aren't capable of separability or independence, and hence cannot be primary substances. Only God satisfies the conditions of immovability and separability required of a primary substance. God is the one substance that is most stable and definable because He is immovable, prior in cause, time and separability. Consequently, God is the primary substance that is most knowable.²⁸ The conditions that characterize God's existence are the standards of oneness by which we measure the substantiality of all things. Things that are more knowable, stable, and definable accord more to the one (*pros hen*) God, and thus, are more substantial than others that aren't. With these characteristics in mind, God and *taiji* differ in that whilst God is most definable, *taiji*, being without limits and formless, is not definable. Aristotle's understanding of God as the *pros hen* cause of substances is also different from Zhu's *taiji* since the latter is neither separate from everything in which it inheres nor immovable.

More elaborately, since Aristotle's unmoved mover is transcendent and unmoved, it is different from Zhu's *taiji* which moves. *Taiji* relies on *qi* (氣 material energy that is common to mind and matter) for its activity. Zhu says, "The Great Ultimate [*taiji*] exists only in the *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽, and cannot be separated from them."²⁹ He explains the relation between *taiji* and the *yin* and *yang qi* in the process of generation as follows:

Principle attaches itself to *yin* and *yang* as a man sits astride a horse. As soon as *yin* and *yang* produce the Five Agents (*wuxing* 五行), they are . . . fixed by physical nature and are . . . differentiated into individual things each with its nature. But the Great Ultimate is in all of them."³⁰

Aristotle would say that if *taiji* relies on the *yin* and *yang qi*/matter to exist and generate, Zhu's *taiji* can't be the first principle. Zhu's system, for Aristotle, would look more like a composite substance because of the combination of *taiji* with the material *qi*.

²⁵ 1071a37.

²⁶ 1071b20-21.

²⁷ See 1072a21-25.

²⁸ 1028a31-b3.

²⁹ Chan, 45: 1a, p. 630.

³⁰ Chan, 49: 14a, p. 641.

A further difference is that Zhu seems to rely on matter to distinguish things since he talks about the same principle inhering in everything. Apart from a *taiji* that can't exist without *yin* and *yang qi*, Zhu also says that the kind of *qi* in which principles must inhere to become active is the mind (*xin* 心). He says, "The mind embraces all principles and all principles are complete in this single entity, the mind,"³¹ and "There must be mind before nature can be gotten hold of and put into operation."³² Despite the fact that the same principle of nature completely inheres in everything, only human beings who have mastered their *qi* and can control their desires can access it completely. What inhibits anything's complete access to principle is its *qi*. As I put it elsewhere,

Something's limited access to *li* 理 is due to its *qi*. Depending on the clarity or turbidity, purity or impurity of *qi*, something will be more or less obstructed from *li*. In spite of how men, animals and things are born with the same *tian li*, the *qi* of things and animals obstruct their access to *li*; they can never penetrate this obstruction. Zhu says, "The principle received by things is precisely the same degree as the material force received by them. . . . the physical constitution of dogs and horses being what it is, they know how to do only certain things."³³

Contrary to Zhu's view in which *qi* individuates things and obstructs their ability to be the principle of nature (*tian li*) that inheres in them, Aristotle's view is that both form and matter individuate things. For instance, the form and matter that makes a man are unique to him.

Nor would Zhu's Ultimate of nonbeing (*wuji*) be the functional equivalent to Aristotle's God. This is because even though *wuji* is independent of matter, it is also inactive. On the contrary, Aristotle's God is always active in thinking of himself as He is the best object of thought; he won't be independent and prior if His thoughts were of things other than Himself.

Despite the differences between Zhu's *taiji* and Aristotle's God as the first principles, respectively, they are similar in claiming that there's one first principle and in attempting to explain how it causes everything. Both are agreed that the first principle must be prior to everything, be immaterial, and yet affect matter to create the many material things. These agreements show that the question of being can be summed up in the question 'what is being'? This question is in turn related to questions such as: 'Is being one or many?', 'why is there something rather than nothing?', and 'how is being related to the many'? For both authors, what being is not only raises, but provides the answers to these questions. E.g., because being is ultimate, it must be one. Because being exists, there is something rather than nothing. Because being is good and immaterial, it manifests itself in the many material things that exist because of being, and are good because they share in being's goodness.

More elaborately, Zhu's principle (*li*) that inheres in everything is "invariably good."³⁴ He says, "The nature is the same as principle. Traced to its source, none of the

³¹ Chan, 2: 4b, p. 606.

³² Chan, 42:6b-7a, p. 616.

³³ Sim, "From Metaphysics to Environmental Ethics: Aristotle or Zhu Xi?" Chapter 6 in *Democracy, Ecological Integrity and International Law*, eds. Ron Engel, Laura Westra & Klaus Bosselmann (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), p. 77-90.

³⁴ Chan, p. 597, Zhu Xi's commentary on Cheng Hao's view of nature, *I-shu*, 1: 7b.

principles in the world is not good.”³⁵ Because *li* is good and responsible for the nature of everything by inhering in them, everything is governed by moral principles. He asserts, “That which is inherent in things is principle. That by which things are managed is moral principles.”³⁶ Again, “Of the thousands and tens of thousands of human beings and all things, there is none independent of these moral principles.”³⁷ Because the same principle of nature exists in everything for Zhu, everything, regardless of whether it is human, is endowed with moral principles. However, since only the human mind has the kind of *qi* that can access the principle of nature completely, it is man’s function to purify his nature in order to know the *li* and act according to the moral principles. Specifically, because man is endowed with the moral principles of *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi*³⁸ as his substance, his proper function is to feel commiseration, shame, deference and compliance, and act by distinguishing between right and wrong, respectively. In short, human beings are to act morally because their minds are “basically good.”³⁹ Zhu holds that just as the mind of Heaven and Earth produce things without ceasing, man’s mind is to use these four virtues of *ren*, *yi*, *li* and *zhi* to “love people gently and to benefit things.”⁴⁰ Human beings then, for Zhu, being endowed with the particular moral principles, have the function of acting morally toward other human beings and things in the universe. What’s normative for human actions stems from the same source of normativity for heaven and earth’s function and that is the first principle of *li/taiji* that is invariably good.

By the same token, Aristotle’s unmoved mover “is necessarily [*anankê*] good [*kalôs*] and is thus the first principle [*archê*].”⁴¹ He continues,

Life belongs to God. For the actuality of thought is life [*nou energeia zôê*], and God is that actuality [*hê energeia*]; and the essential actuality of God is life most good and eternal. We hold, then, that God is a living being [*zôon*], eternal [*aidion*], most good [*ariston*]; and therefore life and a continuous eternal existence belong to God; for that is what God is.⁴²

Similar to Zhu’s *li*, as the norm of goodness for everything, Aristotle’s God, being life most eternal and good, is the standard of goodness for everything. Aristotle’s God is the one end toward which everything is ordered. When considering whether the supreme good/God is related to the universe as something separate and independent, or as the whole which parts are ordered, Aristotle says that it is both, even though it’s more the former, i.e., God is separate and independent. Comparing God’s relation to the universe to that of a general to his army, Aristotle maintains that just as the general is the reason for the order of the army but doesn’t depend on the army at all, God too is responsible for the order of the universe while being independent of it. Just as Zhu assigns a special status to human beings for being able to know the *taiji* and act according to the moral principles endowed in them by *taiji*, Aristotle too privileges human beings in knowing the first principle and achieving the good because of their nature. Only human beings have

³⁵ Chan, p. 606, 2: 2a. See *RTH*, ch. 1, no. 38, p. 28.

³⁶ *RTH*, ch. 1, no. 15, p. 16.

³⁷ Chan, p. 617, 42:13a–b.

³⁸ Humaneness, appropriateness, ritual propriety and knowledge, respectively.

³⁹ *FRTH* no. 16, p. 107.

⁴⁰ Chan, p. 595.

⁴¹ 1072b11–12.

⁴² 1072b27–31.

the speculative part of the soul (*nous*) that is immortal and separable, and hence is most like God when it contemplates eternal truths. Even though things like fishes, birds and plants are also ordered to God as the one end, they aren't ordered toward Him like human beings. Aristotle illustrates the difference in the ordering of human beings and these other creatures to God by appealing to the order in a household. He says that in a household, free persons "have the least liberty to act at random, and have all or most of their actions preordained for them, whereas the slaves and animals have little common responsibility and act for the most part at random; for the nature of each class is a principle as we have described."⁴³ In short, because human nature consists in the rational part of the soul, which is divided into the speculative part and the deliberative part, the human function is to know the truth with the speculative part, and perform right and good actions with the deliberative part.

Two differences between Aristotle's and Zhu's accounts of the human substance and function are: (i) Aristotle separates the theoretical/speculative part of the soul from the deliberative part so that the former is directed at the truth or falsehood of invariable objects whilst the latter is directed at good actions concerning variable objects. In contrast, Zhu doesn't separate theory from practice as he thinks that the investigation into things in the universe will enable us to know their concrete principles and issue in proper actions. Because the same *li* inheres in everything, knowledge of the concrete principles of things can also lead to knowledge of the moral principles in human beings. Thus, theory and practice are continuous for Zhu whilst being separate for Aristotle. (ii) Whereas the perfection of the deliberative part of the soul results in *phronêsis* that is restricted to moral actions toward other human beings for Aristotle, the possession of the four moral principles (*ren, yi, li & zhi*) for Zhu leads not only to virtuous actions toward human beings, but also toward everything else in the universe. Thus, Zhu's view of the function of morality is different from Aristotle's in being more cosmic in scope.

In conclusion, I've shown that despite the differences between Aristotle's and Zhu's specific views regarding their first principles, they agree that these first principles are prior to, and the causes of, everything else. Each offers an account of how his first principle answers the question of what being is, and how it relates to the many in the universe. Ultimately, apart from explaining why everything in the universe exists, what being is for each also accounts for the nature of each thing and what is good for each. Whereas Zhu answers these questions by asserting that the *li/taiji* inheres in everything, Aristotle answers them by positing a transcendent God who moves without itself being moved. Each author's answers results in a different account of knowledge of the first principle, as well as a different account of human actions. Nevertheless, what is clear from comparing them is that there is a single question of being for both. The answer to this single question—"what is being?" is also the answer to other questions that can be asked about being.

⁴³ 1075a20-23.