One and Many
One and Many

a comparative study of Plato’s philosophy and Daoism represented by Ge Hong

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Submitted in total fulfilment of the requirements
of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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and
Melbourne Institute of Asian Languages and Societies

The University of Melbourne
To my father
who taught me the real meaning of Confucian genealogy

and my mother and wife
who taught me Daoist indeterminate action
Declaration

This is to certify that

(i) the thesis comprises only my original work towards the PhD except where indicated in the Introduction,
(ii) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,
(iii) the thesis is 150,000 words in length as approved by RHD Committee, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies.

Ji Zhang

This thesis is printed on acid-free paper.
Abstract

Daoism is often read either within the Chinese context or through Western eyes. This thesis, however, is a dialogue between Western philosophy and Chinese Daoism centred on reading Plato through Ge Hong. By selecting the topic of the “one and many”, the thesis investigates the question of what reality fundamentally is in the context of change. Although the topic stands as one of the oldest philosophical problems, datable to the pre-Socratic philosophers, the issue of unity and plurality is also at the heart of Daoism. In comparative context, I argue that the “one and many” is neither a logical problem as Parmenides frames it, nor a metaphysical problem such as Plato posits in his dualism of an unchanging world of immaterial being over a changeable world of material becoming. Rather, the “one and many” is an ontological problem.

In Part One, this argument takes the form of textual and historical studies along two lines: the “vertical” comparing thinkers in a single tradition and the “horizontal” contrasting between traditions. Along the “vertical” line, on the one hand, Ge Hong’s concepts of Xuan and Qi in the Inner Chapters are compared with Yang Xiong’s system of Xuan and the philosophy of Nothing in the contemporary Xuanxue, and the doctrine of shenxian is discussed against the background of Confucian ethics and contrasted with Plato’s intellectual enlightenment of the soul as the highest good in his Republic and Phaedo. On the other hand, it addresses the question of why Plato rejects pre-Socratic materialism, and how Plato argues his doctrine of immaterial Forms. These historical studies lead to the “horizontal” contrast between Ge Hong’s relational ontology incorporating Xuan and Qi with Plato’s causal ontology as being and becoming.

In Part Two, the discussion begins with two distinctive propositions: Daoist “not-being with being” and Platonic “being without not-being”. After exploring Plato’s misconception of not-being, the discussion returns to Ge Hong’s idea of the Dark. I argue that Daoist cosmogony, moving “from nothing into being”, offers an evolutionary solution to Plato’s problem of change “from being to becoming”. This argument brings in two creation theories. Ge Hong’s cosmogony is a spontaneous process, a genealogical “one and many”, through which the Dao unfolds itself in its progeny – the myriad things. Plato’s doctrine of creation is a causational “one and many”, according
to which the world is a closed system in equilibrium, animated by eternal Reason. Behind these theories, there are distinctive natural philosophies: those of an alchemical Nature and a mathematical universe. To assess the implication of the ontological one for the natural studies of the many, comparative analysis takes account of Ge Hong’s instrumental alchemy and his astronomical writings in the Jinshu, and Plato’s critique of Empedocles’ materialism through Pythagorean idealism in his Timaeus.
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