

IS CHINESE COSMOLOGY METAPHYSICS?

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Abstract: In literature about Chinese philosophy, there are two prevailing views: (1) Chinese philosophy lacks interest in metaphysical pursuit and is preoccupied with practical affairs; and (2) There is a rich cosmology in Chinese thought. However, when we put these two views together, we get a disturbing and puzzling result: (3) Chinese cosmology is not metaphysics. This paper seeks to address the question “is Chinese cosmology metaphysics?” by asking questions about the following three topics. (a) Is there a shared Chinese cosmology that is unique to Chinese tradition but is sharply different from Greek cosmology? (b) Precisely what is the nature of the relation between Chinese ethics and Chinese cosmology? (c) Chinese cosmology and the issue of being. Although a full discussion of the issue is beyond the scope of one paper, I will try to identify some major problems in outline. My approach is through a comparison between Chinese cosmology and Greek cosmology/metaphysics.

Introduction: Problem and Approach

IN LITERATURE about Chinese philosophy, there are two prevailing views: (1) Chinese philosophy lacks interest in metaphysical pursuit and is preoccupied with practical affairs; and (2) There is a rich cosmology in Chinese thought.

Let me call (1) the “lack of metaphysics” view, and (2) the “rich cosmology” view. The position (2), the “rich cosmology” view, cannot be mistaken. Developed in the classical texts such as *Mencius*, *Xunzi*, *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi*, *Guanzi*, *The Book of Changes*, *Huainanzi* etc, Chinese cosmology has contributed many influential theories, such as that of *tian* (Heaven), *Dao*, *Ying/yang*, five phases, *qi*, the cyclical changes, *tian-ren ho-yi* (“the unity of *tian* and man”), and so on. The view (1), the “lack of metaphysics” view, is also strongly justified. It is shared by those who defend the philosophical nature of Chinese philosophy (Fung, 1952, vol.1, 1-6), as well as those who reject the philosophical nature of Chinese thought (Zeller, 1997, 2).¹ There are also prominent comparativists who believe that the lack of theoretical interest in metaphysical pursuits is indeed one of the major differences between Chinese thought and Western philosophy (e.g. G. E. R. Lloyd, 1990, 124).

However, when we put these two views together, the result appears to be: (3) Chinese cosmology is not metaphysics.

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¹ Indeed, for those who accuse Chinese thought of not being a real philosophy, what they actually mean is that Chinese philosophy does not study metaphysical questions.

Since Chinese cosmology expresses a Chinese view of reality, the thesis (3) is surely disturbing and puzzling. It raises issues about the precise distinction between metaphysics and cosmology, and also the philosophical nature of Chinese cosmology. Yet although the relationship between Chinese cosmology and Western metaphysics is a topic of central importance, we have not seen much serious study in this area. Instead, we frequently read in literature confusing expressions such as “the anthropo-cosmological foundation,” or “the cosmological-metaphysical foundation.” Does “a cosmological foundation” amount to “a metaphysical foundation?”

One reason why this important issue has attracted little attention is that, in recent years, the dominant approach to Chinese cosmology or Chinese philosophy has been to emphasize its peculiar sensibility or rationality. In the English-speaking West, the trend has been to show that the West’s own notion of philosophy is provincial and culturally contingent and that Chinese thought should be understood in its own terms. In mainland China, scholars in the past decade have been debating the issue of “the legitimacy of Chinese Philosophy.” Is “philosophy” understood in the Western sense appropriate to understand Chinese traditional thinking? When Western concepts and theories are used to examine Chinese classics, is the result “philosophy of China” (i.e. philosophy that is discovered in China) or “philosophy in China” (i.e. Western philosophy in a Chinese mask)?

There is no question that we must understand Chinese philosophy in terms of its own questions and approaches. It is also definitely our goal to identify Chinese philosophy’s distinct contributions and its alternative perspectives to philosophy. However, we have to conduct in-depth research to ascertain whether many apparent or alleged differences are truly the case, and whether these differences are “in types” or “in degrees.” It is not productive if we treat the issue of the distinctness as a matter of ideology. Over-emphasizing the difference between Chinese cosmology and Western metaphysics will distort our understanding of Chinese cosmology, will mislead scholars of Western Philosophy to treat Chinese philosophy as a different genre of thought, and will seriously hamper constructive dialogues between Chinese cosmology and Western metaphysics.

This paper seeks to address the question “is Chinese cosmology metaphysics?” A full discussion of the issue is beyond the scope of one paper. What I try to do is to identify some major problems in outline and my approach. My approach is through a comparison between Chinese cosmology and Greek cosmology/metaphysics. This approach is adopted for the following two major reasons. First, to effectively answer the question under investigation, we need to have a recognized notion of what metaphysics is. Yet in contemporary philosophy ‘metaphysics’ becomes a term with ambiguous edges. In contrast, Greek metaphysics provides us with a relatively uncontroversial framework. Metaphysics was born in ancient Greece, and it is Aristotle who defines it as the central area of subject matter in philosophy. Second, Greek philosophy also has a rich tradition of cosmology, as a main part of its “physics” or

“natural philosophy.” How metaphysics and natural philosophy are related in Greek philosophy should provide a vantage of point from which to see the nature of Chinese cosmology.

In pursuing this comparison, I use, among others, the “mirror” method, which is appropriated from Aristotle who uses the metaphor of a mirror to explain what real friendship is.

[W]hen we wish to see our own face, we do so by looking into the mirror, in the same way when we wish to know ourselves we can obtain that knowledge by looking at our friend. For the friend is, as we assert, a second self. If, then, it is pleasant to know oneself, and it is not possible to know this without having someone else for a friend, the self-sufficing man will require friendship in order to know himself” (*Magna Moralia*, 1213a20-26).

A friend is a second self, and can be used as an essential and indispensable mirror for one to know oneself better and to obtain self-knowledge. Taking Greek metaphysical/cosmological traditions and Chinese cosmology as mirrors for each other leads us to reflect upon the traditional roots of both traditions, to examine their otherwise unexamined presuppositions, and to generate alternative perspectives to determine why each side proceeds in the way it does. One main task of philosophy is to uncover hidden assumptions, and cross-cultural philosophical comparison has a lot to contribute in this regard. Furthermore, by promoting mutual understanding, comparison will also help philosophy transcend cultural boundaries and reach genuine insights that are not culturally bound.

In specific, I ask questions in the following three topics.

(1) Is there a shared Chinese cosmology that is unique to Chinese tradition but is sharply different from Greek cosmology? In literature on Chinese cosmology, the “prevailing view” focuses on its difference from Western cosmology. It claims that Chinese cosmology is immanent and organic, and it lacks all sorts of dichotomies such as essence/appearance, universal/particular, mind/body, reason/emotion, being/becoming, knowledge/opinion, fact/value, substance/attribute, etc., which are characteristic of Western metaphysics. This prevailing view should be examined in order to determine whether the alleged differences between Chinese cosmology and Western metaphysics are tenable.

(2) Chinese cosmology and the issue of the metaphysical foundation of Chinese ethics. Chinese cosmology is said to be the foundation of Chinese ethics. Confucius is said to have no interest in metaphysical issues, and after Confucius there is not a development of metaphysics that differs from cosmology. In Greek philosophy, Socrates, who initiated Greek ethics, also shows no interest in metaphysics. Yet Plato and Aristotle quickly develop systems in which metaphysics and epistemology constitute the core. What is it that Chinese philosophy does not see a similar development? Precisely what is the nature of the relation between Chinese ethics and Chinese cosmology? We should be enlightened if we examine how Greek ethics is related to its metaphysical foundation.

(3) Chinese cosmology and the issue of being. One major reason to say that Chinese philosophy does not have metaphysics is that there is no theory of being. Metaphysics is defined as “the science of being qua being” in Aristotle. We need to study why Chinese thought lacks a theory of being, and how it affects Chinese cosmology. It would be helpful for this purpose if we examine the relation between cosmology and metaphysics of being Greek philosophy.

In the following, I outline, regarding each of these three topics, what the current situations are, what questions are raised, and offer some perspectives. Hopefully, the following synoptic discussion identifies some serious issues and leads to some in-depth studies.

I. About the uniqueness of Chinese cosmology

“The prevailing view” of Chinese cosmology in current scholarship claims that China had a radically different cosmology from that seen in the West. The nutshell of this view can be summarized as follows. (1) In contrast to the Judeo-Christian God which creates the world, Chinese cosmology does not admit apparent distinction between the order itself and what orders it. It is immanent and naturalist, and is not interested in explaining the origin and birth of the cosmos *per se*. The myriad things are not the creatures of *tian*, but are constitutive of it. The universe is a spontaneous and self-generating system. (2) In contrast to the dualism of creator and human creature in the Western tradition, the classical Chinese emphasizes the continuum between the human being and deity, or between the human and the cosmos. Ancient Chinese view advocates *tian-ren ho-yi* (“the unity of *tian* and man”) and has avoided the tensions between gods and human found in the West. (3) Furthermore, numerous scholars claim that whereas Western thinking is primarily “analytical,” the Chinese cosmology is dominated by “correlative” thinking (Marcel Granet, 1934; J. Needham, 1956, V. 2; A. C. Graham, 1986; Hall /Ames 1995).

Related to such a reading, some scholars claim that Chinese cosmology is not related to the issue of transcendence. Whereas the notion of transcendence is profoundly important in the Western intellectual tradition, it is not an appropriate category for “defining the uniqueness of Chinese thought.” (Hall/Ames, 1998, 221)

To identify the unique form of Chinese sensibility and rationality is supremely important. However, it is questionable whether Chinese cosmological tradition is as homogeneous as the “prevailing view” holds. In my view, the “prevailing view” overemphasizes the East/West differences, and has confused between “the differences in kinds” with “the differences in degrees.” It is not productive to impose the Western framework upon Chinese thought; yet it is equally counter-productive to rule out possible common grounds for fruitful dialogues.

I noticed with great interest that Michael J. Puett has shown that the immanent cosmology is not a universally shared position in classical Chinese philosophy, and should be a controversial subject. His study demonstrates an alternative cosmology in ancient China according to

which the world is “not a spontaneous cosmos but one organized and controlled by spirits.” (Puett, 2002, 3, 118).

Indeed, even the immanent cosmology is not really unique to Chinese tradition. Aristotle’s theory of the Prime Mover (PM) in the *Metaphysics* [henceforth abbreviated as *Meta*] xii and in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (henceforth abbreviated as *NE*) x, for example, has an aspect of immanence. Aristotle uses interchangeably the Unmoved (or Prime) Mover and God. God’s main function is to cause motion, more precisely, the continuity of motion from one substance to another. In Aristotle’s world, the motion of a single natural individual is explained in terms of the thing’s own inner form or nature. It is to provide a rational account of continuous activity in each species and the order of the *kosmos* that Aristotle introduces the PM. The PM imparts motion not because it is an active agent which causes motion in a physical way, but because it is “the object of desire and the object of thought,” and “it produces motion by being loved.” (*Meta.* 1072a25-29, b3) All things are moved by the PM because each of them has a natural desire or impulse for being eternal and for going beyond one’s short existence. The continuous motion is not by an external cause that stays at the end of the process. Rather, it is the actualization of this intrinsic pursuit for eternity. Just as the above characterized Chinese immanent cosmology, Aristotle’s PM involves no divine creation or divine providence.

Furthermore, just as Chinese tradition advocates the continuum between human beings and Heaven, there is also a continuum between human beings and God in Aristotle. For Aristotle, a human being, as a part of nature, must also be attracted by the PM. Yet a human being stands out over other animals because she has a much nobler and higher road to immortality than reproduction. This higher road is contemplation. A contemplative life is one that is devoted to the exercise of theoretical rationality. Contemplation, the highest human activity, is also what characterizes God. “The activity of God, which surpasses all others in blessedness, must be contemplative.” (*NE.* 1178b21-2) In contemplation, we are in the same state as God, although God is always in that state, and human beings can be there only for a limited time. (*Meta.* 1072b24) Clearly, in Aristotle, the fulfillment of what is genuinely human is a process of moving towards divinity. This process does not lead towards an external goal, and it does not consist in following the orders of some external deities. Rather, it is the actualization of what is divine in us. There is no ontological gap between humans and God insofar as contemplative activity is concerned.

The demonstration that the immanent cosmology is neither the only trend nor unique to Chinese thought can help us critically examine the “prevailing view” in the field. The recognition that Chinese cosmology does not have the assumed wide gulf in conceptual structures with Western philosophy enables us to fruitfully open the dialogues between Chinese cosmology and Western metaphysics/cosmology, and objectively assess the strength and weakness of Chinese cosmology.

II. The foundation of ethics: cosmological or metaphysical?

The “lack of metaphysics” view, to a great extent, is related to Confucius’ way of doing philosophy. Confucius is not interested in what is beyond human life and limits his discussions to things within the bounds of practical human concerns. “The topics the Master did not speak of were prodigies, force, disorder and gods.” (*Analects* 7:21) “You do not understand even life. How can you understand death?” (*Analects* 11:12) He adopts a pragmatic attitude towards spiritual beings: “to keep one’s distance from the gods and spirits while showing them reverence.” (*Analects* 6:22) “You are not able even to serve man. How can you serve the spirits?” (*Analects* 11:12) In Joseph Needham’s evaluation, the Confucian “intense concentration of interest upon human social life to the exclusion of non-human phenomena negated all investigation of Things, as opposed to Affairs,” and this attitude “injured the germs of science.” (1956, vol.2, 12) It is not clear that Confucian ethics adversely affects the development of theoretical sciences in Chinese intellectual history, but its lack of interest in pure theoretical inquiry is undeniable.

Nevertheless, Confucian ethics is usually said to have a cosmological foundation, given the role of Heaven (*tian*) in his ethics. His ideal life is the embodiment of Heaven’s way. Even though Confucius himself does not make this aspect of his thought clearly, some scholars insist that Confucius must have presupposed the sort of cosmology which is “presupposed by the family of philosophers contemporary with Confucius and the principal disciples of Confucius.” (Hall/Ames, 1987, 198) The cosmology meant here is one that the “prevailing view” in the previous section describes.

In Greek philosophy, Socrates turns philosophy away from the study of nature to the study of moral issues. Cicero has famously stated that Socrates is “the first to call philosophy down from the heavens and set her in the cities of men and bring her also into their homes and compel her to ask questions about life and morality and things good and evil.” (*Disputations*, V.4.10-11) Socrates’ concentration on ethics is also testified by Aristotle (*Meta.* 987b1-3, *Parts of Animals*, 642a25-31). Like Confucius, Socrates is not interested in metaphysics. In the *Apology*, he repeatedly says that he does not know whether death is a good or an evil thing (29a7-8, 37b5-7, 32d1-2). Moreover, he is agnostic and unconcerned about the post-mortem fate of the soul (*Apology*, 40c-41; 42a3-5).

Yet, after Socrates, Plato and Aristotle quickly proceed to construct metaphysical systems. Despite the influence of Socrates, philosophy is not merely moral philosophy among the Greeks after him.

Here we have an interesting contrast: Both Socrates and Confucius show little interest in metaphysics and both focus on ethics. Yet in Greek philosophy, Socratic ethics is given a metaphysical foundation in Plato. Plato, in examining the metaphysical assumptions of Socrates’ life and philosophy, believes that our practical knowledge of how to live should be supported by a theoretical understanding of the world of Forms. Forms must be grasped by the rational soul, but they are objective

realities independent of our beliefs and thinking. This metaphysical foundation is different from the pre-Socratic natural philosophy. That is, what Plato provides is a metaphysical foundation, not a cosmological one.

In contrast, in Chinese philosophy, after Confucius, his followers develop a cosmological and psychological foundation such as what we found in *the Doctrine of the Mean* and *the Mencius*. Other rival schools also develop cosmologies. The ethics has been the center in classical Chinese philosophy, and there has been no similar development to what Plato did for Socrates' ethics. Is it because of the apparent differences between ancient Chinese cosmology and Platonic theory of Forms that scholars of Chinese philosophy often use expressions such as "anthropo-cosmological foundation" rather than "metaphysical foundation?"

This contrast leads us to ask the following questions: how does Plato expand Socratic ethics to metaphysics? And why is it the case that a similar expansion did not occur in Chinese philosophy? A full understanding of the contrast involves historical, linguistic, scientific, social and anthropological studies of each tradition. Here, I would like to point out, one major puzzle in the internal philosophical development immediately after Socrates and Confucius.

The motto of Socrates' philosophy is to "take care of your soul" and the soul is considered as the seat of all the virtues. Yet Socrates never theorizes about the metaphysical nature of the soul. What is the soul? Is it an entity or a property of some entity? Does it go through the process of generation and corruption? Socrates also does not articulate the soul/body dichotomy. To a large extent it must be because of these theoretical issues that Plato is driven to examine the immortality of the soul in the *Phaedo*. Our practical knowledge of how to live should be supported by a theoretical understanding of the world. It is through such an examination that the theory of Forms, virtue as purification, the method of hypothesis, learning as recollection, the soul/body dichotomy, the identity of the true self, etc. are introduced and examined. In other words, the proof for the immortality of the soul brings up most elements in Plato's enterprise of metaphysics. In the end, Socrates' "taking care of the soul" is set on the ground of the theory of Forms. Plato in the *Phaedo* explores on the level of metaphysics and epistemology what Socrates' examination implied or presupposed.

Confucius considers filial piety as one of his keys virtues. Being filially pious requires one to observe the rites when one's parents pass away. (*Analects* 2:5, 17: 21) Given the role of the sacrificial rites in his thought, it would be natural for Confucius to take seriously the existence of the spirits (and hence the immortality of the soul after death). Yet, as mentioned above, he has no interest in examining the nature of spirits other than taking a practical stance. The founder of Mohism, Mozi, is a fierce critic of Confucius. He points out a tension in Confucius' ethics between the requirement of mourning rituals/sacrificial ceremonies on the one hand, and the agnostic attitude towards the existence of the spirits on the other. The *Mozi* text recorded a conversation between Mozi and a Confucian named Kongmengzi. Kongmengzi holds both that

“There are no ghosts and spirits,” and that “an excellent person must learn the sacrificial rituals.” To this Mozi responds:

To hold that there are no ghosts but to learn sacrificial rites, is like learning the rites for treating the guests though there are no guests, or like preparing the net for fishing though there are no fish (*Mozi*, 12:48).

The tension Mozi reveals also applies to Confucius to a great extent. Without a commitment to the existence of the spirits, the sacrificial rituals appear to be empty. The issue is serious for the ethics of Confucius, given its emphasis on the virtue of filial piety.

Since Mozi is one of Mencius’ two main opponents, one might naturally expect Mencius to address the issue of the existence of the spirits, and thus inquires into the problem of the immortality of the soul. Mencius does emphasize ancestral worship, and he describes as “spirits” (*shen*) the kind of people who are higher than sages and are beyond ordinary understanding (*Mencius*, 7b:25). Nevertheless, he does not provide a discussion of the nature of spirits and does not even touch the topic of the immortality of the soul. Since the immortality of the soul is one of the two key points in Plato’s metaphysical development of Socrates’ ethics (the other is the Form), Mencius’ silence on this point is of special interest in our understanding of how Chinese philosophy develops. I think an in-depth comparative study of this and other related issues should help raise many significant insights for the development of Chinese cosmology.

III. Cosmology and Greek Metaphysics of Being

Although Greek philosophy has a rich tradition of natural philosophy, with cosmology at its center, it also gives birth to Western metaphysics. The most important question of Greek metaphysics is the problem of being (ontology, which is usually synonymous with general metaphysics, means literally a theory (*logos*) about “*onto*”, the participle stem of the Greek verb ‘to be’). Aristotle has explicitly stated that the problem of being is “indeed the question which, both now and of old, has always (*aei*) been raised, and always (*aei*) been the subject of doubt.” (*Meta.* 1028b2-4)

In contrast, Chinese philosophy has a rich tradition of cosmology, yet the question of being has never been a subject of its philosophical reflection. This phenomenon itself becomes a major puzzle. It invites at least the following questions: (a) Why does Chinese Philosophy lack a theory of being (ontology)? As mentioned earlier, the lack of being might be one of the major reasons for the “lack of metaphysics” view. (b) To what extent does the lack of a theory of being affect the metaphysical nature of Chinese cosmology?

For the first question, there are at least two approaches. One is in terms of the characteristic of ancient Chinese language, and the second is

to examine how Greek metaphysics develops from cosmological discussion.

To explain the lack of the theory of 'being' in Chinese philosophy in terms of the features of Chinese language has been developed by several scholars. (Graham, 1967; Tsu-Lin Mei's 1961; Yu, 1999). Ontology is related to the verb 'to be' a characteristic of Indo-European languages. The fundamental distinctions between individual and universal, and between subject and attribute are established on the analysis of predication ("S is P"). In contrast, the verb 'to be' (in Chinese 'shi') was not used as a copula in the period of the Hundred Schools. Linguists have been debating whether 'shi' as a copula appears in the Han dynasty (206 B.C.--220 A.D) or in the period of the Five Dynasties (907-960 A.D). In any case, properties of subject-expressions and of predicate-expressions in English cannot be applied to the ancient Chinese that the pre-Qin philosophers used. That seems to have explained why so many ontological dichotomies did not figure in Chinese philosophy. Indeed, even in modern Chinese 'shi' is used as a copula, there has been a great difficulty in translating 'being' into Chinese, because the verb in Chinese does not have participles, and cannot be used as a name.

If this interpretation based on the linguistic feature is correct, there remains more works to do to figure out its implications. Does it suggest that the metaphysics of being and the various ontological dichotomies in Western metaphysics are conditioned by the language it employs and are therefore relative, provincial rather than universal? What lesions can we draw regarding the nature of metaphysics and the relation between philosophy and language? Moreover, is Chinese cosmology related to the peculiar features of ancient Chinese? If so, how?

Greek philosophy begins with cosmology. How then does it develop into metaphysics? The tradition of natural philosophy developed by Thales, Anaximedes, Anaximenes, Heraclitus, etc. held that various things in the universe are generated from some intrinsically uniform matter and its rarefaction/condensation. The tradition, however, was challenged by Parmenides who believes that natural philosophy, although assuming a changing cosmos, cannot account for the phenomenon of change. In daily experience, we experience flux, change, motion and generation. Yet, according to Parmenides, the senses that suggest the reality of change are misleading and deceptive, and that the natural world is not as we observe. The truth can only be revealed by the power of reasoning. "The same thing is there to be thought and is there to be" (*to gar auto noein estin te kai einai*, fr. 3). The deductive rational argument, however, proves that change is unreal.

The argument of Parmenides against the existence of change runs like this. What comes to be must come to be from what is, or from what is not; but both are impossible. If it comes to be from what is, it does not come to be because it is already. If it comes from what is not, it is impossible and absurd, for nothing comes to be from nothing (the *ex nihilo* principle). Therefore, nothing comes to be, and nothing changes (Aristotle, *Physics*. 191a27-31). His denial of change raises a significant

challenge for natural philosophy. Post-Parmenidean natural philosophers such as Anaxagoras, Empedocles, and Atomists all fail to meet this challenge satisfactorily. They can account for accidental changes, but fail to explain substantial changes.

Parmenides claims that natural philosophy pursues a way of opinion (*doxa*) which holds that “it is and it is not”, whereas his own way of truth (*aletheia*) starts with the premise that “(it) is and it cannot be that (it) is not”. The former follows belief, whereas the latter puts confidence in the power of speculative reasoning and follows the argument where it leads. For Parmenides, only the way of truth sets out the necessary conditions of human knowledge. He was called by Plato “Father Parmenides” (*Sophist*, 241d) and has been regarded as the father of Western rationalism.

It would be helpful if we could study whether Chinese cosmology is subjected to the challenge of Parmenides. Chinese cosmology focuses on change; yet has it provided an account of change that can survive Parmenides’ criticism? Are Chinese cosmologies doctrines supported by intellectual argument? Has Chinese cosmology reflected upon the conditions of its own enquiry Can it establish its secure point of departure?

Finally let us proceed to the question about whether the lack of a theory of being affects the metaphysical nature of Chinese cosmology. I would like to look at this issue through the lenses of the relation between metaphysics and physics (natural philosophy) in Aristotle. What can Chinese philosophy learn from his treatment of their relationship?

Aristotle systematizes metaphysics, and he also has various criticisms of early natural philosophy. Many of them can be appropriated to examine doctrines in Chinese cosmology (e.g, his view that in change a pair of contraries must have a substratum is pertinent for our understanding of the theory of *ying/yang*). However, he criticizes Parmenides for rejecting nature (*Physics* II, 2), and he himself has contributed greatly to natural philosophy. How, then, can he harmonize metaphysics and cosmology (and in general physics) within one system? A comparison with this should be helpful for us to see whether Chinese cosmology can be reconciled with metaphysics.

Aristotle’s philosophy has a distinction between metaphysics and physics. It is, however, less clear precisely what the distinction is. The book, entitled “*metaphysics*” is a group of works put together by Andronics, the first editor of Aristotle’s works. He invented the title, literally because this treatise is placed after (*meta-*) treatises on natural philosophy (or physics, the word ‘*physis*’ means ‘nature’). However, it is not simply a matter of location. Aristotle does say that the first philosophy is dealing things that are higher than the objects of physics (*Meta.* 1026a1-22). We must note that the distinction between physics and metaphysics does not correspond to the distinction between the book *Physics* and the book *Metaphysics*. His treatise entitled ‘*Physics*’ is strongly metaphysical and its contents are continuous with much we find in the *Metaphysics*. More importantly, his conception of metaphysics is ambiguous. He calls it “the science of being as being” (*Meta.* 1003a21-

22; vi.1, 1025b1-18), and also calls it “theology” (1026a19) and names theology “first science” (1026a15) or “first philosophy” (1026a24, 31). Since the science of being qua being is about being in general, whereas the objects of theology are things which are immovable and separable, we have a long-running debate regarding whether and how the science of being and theology, traditionally called *metaphysica generalis* and *metaphysica specialis* respectively, can be reconciled as a unified project. Furthermore, the notion ‘physics’ is also not so clear. Aristotle has a book entitled *Physics*, but his study of nature covers far more broadly, including astronomy, zoology, botany, cosmology, biology, psychology, etc. We should distinguish between the particular natural sciences that deal with one particular kind of substances, and the general physics deals that deals with the principles shared and presupposed by all particular physical sciences. If this is the case, general physics, i.e. much of the contents in the *Physics*, belong to Aristotle’s metaphysics.

My understanding of Aristotle’s conception of metaphysics can be briefly summarized as follows. In his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle claims that being, at the most general level, is divided by Aristotle into the following four types: (1) Accidental being (2) Being as truth, (3) Potential/actual being, (3) *Per se* being or categories of being (*hai katēgoriai tou ontos*). (*Meta.* v.7). Of these four, the science of being is mainly concerned with *per se* being and potential/actual being. The investigation of *per se* being is about the basic constituents of reality and is related to predication, categories, and definition, and the study of potential/actual being which deals with the motion, process, and function of the world. An inquiry into being as *per se* being is to study the world statically, whereas an inquiry into being as potential/actual being is to study it dynamically.

The main differences of these two kinds of being are: (1) The structure of essential predication which is the basis of Aristotle’s division of *per se* beings or categories is not associated with potential/actual being. (2) A *per se* being is an ontological counterpart to an essence-revealing definition of genus plus differentia. In contrast, we should not seek a definition of potentiality or of actuality, and they are explained not by reducing them to other notions, but by examples and analogies (*Meta.* 1048a36). Third, the Principle of Non-Contradiction is said to be the “most certain principle of all.” (*Meta.* 1005b11) Yet it applies only for *per se* being, but not for potential/actual being. For the same thing can be potentially at the same time two contraries, but it cannot actually (*Meta.* 1009a30-5).

These two beings, however, are also connected. Potentiality and actuality are two senses that each categorical being takes. It is one of these beings that is sometimes potentially, and sometimes actually. Hence, these two studies are not in tension. Rather, they together constitute a complete theory of being. They represent two central concerns of Aristotle’s metaphysical inquiry: the problem of the basic elements of reality, and the problem of the movement of the world.

In calling theology first philosophy, Aristotle is not contrasting it with the science of being, but with physics, which is said to be second

philosophy. Both physics (natural sciences), and theology are subdivisions of theoretical sciences. The main contrasts are the following two: (1) the objects of physics are the things in which forms are inseparable from matter, whereas the objects of theology are separable; (2) whereas the objects of physics are things that are movable, the objects of theology are immovable (*Meta.* 1025b19-1026a23). Both theology and physics, however, fall under the study of potential/actual being. Thus, both constitute parts of the science of being qua being.

Aristotle's framework is suggestive for our study of Chinese cosmology at least in following aspects. First, Chinese cosmology can be thought of as metaphysics. Although it does not have a theory of being and is not based on predication, it is metaphysics of change (*becoming*), or, in Aristotle's term, a study of potential/actual being. Second, in current study of Chinese cosmology there are popular views suggesting that Chinese cosmology is purely a non-substantial metaphysics of process, in contrast to the Western metaphysics of substantialism. Whitehead and the theory of process becomes the standard framework to present Chinese cosmology. There is nothing wrong to demonstrate that Chinese philosophy focuses on process and change, but it is not necessary to infer from here that it has to be non--substantial. Following Aristotle's relation between categorical being and potential/actual being, change itself should assume something that is changing. Substantialism and metaphysics of process do not have to be opposite. The relationship between metaphysics and physics in Aristotle should provide a historical mirror to show that Chinese cosmology can be part of metaphysical discussion.

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