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The One and Many in Heraclitus and the Hengxian 恆先 A comparative study

Greece: Ionian school: “explain the multiplicity of cosmic phenomena [...by] tracing them to the Unity of a principle” [Reale 2018]

Thales (c. 626-545 BC): quest for an ἀρχή “of which everything consists, from which everything comes, and to which everything shall finally dissolve” (“ἐξ οὗ γὰρ ἔστιν ἅπαντα τὰ ὄντα καὶ ἐξ οὗ γίγνεται πρῶτου καὶ εἰς ὃ φθίρεται τελευταῖον”) [Arist. *Met.* 983b]¹

China: Investigation into the unity of everything, reconcilable to a nameless, mysterious, and most fundamental principle, expediently termed the Way (*Dao* 道).

Laozi 老子 (trad. 6th cent. BC): “There was something indefinitely formed, born before heaven and earth. Unstirred, unperturbed, standing alone without change, moving round, yet with no peril, capable of being the mother of all under heaven. I do not know its name, I style it as the Way, forced to give it a name, I say it is great. Great means passing on, passing on means reaching far, reaching far means returning” (“有物混成，先天地生。寂兮寥兮，獨立不改，周行而不殆，可以為天下母。吾不知其名，字之曰道，強為之名曰大。大曰逝，逝曰遠，遠曰反。”) [Laozi, 25]

Newly-excavated paleographic material: philosophy of Warring States 戰國 (VI-III cent. BC). Two anonymous works: “The Great One generates water” 太一生水 (from Guodian 郭店 tomb) and “**The Constant Principle**” 恆先 [in short CP] (c. IV century, from Shanghai Museum collections 上海博物館藏).

CP: Multitude of diverse beings (“采物”) originating from one physical essence, *qi* 氣, self-generated but in turn deriving from and governed by the metaphysical principle of constancy 恆先, permeating all things.

Her: Heraclitus [in short Her] (Ἡράκλειτος c. 535-475): enunciation of the “problem of One and its dynamic-relational nexus with multiplicity” [Reale 2018]: “Henology”, (ex ἓν).

Metaphysical principle:	Her λόγος	CP <i>hengxian</i> 恆先
Physical principle:	πῦρ (“fire”)	<i>qi</i> 氣
Human existence, reason	Refutation of traditional knowledge in favor of rigorous intellectual investigation	

¹ All translations, save where differently indicated, are by the author.

Hengxian 恆先 “The Constant Principle”

Text and Translation

[i.1]² 恆先無有，樸、清、虛。樸，大樸；清，大清；虛，大虛。

The constant principle is without being, simple, pure, void. Its simplicity is outmost simplicity, its purity is outmost purity, its vacuity is outmost vacuity.³

[i.2] 自厭不自物，域作。有域，焉有氣；有氣，焉有有；有有，焉有始；有始，焉有往者。

It overflows itself, not restraining itself: space is made. There being space, then there is spirit; there being spirit, then there is being; there being being, then there is beginning; there being beginning, then there is progression.

[ii-ii.3] 未有天地，未有作行出生。虛靜，為一若寂，夢夢靜同。而未或明，未或滋生。

There was no heaven or earth yet, there was no creation, movement, emergence, generation yet. Void and still, being one and silent, muddled murky, still and all together. And there was no light at all yet, there was no teeming with life yet.

[ii-iii.4] 氣是自生，恆莫生氣。氣是自生自作。恆氣之生，不獨有與也，域恆焉，生域者同焉。

Spirit is self-generated: constancy in no way generates spirit. Spirit is self-generated and self-made. The generation of the constant spirit is not solitary: it has companions. Being space constant, then the process of generation of space is common with it.

[iii-iv.5] 混混不寧，求其所生。異生異，歸生歸，違生非，非生違，依生依。求欲自復，復，生之生行。

Confused and jumbled, not at peace, seeking what generated it. Difference generates difference, return generates return, divergence generates negation, negation generates divergence, dependency generates dependency. Seeking and desiring to reproduce itself: reproducing is the generative process of life.⁴

[iv-viii.6] 濁氣生地，清氣生天。氣信神哉，芸芸相生，信盈天地。同出而異性，因生其所欲。

察察天地，紛紛而多采物。

Turbid spirit generates the earth, pure spirit generates the heaven. Spirit is truly divine! Diverse and multitudinous (things) generate one another, truly filling heaven and earth.

² The first roman numeral on the left refers to the strip number, the second Arabic one divides the texts into content sections and is meant to aid reference. I present the text as in Ma, *Shanghai Bowuguan Cang Zhanguo Chu Zhushu* and point out any change in the notes.

³ For a study of what I transcribe as *pu* 樸 (substantially supporting this reading), see Andreini, “Shi ‘pu’. Guanyu Shanghai Bowuguna suo zang zhushu ‘Heng xian’ de yixie wenti”.

⁴ I follow here the readings in Brindley, Goldin, Esther, “A Philosophical Translation of the Heng Xian”, but punctuate (and translate) differently.

Their source of emergence is common, yet their nature is different; hence, they generate that which they desire. Pure and bright are heaven and earth, in swarming profusion they multiply the varied things.⁵

[viii.7] 先者有善，有治無亂。有人，焉有不善；亂出於人。

At first there was good, there was order and no chaos. There being people, then, there was not good; chaos emerged from people.

[viii-ix.8] 先有中，焉有外。先有小，焉有大。先有柔，焉有剛。先有圓，焉有方。先有晦，焉有明。先有短，焉有長。

At first, there being center, there was also periphery; at first, there being small, there was also large; at first, there being soft, there was also hard; at first, there being round, there was also square; at first, there being dark, there was also luminous; at first, there being short, there was also long.

[ix-v.9] 天道既裁，唯一以猶一，唯復以猶復。恆氣之生，因復其所欲。明明天行，唯復以不廢。知既而荒思不殄。

As the way of heaven had been established, for unity was unity resembled, for reproduction was reproduction resembled. The generation of the constant spirit, therefore, reproduces what it desires. Luminous and bright heaven's moving, for reproduction, are (all things) not destroyed. As this is known, wide-ranging thought shall not perish.⁶

[v-vii.10] 有出於域，生出於有，音出於生，言出於音，名出於言，事出於名。

域非域，無謂域。有非有，無謂有。生非生，無謂生。音非音，無謂音。言非言，無謂言。名非名，無謂名。事非事，無謂事。詳宜利主。

Being emerges from space, generation emerges from being, sound emerges from generation, words emerge from sound, names emerge from words, deeds emerge from names. If space were not space, there would be no calling it space. If being were not being, there would be no calling it being. If generation were not generation, there would be no calling it generation. If sound were not sound, there would be no calling it sound. If words were not words, there would be no calling them words. If names were not names, there would be no calling them names. If deeds were not deeds, there would be no calling them deeds. Precise appropriateness is the master of success.

⁵ I follow here the ordering proposed in Brindley, Goldin, Esther, "A Philosophical Translation of the Heng Xian", and accept their emendation of *yun* "芸" for *yun* "云", better semantically, though not very different.

⁶ Here too I follow the ordering of Brindley, Goldin, Esther, "A Philosophical Translation of the Heng Xian". The construction "唯...以..." is not a common one. Here *wei* 唯 does not possess limitative value ("only"), rather it constitutes a fossilized form of the ancient copula. For an analogue passage, of clear meaning, see *Liji, Tang Gong xia*, 200.

[vii.11] 采物出於作。作，焉有事；不作，無事。與天之事，自作為事，庸以不可廢也？

The varied things emerge from creation. If one creates, then there is a deed; if one does not create, then there is no deed. As for the deeds of heaven, they create themselves into a deed, how could it be they not could not continue?

[vii-x.12] 凡言名，先者有疑、荒言之。後者校比焉。舉天下之名，虛樹，習以不可改也。

Generally, for words and names, those who came earlier had doubts, spoke of them unchecked; and those who came after collated and compared those things. As for the names under heaven, they were emptily planted, yet, being practiced, they could then not be changed.

[x-xiii.13] 舉天下之作，強者果；天下之大作，其熾龍不自若作，庸有果與不果？兩者不法。

舉天下之為也，無舍也，無與也，而能自為也。

舉天下之生，同也，其事無不復。

天下之作也，無忤恆，無非其所。

舉天下之作也，無不得其恆而果遂；庸或得之，庸或失之？

舉天下之名，無有廢者歟？

As for creations under heaven, the forceful ones succeed; but (even) for great creations under heaven, if their great brilliance (?) does not maintain its own appearance, how could they have success or unsuccess? Both cannot be taken as a model.⁷

As for actions under heaven, if they do not reside upon or partake with anything, then they can act out of themselves.

As for generation under heaven, it is the same: among its deeds none shall not reproduce.

Creations under heaven, if they do not defy constancy, none shall negate their place.⁸

As for creations under heaven, none does not achieve its constancy and yet succeeds and progresses. How could some achieve it and some miss it?

As for names under heaven, none refers to what has perished, is it not so?

[xiii.14] 天下之明王、明君、明士，庸有求而不慮？

The bright kings, bright lords, and bright knights, how could they seek and not consider this?

⁷ This first sentence is problematic. For once the meaning of the two characters transcribed as “熾龍” is still unclear, for the sake of presenting a possible translation, I have followed Liu Xinfang’s suggestion, reported in Ding, “Chu jian ‘Hengxian’ zhangju shiyi”. Then, I have also adopted Ding’s choice of maintaining the manuscript reading of “法”, instead of the emendation “廢” of Ma, *Shanghai Bowuguan Cang Zhanguo Chu Zhushu*, improving considerably the intelligibility, and coherence, of the passage.

⁸ Instead of the reading “許” of Ma, *Shanghai Bowuguan Cang Zhanguo Chu Zhushu*, I accept the emendation “忤” of Ding, “Chu jian ‘Hengxian’ zhangju shiyi”, roughly equivalent to “迕” of Brindley, Goldin, Esther, “A Philosophical Translation of the Heng Xian”, but easier paleographically.

Heraclitus

Selected Fragments and Comparanda

I. Metaphysics: *hengxian* 恆先 and λόγος

a. λόγος, common to all things and governing their existence

CP: Constancy as the fundamental law of the universe:

in the generative power of *qi* [4, 9]

that to which everything tends and norm of success for action [11,12]

[1 M]⁹ ...γινομένων γὰρ πάντων κατὰ τὸν λόγον τόνδε...

...all things happening according to this reason...

[23 M] ζῶν νόμῳ λέγοντας ἰσχυρίζεσθαι χρὴ τῷ ζυνῶ πάντων, ὅκωσπερ νόμῳ πόλις καὶ πολὺ ἰσχυροτέρως · τρέφονται γὰρ πάντες οἱ ἀνθρώπειοι νόμοι ὑπὸ ἐνός, τοῦ θείου · κρατεῖ γὰρ τοσοῦτον ὀκόσον ἐθέλει καὶ ἐξαρκεῖ πᾶσι καὶ περιγίνεται.

Those who will speak with intelligence need to make themselves strong by that which is common to all, just like a city by the law, and yet much more strongly. For, all the human laws are nourished by one, the divine one; that one, in fact, commands on as much as it wants and suffices for all (of them) and remains over them.

[26 M] οὐκ ἔμοῦ ἀλλὰ τοῦ λόγου ἀκούσαντας ὁμολογεῖν σοφὸν ἐστὶν ἓν πάντα εἶναι.

It is wise that those who have heard not me but the reason do agree that all things are one.

b. λόγος ensuring unity of everything

CP: Unity of everything “為一” [3] Differentiation into existence [5]

[25 M] συλλάβεις · ὅλα καὶ οὐχ ὅλα, συμφερόμενον διαφερόμενον, συνᾶδον διᾶδον · ἐκ πάντων ἓν καὶ ἐξ ἐνός πάντα.

Conjunctions: things whole and not whole, brought together – brought apart, harmonic – disharmonic: out of all things the one and out of the one all things.

c. Conjunction and transfiguration of opposites

CP: “Constant *qi*” (“恆氣”) reproducing what it desires, hence progressive differentiation of the real [5, 9]

Tension: permanence of the whole - increasing divergence of the parts

[40 M] ποταμοῖσι τοῖσιν αὐτοῖσιν ἐμβαίνουσιν ἕτερα καὶ ἕτερα ὕδατα ἐπιρρεῖ.

Upon those that enter the very same rivers different and again different waters flow.

d. Rules of divergence

[28 M] εἰδέ<ναι> χρὴ τὸν πόλεμον ἔοντα ζυνὸν καὶ δίκην ἔριν καὶ γινόμενα πάντα κατ’ ἔριν καὶ χρεῶν.

⁹ Numeration and text as in Marcovic, *Heraclitus – Greek text with a short commentary*.

It is necessary to know that war is common (to all) and that justice is strife and that all things happen according to strife and necessity.

[29 M] πόλεμος πάντων μὲν πατήρ ἐστι, πάντων δὲ βασιλεύς, καὶ τοὺς μὲν θεοὺς ἔδειξε τοὺς δὲ ἀνθρώπους, τοὺς μὲν δούλους ἐποίησε τοὺς δὲ ἐλευθέρους.

War is father of all, king of all; and some it renders gods, others men; some it makes slaves, others free.

CP: *Kosmos* permeated by sets of oppositions in balance (before man) [7, 8]

[31 M] ὁ κυκεὼν δίσταται <μῆ> κινούμενος

The barely drink separates if it is not stirred.

e. Problem of origin

Why does λόγος or *hengxian* 恆先 permeate reality?

How did physical reality emerge from this strictly metaphysical principle?

II. Physics: *qi* 氣 and *pŭr*

a. Dynamism and transformation

[51 M] κόσμον τόνδε, τὸν αὐτὸν ἀπάντων, οὔτε τις θεῶν οὔτε ἀνθρώπων ἐποίησεν, ἀλλ’ ἦν ἀεὶ καὶ ἔστιν καὶ ἔσται· πῦρ ἀείζων, ἀπτόμενον μέτρα καὶ ἀποσβεννύμενον μέτρα.

This ordered world, same for all, was not made by any of the gods or of man, but always was and is and shall be: ever-living fire, in measures kindled and in measures quenched.

CP: Definition of *qi* [4]: born out of itself (“自生”), not made (“恆莫生氣”), eternally constant (“恆氣”). Development [5]: generation (“氣生...氣生...” [6]).

[53a M] πυρὸς τροπαί· πρῶτον θάλασσα, θαλάσσης δὲ τὸ μὲν ἥμισυ γῆ, τὸ δὲ ἥμισυ πρηστήρ.

Transformations of fire: first sea; then half of the sea, earth; and half, lightning-storm.

[54 M] πυρὸς ἀνταμοιβῆ τὰ πάντα καὶ πῦρ ἀπάντων, ὅκωσπερ χρυσοῦ χρήματα καὶ χρημάτων χρυσός.

All things are exchange for fire and fire is for all things: just like riches for gold and gold for riches.

b. Divinity of the physical principle

CP: *Qi* is “divine”, filling the universe with life (“氣信神哉, 芸芸相生, 信盈天地” [6]),

[82 M] πάντα τὸ πῦρ ἐπελθὼν κρινεῖ καὶ καταλήφεται.

All things, coming upon them, shall fire judge and seize.

[77 M] ὁ θεὸς ἡμέρη εὐφρόνη, χειμῶν θέρος, πόλεμος εἰρήνη, κόρος λιμός. ἀλλοιοῦται δὲ ὅκωσπερ <πῦρ, ὄ> ὀκόταν συμιγῆ θύμασιν ὀνομάζεται καθ’ ἡδονὴν ἐκάστου.

The god is day and night, winter and summer, war and peace, satiety and hunger. It changes just like fire, which, when mingled with spices, is called according to the scent of each.

CP: Common unity whence diversity (“同出而異性” [6]); [8]

[79 M] πάντα οἰακίζει Κεραυνός.

All things does Thunderbolt steer.

[84 M] ἓν, τὸ σοφὸν μόνον, λέγεσθαι οὐκ ἐθέλει καὶ ἐθέλει Ζηνὸς ὄνομα.

The one, the only wise, is both unwilling and willing to be called by the name of Zeus.

The Human: traditional knowledge, epistemology, and ethics

a. Unbalance brought by man

CP: Man as the beginning of disorder (“亂出於人”) [8].

[91 M] τῷ μὲν θεῷ καλὰ πάντα καὶ δίκαια, ἄνθρωποι δὲ ἅ μὲν ἄδικα ὑπειλίφασιν ἅ δὲ δίκαια.

While for the god all are fair and just; men, instead, assume some things to be unjust and some just.

[92 M] ἀνὴρ νήπιος ἤκουσε πρὸς δαίμονος ὄκωσπερ παῖς πρὸς ἀνδρός.

Man is called silly by god, just like a child by a man.

CP: Incapacity for human deeds 事 to reach the success of constancy [9-13]

b. Knowledge of truth as only remedy

[85 M] ἓν, τὸ σοφὸν · ἐπίστασθαι γνώμην ἴδούτῃ κυβερνήσαι† πάντα διὰ πάντων.¹⁰

One thing is wisdom: to know the thought that steers everything through all.

[8 M] φύσις κρύπτεσθαι φιλεῖ.

Nature loves to hide.

[13 M] κακοὶ μάρτυρες ἀνθρώποισιν ὀφθαλμοὶ καὶ ὦτα, βαρβάρους ψυχὰς ἐχόντων.

Bad witnesses for men are the eyes and ears, when having uncomprehending minds.

[14 M] ὁ ἀναξ οὐδὲ τὸ μαντεῖόν ἐστι τὸ ἐν Δελφοῖς οὔτε λέγει οὔτε κρύπτει ἀλλὰ σημαίνει.

The king whose oracle is the one in Delphi neither declares nor hides but gives signs.

[1 M] τοῦ δὲ λόγου τοῦδ’ ἐόντος αἰεὶ ἀζύνετοι γίνονται ἄνθρωποι, καὶ πρόσθεν ἢ ἀκοῦσαι καὶ ἀκούσαντες τὸ πρῶτον · γινομένων γὰρ πάντων κατὰ τὸν λόγον τόνδε ἀπίροισιν εἰκόσασιν πειρώμενοι καὶ ἐπέων καὶ ἔργων τοιούτων, ὁκοίων ἐγὼ διηγεῦμαι κατὰ φύσιν διαιρέων ἕκαστον καὶ φράζων ὅκως ἔχει · τοὺς δὲ ἄλλους ἀνθρώπους λανθάνει ὁκόσα ἐγερθέντες ποιοῦσιν ὄκωσπερ ὁκόσα εὔδοντες ἐπιλανθάνονται.

Of the reason-principle, which is (real), man are always uncomprehending, both before hearing it and after they have heard it: for, even though all things happen according to this reason, they appear unacquainted with it, although they have been acquainted with both

¹⁰ For a discussion of the *crux*, see Marcovic, *Heraclitus – Greek text with a short commentary*, 449-450. The meaning is however quite clear, I have translated the simplest “ὅτι ἐκυβέρνησε” of Diels, although Marcovic’s objections against the gnomic aorist are fully substantiated. Another possibility is to emend the Greek text to reach the meaning of the Latin version by Ambrogius Traversarius Camandolensis (c. 1472) “*qua gubernentur omnia per omnia*” (“by which/through which all things are governed through all”).

such words and deeds, as those that I explain, analyzing each thing according to its nature and declaring how it stands. And yet, what they do while awake escapes the notice of other men, just like they forget what they do while sleeping.

CP: Centrality of intellectual investigation: “how could they seek something, without considering this?” (“庸有求而不慮?” [14]).

c. Rejection of traditional knowledge

CP: Attack to the customary erudition (“先者有疑、荒言之。後者校比焉。[12]”) Solidifying (“習以不可改”) of void names (“名...虛樹”)

[16 M] πολυμαθίη νόον οὐ διδάσκει· Ἡσίοδον γὰρ ἂν ἐδίδαξε καὶ Πυθαγόρην, αὐτίς τε Ξενοφάνεά τε καὶ Ἑκαταῖον.

Having much learned does not teach intelligence: for, otherwise, it would have taught Hesiod and Pythagoras, and also Xenophanes and Hecataeus.

[101 M] τίς γὰρ αὐτῶν νόος ἢ φρήν; δῆμων ἀοιδοῖσι πείθονται καὶ διδασκάλῳ χρείωνται ὁμίλῳ, οὐκ εἰδότες ὅτι οἱ πολλοὶ κακοί, ὀλίγοι δὲ ἀγαθοί.

For, what is their intelligence or mind? They trust in folk-bards and take the mass as a teacher, not knowing that the many are bad and few are good.

[89 M] οὐ δεῖ <ὡς> παῖδας τοκεῶνων (*scil.* ποιεῖν καὶ λέγειν)

One ought not (*scil.* to act and speak) like a child of his parents.

A final remark:

Might it be that at times ἀπιστίη διαφυγγάνει μὴ γινώσκεσθαι? (12 M).