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Dissertation

**A STUDY OF COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION ON “*CREATIO
EX NIHILO*” AND “*SHENG SHENG* (BIRTH BIRTH, 生生)”**

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my wise wife, Qi Yuan, my wondrous daughter, Maggie, and my caring father-in-law, Sanfu Yuan.

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ABSTRACT

The question whether the Ruist (Confucian) idea of *Tian* (heaven) or *Taiji* (ultimate polarity) is transcendent in comparison to Christian ideas of the Creator-God remains controversial in the history of Christian-Ru interaction. To tackle the debate, this dissertation investigates the intellectual histories of “*creatio ex nihilo*” in the Greek-European Christian tradition and of “*sheng sheng*” (birth birth) in the Chinese Ru tradition, and compares these ideas with a methodology combining the pragmatist use of “vague category” and the hermeneutical “situational thinking.”

The emergence of the idea “*creatio ex nihilo*” from Plato to Augustine championed the “ontological dependence” of cosmic realities upon the Creator-God. Divine creation was typically thought of as one process whereby divine intelligence implants ideas and forms into an inchoate form of being so that varying realities are created. However, Descartes’ theory of “created eternal truth” conceptualized divine creation as not being constrained by any rule of intelligence. This Cartesian voluntarism pushes the theistic vocabularies of creation to their limit such that it allows us to delineate a de-anthropomorphic sub-tradition within the main theistic tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*.” Descartes’ thought was refined by Schleiermacher and Tillich.

There were two distinctive ancient Chinese cosmologies: one Daoist pioneered by the *Dao De Jing*, and the other is Ruist initiated by the *Appended Texts* in the *Classic of Change*. When Wang Bi employed the ontology in the *Appended Texts* to interpret the cosmogony of *Dao De Jing*, his understanding of *Taiji* influenced the Ru tradition to reach an idea of creation similar to “creatio ex nihilo.” Accordingly, *Taiji*’s creativity can be characterized as “generatio ex nihilo,” an unconditioned constantly creative cosmic power without a creator standing behind the scene. Wang Bi’s thought was refined by Zhou Dunyi and Zhu Xi.

As this project demonstrates, the Ru tradition of “generatio ex nihilo” provides the most apt comparison to the de-anthropomorphic sub-tradition of “creatio ex nihilo.” If we define transcendence as what is indeterminate and ontologically unconditioned by the existing world, *Taiji*’s “sheng sheng” conceptualized as “generatio ex nihilo” is even more transcendent than the mainstream theistic Christian understanding of divine creation.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- BP.....Zhou Dunyi, *The Book of Penetration*
- GI.....Schleiermacher, Friedrich, *The Christian Faith*
- EUPDZhou Dunyi, *The Explanation of the Ultimate Polarity Diagram*
- SCG.....Aquinas, Thomas, *On the Truth of the Catholic Truth: Summa Contra Gentiles*

Glossary

大虛 Daxu: great vacuum

禮 Li: ritual, rite, ritual propriety, civilized symbols

理 Li: principle, pattern, or pattern-principle

氣 Qi: vital energy, or psychophysical energy

仁 Ren: humanity, or humaneness

上帝 Shangdi: supreme deity, or the Lord on High

聖 Sheng: sage

生生 Shengsheng: birth birth, or constant creativity

太極 Taiji: ultimate polarity, or great ultimate

天 Tian: heaven, or the cosmos

無為 Wuwei: non-action

無極 Wuji: non-polarity, or non-polar

繫辭 Xici: the *Appended Texts*, or the *Great Commentary*

神 Shen: numinous and wonderful

易經 Yijing: the Classic of Change, or the Book of Change

元氣 Yuanqi: primordial vital-energy

周易 Zhouyi: the Zhou Book of Change

自然 Ziran: what is as it is of its own accord, or what comes out spontaneously and natural

Introduction

This dissertation is a project of comparative philosophy of religion, or comparative religion with a primary philosophical interest, on the ideas “*creatio ex nihilo*” in the Greek-European Christian tradition and “*sheng sheng* (birth birth)” in the Chinese Ru¹ tradition. Its motif is triggered by a long-lasting scholarly debate in the history of Christian-Ru interaction which I term as the “transcendence debate.” The debate addresses the controversy concerning whether the Ruist idea of “*Tian*” (heaven), or its metaphysically more accurate referent “*Taiji*” (ultimate polarity) is transcendent when compared with Christian ideas of the Creator God. Following Jonathan Smith’s insight which I will discuss in Chapter Two, I believe any project of comparative religion needs to answer three methodological questions in order to serve its readers well: Why do I do this comparison? How? And so what?

Chapter One addresses the “why” question, i.e., it clarifies the purpose of this comparative project. I therefore delineate three stages of Christian-Ru interaction starting from Matteo Ricci in the 16th century, take a survey of the major contentions of scholars involved in the transcendence debate, and in the end, try to lay out methodological points to guide my comparative research. I start from Matteo Ricci because he was the primary

¹ Since “Confucianism” is a misnomer, in this dissertation, “Confucianism” will be replaced by “Ruism,” and “Confucian” or “Confucianist” will be replaced by “Ruists” or “Ru.” Accordingly, “Neo-Confucianism,” which usually denotes the development of Confucian thought in the Song and Ming Dynasties of China (960 – 1644 C.E), will be replaced by “Song and Ming Ruism.” For why “Confucianism” is a misnomer, please refer to Stephen Angle, “Should we use ‘Ruism’ instead of ‘Confucianism’?” *Warp, Weft and Way*, <http://warpweftandway.com/should-instead-confucianism/>, posted May 4, 2016, accessed January 1, 2017; and “Dr. Bin Song on the Meaning of Ru for Confucianism,” the Paos Arts Center of the Boston Chinatown Neighborhood (BCNC), July 22, 2017, video available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ti7SuAx7B-w&t=1155s>. Tony Swain’s view on this issue is highly recommended in Tony Swain, *Confucianism in China: An Introduction* (Bloomsbury, 2017), 3-22.

Christian thinker whose writings triggered the transcendence debate, and as a result, he helped to create the first round of substantial intellectual exchange between Christianity and Ruism. One conclusion in this chapter is that Christian scholars, Ruist scholars and independent comparativists in the history of the transcendence debate used different understandings of “transcendence” and varying methodologies to argue for their views in the debate. This has led to an unsettled and somewhat confusing situation until today. Therefore, in order to tackle the debate, this comparative project has decided to focus on the most controversial understanding of transcendence, and to devise a methodology to compare impartially the relevant metaphysical ideas in order to yield maximum relevance for this comparative project to concerned scholars.

Given the ongoing transcendence debate as the situation undergirding my comparative project, Chapter Two investigates various methodologies of comparative studies of religion in order to select and construct those most appropriate for my project. After taking into consideration methodologies in disciplines such as comparative theology, comparative religion, and comparative philosophy of religion or comparative religion with a mainly philosophical interest, I decided to categorize my project as one of comparative philosophy of religion, and its main methodological guidance as a combination of Robert Neville’s pragmatist use of “vague category” and Jonathan Smith’s hermeneutical “situational thinking.” This combination is prompted by my intention to satisfactorily answer the “why” and “how” questions of comparative studies in such a way as to compare impartially and accurately targeted metaphysical ideas with legitimacy.

Chapter Seven answers the “so what” question, i.e., the conclusion and broader meanings of this project which are primarily directed to concerned scholars in the transcendence debate, but also to interested audiences in other areas. Apart from giving my direct answer to the question of whether the Ruist idea of *Taiji* is transcendent in comparison to various Christian ideas of the Creator God, I also discuss questions such as the relationship between ontology and cosmology, the mystical expression of the ineffable feature of divine creativity, and the theodicy, all with a comparative perspective. These discussions are intended to address issues raised by scholars involved in the transcendence debate; however, I also hint at further directions of similar comparative studies at the end of the chapter.

The main body of the dissertation is developed in Chapter Three to Six. Among these, Chapters Three and Four are dedicated to the intellectual history of “*creatio ex nihilo*,” while the remainder concern “*sheng sheng*.” The purpose of these chapters is to furnish the necessary comparative data for the final comparative pursuit. I choose to compare traditions, rather than singular figures or texts as scholars usually do, because of the nature of the transcendence debate. Scholars have made use of varying texts and figures within two traditions to argue their disparate views in the transcendence debate, but these views are quite often unjustly thought of as representing the entire traditions. For if I had continued to focus on isolated figures and texts without paying enough attention to the continuity and renewal of ideas in each of the compared traditions, my discussion of the transcendence debate would continue to pass by other scholars who have not yet focused on those particular figures and texts. If this had happened, the hope

that this comparative project will advance scholarship accumulated in the transcendence debate would be likely to be passed over. Even so, I am of course aware of the criticism of comparativists that the more material they deal with, the less accurate their descriptions tend to be. Therefore, although I compare traditions rather than particular figures and texts, I nevertheless try to find the most important moments for each compared tradition in order to present the most relevant data in my final comparison. These will be the moments of seeds of thought (Plato vs. the *Great Commentary*), the first systematic expressions (Augustine vs. Wang Bi), and the significant innovations in early modern times (Descartes vs. Zhu Xi). Having ensconced my descriptions of the intellectual histories of each compared idea within these three constitutive moments, each additional mentioned figure and text will be included as a way of showing a more well-rounded picture of each history. I carefully explain the reasons that I decide to include certain figures and texts while excluding others at the end of Chapter One, the end of Chapter Two, and in particular, the beginning of Chapter Three. All in all, each of these considerations succumbs to the methodological guidance furnished by the first two chapters.

One caveat before concluding this introduction: I have deliberately avoided explaining in detail how I became interested in this topic in this orientation section of the dissertation because I think this question is largely irrelevant to the academic quality of this project. I grew up in China, have pursued my studies of philosophy, science and religion on three continents (China, France, and the United States), and will continue to study and teach similar subjects in the United States. It is therefore all too natural for me

to have become interested in one of the fundamental questions which is of supreme metaphysical significance for both Ruism and Christianity: Is there anything transcendent that is describable and comparable in humans' awareness of the world? However, as I mentioned above, I believe how I personally became interested in the project is not quite relevant to its academic quality. Its academic quality will be determined by whether I treat all compared ideas justly, and how my own analysis and conclusions can help to clarify confusions and controversies within the current scholarship concerning the transcendence debate. Therefore, when describing and comparing ideas under the guidance of the devised methodology, I hope what I am doing is to engage and contribute to a Platonic realm of objective knowledge so that later comparativists can continue to criticize my work in an equally engaging and objective way. For me, this is the hope of comparative studies of philosophy of religion as a well-organized, improvable discipline, rather than as a narrating strategy for the purpose of strengthening or overthrowing existing power structures in human society.

CHAPTER ONE

The Transcendence Debate in the History of Christian-Ru (Confucian) Interaction

A substantial exchange of religious and philosophical ideas between Christianity and Ruism was initiated by the arrival of Catholic Missionaries in China in the 16th and 17th centuries. From then on, as mainly reflected in the international English historiography and scholarship, three stages of the Christian-Ru interaction² can be identified: the first one is mentioned as such, the second one refers to Protestant missionaries visiting China around the middle 19th century, and the third one starts around the World War II and continues to unfold.

In all three stages, a “transcendence debate” subsists, but is far from being settled. The debate refers to the controversy over whether the Ruist idea of *Tian* (Heaven), or its metaphysically more accurate referent *Taiji* (Ultimate Polarity)³, is transcendent when compared with Christian ideas about the Creator God. In this first

² I use the term “Christian-Ru interaction,” rather than “Christian-Ru dialogue,” to designate the socially embedded process of idea exchange between various forms of Christianity and various forms of Ru thought. The preference for “interaction” over “dialogue” is based upon two reasons. One, the Ru tradition is neither revelatory nor church based. This implies that a Ruist’s self-identity may diffusely merge with his or her roles in varying aspects of secular life: how to become a good parent, how to harmonize a community, how to govern the country, etc. In this way, the way a Ruist exchanges ideas with other religious traditions is similar to a philosophical communication of his or her radical open-mindedness to all kinds of new ideas and thoughts. This feature undermines the accuracy of the use of “inter-religious dialogue,” which usually assumes religious affiliates with their bulwarked consciousness of identity sitting on opposite sides of a round table. Two, being constrained by varying historical situations, scholars involved in the process of idea exchange may mainly learn by themselves and speak to themselves. This monological feature also makes the term “dialogue” lose its traction. However, an inter-religious dialogue, each of whose participants has a strong feeling of religious affiliation and intensively exchanges ideas with the religious others, can be seen as part of the interactive process which I will analyze in what follows. In this sense, “Christian-Ru interaction” can be seen as a broader term connoting possible modes of idea exchanges between the two traditions.

³ The conceptual relationship between *Tian* and *Taiji* is a central theme in Chapter Five, where I have a detailed analysis of key concepts in the Ruist cosmology implied by the *Appended Texts* of the *Classic of Change*.

chapter, I will try to recover the major contentions in this transcendence debate and, ultimately, suggest a methodology for how to continue engaging in the debate.

1.1 The First Stage

Matteo Ricci (1552-1610 C.E.) and *The True Meaning of The Lord of Heaven*.

As the initiator of the first stage of the interaction concerning transcendence, Matteo Ricci's *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* is one *Magnum Opus* which vividly represents Ricci's missionary strategy, as depicted by scholars, as "accommodation." On the one hand, it tries to find similar theistic terms and ideas such as *Tian* (Heaven) or *Shangdi* (the Supreme-Deity) in Pre-Confucian Ruist classics in order to prove that this kind of "original Ruism" contains seeds of truth that can accommodate the spread of the Christian message within the Chinese cultural soil. On the other hand, it argues that these original theistic Ruist ideas were corrupted later by the naturalizing and humanizing of mainstream Ruist teaching which had been first developed by Confucius and then perfected by his followers up until Song and Ming Ruism, which was the flourishing form of Ruism in Ricci's time. Therefore, through the accommodation of the Christian message within an indigenous Chinese mindset, Ricci thought his mission would be able to fulfill the potential of truth seeded in original Ruism, and thus he would be able to correct the non-theistic contaminants of later Ruism⁴. Understood in this way, Ricci's approach of inter-religious interaction is similar

⁴ For a general approach to Matteo Ricci's missiology in China, please refer to Julia Ching, *Confucianism and Christianity: A Comparative Study* (Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd., 1977): 20-25; John D. Young, *Confucianism and Christianity, The First Encounter* (Hong Kong University Press, 1983): 31-37; Hans Kung & Julia Ching, *Christianity and Chinese Religions* (New York, London: Doubleday, 1989): 239, and Keng-hsin Li, "Catholic-Confucian Dialogue in Historical Perspective," in Peter Ki. H. Lee edited,

to what modern scholars categorize as “inclusivism” or “fulfillment theory” such as is described in Karl Rahner’s or Jacque Dupuis’ thought⁵.

If the first part of Ricci’s missiology can be seen as a creative re-interpretation of pre-Confucian Ruist classics aiming to bridge the hermeneutical gap between the two traditions, its second part furnished a great philosophical and theological challenge. In regard to the concerned transcendence debate, the challenge entailed the fact that Ruism, by Ricci’s time, had developed a highly sophisticated form of metaphysics based upon classical Ruist texts such as the *Appended Texts (Xici)* of the *Classic of Change (Yijing)*, whose authorship had been traditionally ascribed to Confucius.

In *Xici*, *Tian* is not conceived of as a supreme deity standing above the heavens and dominating the fates of human society as it once had been in Pre-Confucian Ruist classics. Instead, *Tian* is thought of as an all-encompassing, constantly creative, cosmic power that brings all things in the universe into being and becoming, yet with no creator standing beyond the scenes. Within this all-inclusive existential power-field, *Xici* also investigated layers of “pattern-principles” (*li*) that purport to explain the origin and order of the ever-changing cosmic entities, among which the *yin* and *yang* “vital-energies” (*qi*) stand out distinctively. In other words, as an explanatory purpose, the alternation and interaction of *yin* and *yang* vital-energies is thought of in *Xici* to be the most pervasive pattern-principles, as *Xici*’s verse, “one *yin* and one *yang* is called the Way” nicely

Confucian Christianity Encounter in Confucian-Christian Encounter in Historical and Contemporary Perspective (Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1991): 2-3;

⁵ Karl Rahner, “Christianity and the non-Christian Religions,” in *Theological Investigation*, Vol. V., trans. by Karl-H. Kruger (Darton: Longman & Todd, 1966). Jacque Dupuis, *Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Orbis Books, 1999). A fine summary and analysis of their theologies of religion can be found at Marianne Moyaert, *Fragile Identities: Toward a Theology of Interreligious Hospitality* (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2011).

encapsulates. However, with another cryptic verse, “Ultimate Polarity creates two modes,”⁶ and *Xici* strives further to seek a singular pattern-principle able to account for the origin of both *yin* and *yang* vital-energies. In a word, what *Xici* presents is a potentially complete cosmology that not only describes the generic features of cosmic changes, but also explores the ontological origin of the entire universe. As mentioned above, this Ruist cosmology was later developed, in Ricci’s time, by Song and Ming Ruist thinkers such as Zhou Dunyi (1017-1073 C.E.), Zhu Xi (1130-1200 C.E.) and Luo Qinshun (1465-1547 C.E.) into a dominant metaphysical worldview among the Ru literati.

In face of this sophisticated form of Ruist cosmology that Ricci’s mission claimed to fulfill, what Ricci needed to do is to prove why his Christian counterpart ought to triumph. Two methods were adopted: First, Ricci presented to the Ruist literati what was the most sophisticated form of the Christian theory of “creation” in his time – that of Thomas Aquinas, which centered on “*creatio ex nihilo*” - using approachable Chinese language and ideas. Secondly, Ricci degraded the ontological rank of the Ruist idea of Ultimate Polarity in order to argue that it would not be able to sustain itself as the origin of the cosmos.

For the first method, Ricci’s arguments for the existence of the Christian God, which he translated into Chinese as “Lord of Heaven” (*tianzhu*), who was the non-caused cause of the cosmos, pivoted upon Aquinas’ “cosmological proof” of the existence of God and another related proof for “intelligent design.” For the second, using scholastic

⁶ The Chapter 5, Part I of the *Appended Texts*, translation is my own, adapted from multiple sources such as: Richard J Lynn, *The Classic of Changes: A New Translation of the I Ching as interpreted by Wang Bi* (Columbia University Press, 2004) and Richard Butt, *The Book of Changes (Zhou Yi)* (Oxon: Routledge Curzon, 2002). A philosophical analysis of *Xici*’s cosmology, ontology and anthropology is a major theme of Chapter Five.

vocabularies, Ricci differentiated two kinds of ontological entities that are either “self-sustaining” (substance) or “dependent-upon others” (attributes). Then Ricci took the literal meaning of Ultimate Polarity as it had been explained in Zhu Xi’s metaphysics, and argued that Ultimate Polarity was just a general name for all kinds of “pattern-principles,” such as the musical codes played out by instruments or the geometrical figures embodied by furniture, and as such, it would not be able to sustain itself. According to Ricci, neither can Ultimate Polarity be thought of as the origin of the cosmos, since as something not self-sustaining, it cannot bring other things into being.⁷

Although Ricci did not explicitly mention the term “transcendence” in these metaphysical arguments, his thought can nevertheless be seen as initiating the transcendence debate in the history of Christian-Ru interaction. According to Ricci, the Christian God is more transcendent since He alone can sustain being the origin of cosmic realities, including the reality of Ultimate Polarity, which was thought by the Ruists to be the origin of the cosmos. From a Ruist perspective, we have to say that Ricci’s degradation of the ontological rank of Ultimate Polarity did an injustice. In Zhu Xi’s thinking, “pattern-principle” means not only the essential attributes differentiating one thing from another which thereby explain the order and relationship among cosmic

⁷ Ricci’s view on Ultimate Polarity can be seen at Matteo Ricci, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven (T’ien-chu- shih-yi)*, Chinese-English ed. (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1985): 61, 72, 82, 108-120. Scholarly analyses of Ricci’s view can be found at Yang Hongsheng 杨宏声, “明清之际在华耶稣会士之《易》说,” 《周易研究》2003 (6):41-51; Song Rongpei (韩) 宋荣培, “利玛窦的《天主实义》与儒学的融合和困境,” 《世界宗教研究》, 1999 (1): 50-59; Zhu Youwen 朱幼文, “析利玛窦对理学的批判及其影响,” 《华东师范大学学报(哲学社会科学版)》, 1997 (5):46-51.

realities. It also connotes the ontological origin of the cosmos⁸. By denying the latter crucial part of Zhu Xi's interpretation of Ultimate Polarity, Ricci showed his Christian bias and missionary purpose.

Matteo Ricci's Followers

After Ricci, both Catholic missionaries and Chinese converts developed similar arguments to engage with the emerging transcendence debate, although their understanding of Ultimate Polarity became more and more nuanced depending upon the depth of their Ruist learning.

For Yang Tingyun (1562-1627), one of the most philosophical among the first generation of Chinese converts, Ultimate Polarity was the pattern-principle that “resides in things, and thus, it cannot give rise to things.” Instead, only the Lord of Heaven “creates being out of utterly non-being,” and thus, is the creator of the entire universe.⁹

For Julius Aleni (1582-1649) and Alexandre de la Charme (1695-1767), two influential Catholic missionaries after Ricci, Ultimate Polarity is the formless “original material” (*yuanzhi*) that is created by God, and then used by God as the original matrix in which to put His intelligent ideas and forms so that a variety of things can be created. Furthermore, Alexandre de la Charme likened his idea of Ultimate Polarity as “original material” to the Chinese idea of “primitive vital-energy” (*yuanqi*) and argued that Ultimate Polarity lies at the same ontological rank as *yin* and *yang* vital-energies, and

⁸ Zhu Xi's thought on Ultimate Polarity and pattern-principle is a major theme of Chapter Six.

⁹ Zhang Xiaolin, 张晓林, “文化互动与诠释——《天主实义》与中国学统”, 博士论文, 香港中文大学, 2002年7月: 95页, 98页。Translation is my own.

thus needs a further reason to account for its origin – and for de la Charme that reason can only be the Christian God.¹⁰

Concerning the transcendence debate, we find that Yang Tingyun’s argument repeated Ricci’s argument verbatim. Alternatively, Julius Aleni and Alexandre de la Charme found a new idea within Ruist metaphysics that interprets Ultimate Polarity as “primitive vital-energy,” which is different from Zhu Xi’s “pattern-principle.” Then, they likened Aquinas’ idea of divine creation to this new idea of Ultimate Polarity and claimed that it must have been created by the Christian God as well. The details of their argument can be illustrated like this: inspired by the Platonic idea in the *Timaeus* that conceives of divine creation as a process where the *Demiurge* puts forms into the eternally existent inchoate matter, Aquinas theorized divine creation in his Christian context as a process in which God formulates ideas and forms in His divine intelligence into His infinite abundance of being, the divine plenitude, so that a variety of cosmic beings are created¹¹. In this way, Aquinas’ idea of the divine “plenitude of being” was termed *yuanzhi* in Chinese by Aleni and la Charme, and they identified *yuanzhi* as “primitive vital-energy” which they thought was what Ultimate Polarity was all about. Finally, they concluded that Ultimate Polarity was created by the Christian God.

Although they had a more nuanced idea of Ultimate Polarity, Aleni and de la Charme followed the same strategy as Ricci in the transcendence debate, that of using

¹⁰ The view of Julius Aleni on *Taiji* can be found at Zhu Youwen, 析利玛窦对理学的批判及其影响, 4. The view of Alexandre de la Charme on *Taiji* can be found at: Liu Genghua 刘耕华, “孙璋 《性理真诠》对‘太极’的诠释,” 《盐城师范学院学报:人文社会科学版》, 2007, 27 (3) :75-77.

¹¹ Plato’s and Thomas Aquinas’ thoughts on divine creation are a major theme of Chapter Three and Chapter Four.

specific Christian ideas to interpret selected Ruist counterparts, degrading the ontological rank of Ultimate Polarity, and then claiming the transcendence of the Christian God.

Counter-arguments from Ruist Literati

Given the rich legacy and wide theoretical possibilities of Ruist metaphysics in Ricci's time, it is understandable that the Ruist literati would not accept Ricci's and his followers' arguments. A series of counterarguments were immediately developed after the publication of Ricci's work. A couple of examples will suffice to illuminate the situation.

Confronting the argument that Ultimate Polarity is only an attribute-like pattern-principle and thus cannot sustain itself, Huang Zhen quotes a verse in one of the texts in the Ruist canon, the *Zhong Yong*, as "the Way (which, according to Huang Zhen, also means Ultimate Polarity and the singular supreme pattern-principle) cannot be left for even a moment. If it can be left, it is not the Way." He argues that all human and cosmic realities depend upon the creativity of Ultimate Polarity, and therefore, Ultimate Polarity is sustained by itself, rather than depending upon others¹².

Furthermore, no matter whether Ultimate Polarity is understood as an attribute-like pattern-principle or as the "original material"-like vital-energy, neither of these understandings complies with the ultimate ontological status of Ultimate Polarity as acknowledged by both the *Xici* text or by Zhu Xi's understanding of it. For this reason, Chen Houhuang said:

¹²Zhang Xiaolin 张晓林, "互动与诠释", 98.

He (Matteo Ricci) knows neither *Tian* nor *Shangdi*. How can he know Ultimate Polarity? Ultimate Polarity is the origin of pattern-principles, so it cannot be interpreted merely as one pattern-principle. Ultimate Polarity is where vital-energy derives from, so it cannot be interpreted merely as vital-energy. Pulling back, it has no beginning, so it can initiate things. Pushing forward, it has no end, so it can complete things.¹³

From these Ruists' counterarguments, we are given a glimpse into how intense the transcendent debate was in its first historical stage. Unfortunately, as the debate transpired in tandem with the aggravating "Rites Controversy," which finally led to the official exclusion of Christian missionaries from China in 1721, we do not see signs of reconciliation from either side. Instead, for the debate's outcome in its first stage, Yu Chunxi's words are telling: "If the teaching of the Lord of Heaven gets its stand in China, there will be nothing in Ruism's teaching of Ultimate Polarity that can be committed to."¹⁴ This was meant to convey that, as witnessed by this Ru, Christianity and Ruism were mutually exclusive in regard to the debated metaphysical issue.

1.2 The Second Stage

James Legge (1815-1897), a British Congregationalist missionary, stood front and center on this second stage of the transcendence debate. As a follower of Matteo Ricci's "accommodation" strategy, Legge's scholarship concerning Ruism rehashed nearly all

¹³ "玛竊历引上帝以证天主，皆附会影响，其实不知天，不知上帝，又安知太极？夫太极为理之宗，不得单言理；为气之元，不得单言气；推之无始，而能始物；引之无终，而能终物也。" quoted by Zhang Xiaolin 张晓林，"互动与诠释"，98. For the Chinese texts quoted in this dissertation which do not have an available English translation, or which lack multiple English translations, I will try to include their original Chinese in footnotes. Whether the texts are quoted in simplified or traditional Chinese depends upon its quoted version.

¹⁴Zhang Xiaolin 张晓林，"互动与诠释"，128.

the essential elements in Ricci's missiology: he affirmed that the pre-Confucian "original Ruism" was a monotheism advocating belief in the same Christian God; he thought this pure monotheistic faith became corrupted in later Ruism; and therefore, through spreading the Christian message in China, missionaries would be able to bring better opportunities for Chinese people to rediscover and then, remain closer to the religious truth ultimately revealed by Christianity¹⁵.

We can anticipate that this missionary approach to inter-religious engagement would constrain Legge's understanding of Ruism just as happened in Ricci's case. In particular, because of Legge's enhanced philological skills and his more open-minded Protestant spirituality, we can see a clear struggle within Legge's translation and study of Ruist classics between his scholarly commitment to critical analysis and his missionary piety. This yields a contrived, uneasy stance for Legge's involvement in the transcendence debate.

When commenting on the Ruist cosmology in the *Appended Texts*, Legge noticed that the alternation and interaction between *yin* and *yang* vital-energies (which he translated as "subtle matter," "breath," or "energy" in different contexts) are taken by this Ruist classical text to be the all-pervasive principle which explains the dynamics and order of cosmic changes. However, as for the deeper concern about the origin of these vital-energies, at one moment, Legge said, "whether (the subtle matter is) eternal or

¹⁵ On James Legge's general approach of missiology, please refer to Ching, *Confucianism and Christianity*, 57. Peter K.H. Lee, "Preparation for Christian-Confucian Encounter," in Lee, *Confucian Christian Encounter*, 14. Anna Sun, *Confucianism as a World Religion: Contested Histories and Contemporary Realities* (Princeton University Press, 2013): xii-xiii. N.J. Girardot, *The Victorian Translation of China, James Legge's Oriental Pilgrimage* (Berkeley: University of California Press): 266-268.

created is not said”¹⁶ in the *Appended Texts*. But at another moment, concerning the same text, Legge said: “Neither creation nor cosmogony was before the mind of the author whose work I am analyzing. His theme is the *Yi* - the ever-changing phenomena of nature and experience. There is nothing but this in the ‘Great Treatise’¹⁷ to task our powers; nothing deeper or more abstract.”¹⁸

However, as mentioned above, there is indeed one verse about Ultimate Polarity in the *Appended Texts* which clearly addresses the ontological origin of *yin* and *yang* vital energies. So how would Legge deal with it? Despite his decently translated quotations of several major interpretations of Ultimate Polarity in the later Ruist tradition offered by distinguished commentators such as Wang Bi (226-249 C.E.), Kong Yingda (574-648 C.E.) and Zhu Xi, none of whom followed a theistic hermeneutics by perceiving Ultimate Polarity as a supreme deity, Legge nevertheless inserted very ambiguous comments such as “the name of (Ultimate Polarity) gives us hardly any clue to its meaning.”¹⁹ Instead, in the preface of the same book, Legge stated that the non-theistic Ruist cosmology which was developed after Confucius and flourished in the minds of Song and Ming Ruist thinkers was impacted by Daoist philosophy, and thus is “more Taoistic than Confucian.”²⁰ In other words, the reason Legge could disregard the rich Ruist metaphysical tradition used to interpret Ultimate Polarity as the non-theistic ontological

¹⁶ James Legge, *The Religions of China: Confucianism and Taoism Described and Compared with Christianity* (New York: Scribner, 1881): 38

¹⁷ “Great Treatise” here refers to the *Appended Texts*.

¹⁸ James Legge, trans., *The I Ching* (New York, Dover Publications, 1963; the original version was published in 1899): 44.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 375.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, xvi.

origin of *yin* and *yang* vital energies is that he continues to think that this is a corrupted form of “original Ruism.”

Then, in Legge’s mind, what is the correct answer provided by “original Ruism” for the origin of *yin* and *yang* vital energies? In commenting on another related verse in the *Appended Texts* (“What is unfathomable through *yin* and *yang* is the numinous and wonderful”), Legge said: “Confucius felt that all which appeared in the *Yi* did not account for all that took place in the world of fact. ...Confucius felt, I believe, that in all phenomena there was the presence and doing of God, the potency that ‘spreads undivided and operates unspent,’ an immanent spirit, and yet not to be confounded with the matter which He moulds and changes.”²¹ Clearly, Legge believed that what created *yin* and *yang* vital-energies, according to Confucius’ view in the *Appended Texts*, was the spiritual power of the Christian God, termed *Shangdi* in Chinese, which is immanent in the functioning of vital-energies while simultaneously transcending it. This also implies that Legge’s conception of Ultimate Polarity refers to the same power.

In a word, if we ask Legge about the central question in the transcendence debate: “Is the Ruist idea of *Tian*, or Ultimate Polarity, transcendent in comparison with the Christian God?”, Legge’s answer will be “yes” because for him *Tian*, or Ultimate Polarity, *is* the Christian God.

Unfortunately, no words in the *Appended Texts* can even remotely verify Legge’s interpretation. The mainstream non-theistic cosmological tradition in Ruism after the composition of the *Appended Texts* did not support Legge’s view, either. In Legge’s time,

²¹ Legge, *The Religions of China*, 42.

the arrival of Christian missionaries was seen by the Chinese literati as a portent of Western colonialism. The suspicion and anxiety incurred preempted any effective interaction between Christianity and the Ru tradition. Therefore, though engendering an amount of “term controversies” among missionary colleagues about how to translate Chinese ideas, James Legge’s voice for the “transcendent” status of *Tian* was almost a self-assertive monologue that received rare, if not zero, responses from his own contemporary Ruist audience.

1.3 The Third Stage

The third stage of Christian-Ru interaction started around World War II when the unstable geo-political situations drove distinguished Chinese intellectuals to Hong Kong or Taiwan, and forced a number of East Asians to emigrate to Western societies. Three major categories of scholars were involved in the interaction: Christian scholars who were usually ordained priests or pastors in various Christian orders, contemporary Chinese Ru philosophers who grew up in China and tried to present Ruism to Western academies using a comparative method, and other Western comparativists who either had no obvious religious affiliation or endorsed “multiple religious affiliations,” urging that religious affiliates ought not to bring undue bias into comparative studies of religions. Given my humble knowledge of this scholarship, I claim no exhaustive set of examples that I will analyze for each category of these scholars in the following. However, I will appraise the major disputes in the transcendent debate in order to make my case at the end of this chapter.

Christian Scholars

As one of the most important religious scholars for the Christian-Ru interaction in late 20th century, Julia Ching's book, *Confucianism and Christianity: A Comparative Study*, represents the depth of interaction in her time. We find complex messages in regard to Ching's view of the transcendence debate.

Ching says: "Confucianism has not developed any doctrine of creation."²² And: ...the Confucian tradition has never developed a theory of creation *ex nihilo*. The later substitution of the word Heaven (*Tian*) for that of Lord-on-High (Supreme Deity in my translation) also strengthened the direction of immanence and the idea of a spontaneous creation. Besides, the word 'Heaven' lacks inherently a notion of personality, and its increasing usage has been accompanied by an evolution in the meaning of the world itself - in a mystical, perhaps 'pantheistic' direction.²³

In spite of this seemingly self-contradictory statement, we can try to understand Ching's view as follows: if according to Christianity creation is understood as relating to a supreme deity standing outside the world and creating the world from nothing, Ruism has nothing similar. Instead, according to Ruism's mainstream teaching, *Tian* overlaps the world, so the world is depicted as a process of spontaneous emergence that can sustain and perpetuate itself. In this way, Ching's understanding of *Tian* is similar to early Catholic missionaries who maintained that *Tian* refers to what the existing natural world is all about, and thus cannot be seen as a creative origin which transcends the world.

²² Ching, *Confucianism and Christianity*, 118.

²³ *Ibid.*, 143.

However, we find Ching's statement about the transcendent dimension of Ruism in other contexts. Since Ruism has no comparable "creation" doctrine, "for the interaction between Christianity and Confucianism, an understanding of faith in man as openness to the transcendent remains the most promising starting point."²⁴ Here, "the transcendent" means "the realm beyond man."²⁵ In Ching's view, Ruism espouses an ethical sort of transcendence, because it teaches that through self-cultivation human individuals can manifest *Tian*'s cosmic features within human society and thereby realize humanistic values which have implications beyond the human realm. However, metaphysically, since *Tian* overlaps the created world, it is not transcendent in comparison with the Christian God.

It is fair to describe Julia Ching's approach to inter-religious interaction as more impartial than that of her Christian predecessors since she thought that neither of the compared traditions was perfect and that a primary purpose of her comparison was that of having the two traditions learn from one another.²⁶ In this way, I think her view that Ruism has no doctrine of creation is more likely to have been inherited from established views shared by previous Christian scholars such as James Legge, rather than that it resulted from biased missionary intentions. Be that as it may, the view that Ruism has no doctrine of creation and, even more, that Ruism has no interest in metaphysics, has gained great traction among Christian scholars and other Western comparativists. One example is that under Julia Ching's intellectual influence, when Hans Kung attempted

²⁴ Ibid., 103.

²⁵ Ibid., 30.

²⁶ Ibid., 6, 215.

“something like a presentation of Christianity in light of the Chinese religions,” viz, Christianity’s “contextual inculturation” in East Asia, Kung did not pay attention to any metaphysical themes in the Ru tradition. Instead, he referred only to Daoism to do his metaphysical comparison between Christianity and Chinese religions.²⁷ If we asked Kung about his view of the transcendence debate, he would likely follow Julia Ching with every step. Considering that in the first stage of Christian-Ru interaction, whether the Ruist *Tian*, or Ultimate Polarity, could be taken as the ultimate creative origin of the cosmos was once a pivotal controversy, we have to conclude that sometimes scholarship regresses.

In the 21st century, we have more Christian scholars who have been born in East Asia and because they can usually read ancient Ruist materials in greater depth, they can pursue more sophisticated forms of Christian-Ru comparison. Even so, concerning the transcendence debate, their contributions bring no more optimism towards resolving the debate than their Christian predecessors.

The first example I will analyze is Hyo-Dong Lee’s *pneuma*-centric comparative theology. Two purposes underlie Lee’s comparative theology: (1) to construct an Asian contextual theology that champions the sovereignty of the Asian embodiment of Christian truth in order to counteract the traditional Eurocentric Christianity featuring its colonialist power of metaphysical “Oneness” and social-political “empire”²⁸; (2) to explore a particular central idea of traditional Ruist metaphysics, the “psychophysical

²⁷ Hans Kung & Julia Ching, *Christianity and Chinese Religions*, xvii, 252.

²⁸ Hyo-Dong Lee, *Spirit, Qi, and the Multitude: A Comparative Theology for the Democracy of Creation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013): 34, 245.

energy” (Qi, or “vital-energy” in my translation). In Lee’s mind, the pervasiveness of psychophysical energy in the cosmos affirms the all-interconnectedness of the “many” cosmic events and thus champions the democratic power of cosmic entities (called, in Lee’s term, the “multitude”) in the overall process of cosmic creation. Lee thinks this Ruist idea could help Christianity to recover the role of “spirit” from its marginalized position in the traditional hierarchical Trinitarian theology so that a post-modern innovation of Christian theology sensitive to contexts and multitudes can be brought out.

In this way, Lee’s approach to comparative theology brings an intriguing message to the transcendence debate. Lee notices that in some parts of the Ru tradition, psychophysical energy is not seen as ultimately real since beyond this some Ru thinkers, such as Zhu Xi, affirmed a more transcendent creative origin of the cosmos. In this way, traditional Ruism shares an idea of “ontological hierarchy” among its key metaphysical concepts which is comparable to the Christian Trinity. Because this similarity does not support the major purposes of Lee’s comparative theology, Lee urges a turn to the more “psychophysical energy”-centric part of Zhu Xi’s thought, or to other more “psychophysical energy”-centric thinkers in the Ru tradition such as Yin-Senzhu or Sun, in order to find available resources to construct his Asian contextual theology. In other words, if “transcendence” is understood as “a deeper ontological context unconditioned by that which depend on it,”²⁹ Lee affirms that Ruism possesses this same idea concerning creation, but for Lee, this part of Ruism is not interesting.

²⁹ Ibid., 276.

Although we understand that scholars always follow their interests to pursue comparative study, Lee's approach risks an over-simplified presentation for each of the compared traditions. For traditional Christian theology, the conception of the supreme power of God's creativity as "*creatio ex nihilo*" does not necessarily contradict individual freedom, as was once brilliantly argued by classical theologians such as Thomas Aquinas and Schleiermacher³⁰. For Ruism, the co-creativity of Heaven, Earth and Human Beings as it is mediated by the all-pervasive vital energy, can be seen as a manifestation of the ultimately unfathomable creative power of Ultimate Polarity, so that an affirmation of the sublimity of Ultimate Polarity's creativity does not necessarily bring any extra imperial order to the *de facto* empirical order among the multitudinous cosmic events³¹. Therefore, although Lee gives a very positive answer to the transcendence debate on Ruism's side, this answer conceals details of Ru metaphysics and Christian theology, and thus brings more, rather than fewer, puzzles to the debate.

The last Christian scholar whose view in the transcendence debate I will analyze is Paulos Huang. In his work aiming "to analyze Confucian understandings of the Christian doctrine of salvation,"³² Huang dedicated one whole chapter, Chapter Five, to argue his view that the Ruist idea of *Taiji* can be hardly seen as ontologically transcendent in comparison to the Christian idea of God. We will see in the following analysis that Huang's argument is basically in line with his Christian predecessors,

³⁰ Please refer to Chapter Four for Aquinas' and Schleiermacher's thought.

³¹ This statement will be analyzed in more detail in Chapter Six through Seven.

³² Paulos Huang, *Confronting Confucian Understandings of the Christian Doctrine of Salvation – A Systematic Theological Analysis of the Basic Problems in the Confucian-Christian Dialogue* (Leiden Brill, 2009): 18.

though ensconced in a much more detailed reading of traditional Confucian texts, and with a more foregrounded consciousness of engaging the transcendence debate.

Though having noticed the fundamental role ascribed by Ruist metaphysicians to the ultimate creative power of *Taiji*, Huang differentiates “create” from “produce”, and argues that *Taiji*’s creativity cannot be thought of as “creating” in the full Christian sense:

Although the *Taiji* is the Source of all things, the birth of all things is, however, not accomplished through ‘creating’ but through ‘producing’. ‘Producing’ implies that the source of the world has no personality, and that the producer and the world are of the same substance. ‘Creating’ implies that the creator of the world has personality, and that the creator and the world are of different substances.

This statement defines the essential difference between ‘creating the world’ and ‘producing the world’, and it throws into relief the difference between *Taiji* and *Shangdi*. The former is a monistic theory, and the latter is an affirmation of theism.³³

Since *Taiji*’s generative power cannot be counted as “creating,” Huang’s further view regarding *Taiji*’s transcendence is as follows:

Within the context of this noted difference, these concepts involve essential distinctions within the notion of transcendence, as the transcendence of *Shangdi* cannot be the same as that of *Taiji*. When *Shangdi* is considered as the source of all things in the world in its act of giving birth and creating, the creator here is quite similar to the Christian God. When *Taiji* is considered as the source of all

³³ Ibid., 41.

things in the world, the producer and the world are of the same substance, bearing no distinction between the world and the producer. Therefore, the producer *Taiji* differs from the creator God.³⁴

Asserting the ultimate creative power of *Shangdi*, a pre-Confucian theist idea as analyzed above, rather than *Taiji*, a post-Confucian naturalized idea, as being similar to the Christian God, Huang's analysis is in line with Matteo Ricci's and James Legge's discourse on "original Confucianism." However, regarding the transcendence debate, since Huang's historical situation was different from his Christian predecessors, his view of whether Ruist metaphysics has a transcendent dimension is actually much more nuanced. He differentiates two meanings of transcendence: an "objective-lying-beyond-the-limits," and an "actively to go beyond some limit," and expresses his ultimate view on the transcendence debate as follows:

These considerations show that it is difficult to say whether the concept of 'transcendence' exists in Neo-Confucianism. The main problem for achieving clarity here is that one is not sure whether in Neo-Confucianism *Taiji* is an objective-lying-beyond-the-limits (of the finite, of knowledge, of the subject, of that which falls within the power of knowledge, and so on). This problem arises because, on the one hand, for Neo-Confucians there is no transcendent world that differs from the material world. ...But, on the other hand, *Taiji* is the source of all

³⁴ Ibid., 41.

things, so that there is no substantial distinction between the two realms, which are both of the same substance.³⁵

The second meaning of transcendence is defined by Huang as “actively to go beyond some limit.” Since Ruism in general maintains that the cosmos is a process of constant changes, and it also urges human beings to pursue constant moral self-cultivation in order for human life to achieve its Heavenly, cosmic values, Huang acknowledges that this sense of transcendence registers with Ruism. Furthermore, Huang called transcendence in the first sense an “ontological transcendence” or “external transcendence,” because what is perceived as transcendent in the first sense by no means depends upon the world or the worldly realities that it creates. And Huang termed the second mode of transcendence an “internal transcendence,” because what is transcendent is in the same substance with what is not, and what human beings are urged to do is to transcend themselves within this same all-encompassing and self-evolving world. In other words, in Huang’s view, although *Taiji* is thought of as “producing” the world, it is still part of the world. In this sense, *Taiji* doesn’t transcend. However, since humans try to be cosmic and the cosmos is always changing, they are transcending themselves.

In my view, there are several problems with Huang’s argument:

(1) The assertion that “creating” must imply a personal creator cannot even do justice to Christian theology. Influenced by Plotinus’ neo-Platonic thought, Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas both entertained a similar idea: that anthropomorphic and personalist terms cannot ultimately be used to portray the infinite depth of God’s

³⁵ Ibid., 42.

creativity, although they continue to be theistic thinkers in their major theological discourses. After them, classical Christian mystics such as Master Eckhart and Cusa Nicolos, and some modern theologians such as Rene Descartes, Schleiermacher, and Paul Tillich, in certain crucial theological moments, all tended to refuse to use personalist language to discuss divine creativity. Therefore, in this sense, Huang's argument is inadequate to the history of Christian theology since "creating" must derive from a person.

(2) Huang's definition of "ontological transcendence" to refer to an "objective-lying-beyond the limits" agrees with Hyo-Dong Lee's conception of "transcendence" as "a deeper ontological context unconditioned by that which depend on it." Interestingly enough, though relying on exactly the same materials, that is, the writings of Song and Ming Ruist masters, Huang and Lee reached opposite conclusions regarding whether *Taiji*'s creativity should be seen as ontologically prior to and independent from its created world. Lee says yes, but Huang says no. If we include Julia Ching's view for comparison, we find that her view on the relationship between *Tian* and the world is very sympathetic to Huang's. In both Huang's and Ching's view, for Ruism, the source of the world is congruent with the world, so in this sense, it is not transcendent in an ontological sense. However, even given that we have no time to delve into the thought of those mentioned Song and Ming Ruist masters, what was quoted above about Ming Ruist followers' refutations of Matteo Ricci's view that *Taiji* cannot be self-sustaining is illuminating: in Chen Houhuang's view, "*Taiji* is the origin of pattern-principles, so it cannot be interpreted merely as one pattern-principle. *Taiji* is where vital-energy derives, so it

cannot be interpreted merely as vital-energy. Pulling back, it has no beginning, so it can initiate things. Pushing forward, it has no end, so it can complete things.” In this view, *Taiji* is hardly to be thought of as ontologically dependent upon any worldly reality. Since it is possible to read the idea of “ontological independence” into some Song and Ming Ruist thinkers’ views on *Taiji*, it is not easy either to sustain Huang’s interpretation that the relationship between *Taiji* and the world is one in which *Taiji* “produces” the world, but also is in and of the same substance of the world.

(3) Huang’s definition of “internal transcendence” is similar to Julia Ching’s idea of “the transcendent” as “the realm beyond man.” In other words, in an anthropological sense, these Christian scholars can achieve a basic consensus that in Ruism human beings are urged to transcend themselves in order to accomplish the cosmic values of human life. However, as shown by the three aforementioned cases, Christian scholars in the third stage of the transcendence debate disagree as to whether the Ruist idea of the ultimate generative power of *Tian*, or *Taiji*, can be comparable to the Christian idea of divine creation in the ontological sense, and accordingly, they disagree about the relationship between *Tian* or *Taiji* in relation to its created world.

In a word, in the third stage of the transcendence debate, Christian scholars are much less mission-driven and more academically disciplined. However, regarding the meaning of “transcendence,” and the appropriateness of this term in characterizing *Taiji*’s ultimate generative power in Ruism, they are in disagreement.

Contemporary Chinese Ru philosophers

I will take three contemporary Chinese Ru philosophers as examples in order to showcase Ru philosophers' stances in the transcendence debate: Mou Zongsan, Liu Shu-hsien and Tu Wei-ming. Although the "religiosity of Ruism," as well as its related theme, the "transcendence of *Tian*", began to be discussed from the very beginning of the movement of contemporary new Ruism, the aforementioned three philosophers deserve more attention in our study because, first, because they have close relationships with one another as student to teacher, and secondly, they either write in English or have been well translated in English so that their thoughts are, compared with other contemporary Chinese Ru philosophers, more accessible to English readers. From the following we will see that the transcendence of Ru discourse is a consistent contention that each of them has argued but from different angles.

One of the most quoted statements from Mou Zongsan (1909-1995) on the transcendence of *Tian* is as follows:

The humanistic ethics which Ruism acknowledged concerns what is necessarily real, not just a theory. However, the mere existence of a humanistic ethics addressing ordinary human life cannot make Ruism a "religion." The reason why Ruism can be thought of as a religion is that in not abandoning the human world, Ruism confirms and acknowledges one true, beautiful, and good "divine reality" or "origin of values" through its humanistic thinking. This "divine reality" or "origin of values" is a universal moral substance. I do not say this universal moral substance refers to the "Dharma outside humans" (as Buddhists did), but I will

say this substance is a transcendent substance. But it is both transcendent and immanent, not segregated (from humans).³⁶

In another quote, Mou Zongsan explicitly refers to this “transcendent substance” as the Way of *Tian*, and explains further why *Tian* is both transcendent and immanent:

The Way of *Tian* is high in the above and refers to something transcendent. When the Way of *Tian* runs through humans, it exists inside humans and becomes the nature of human beings. At this moment, the Way of *Tian* is immanent.

Therefore, we can use terms that Kant was once fond of to say, the Way of *Tian* is on the one hand transcendent, while on the other hand is immanent. Because the Way of *Tian* is both transcendent and immanent, it has both a religious and an ethical meaning. The transcendent meaning of *Tian* is emphasized in religion, while the immanent meaning of *Tian* is emphasized in ethics.³⁷

Because Mou Zongsan’s Ru philosophy follows Wang Yang-ming’s teaching on “attaining one’s authentic conscience” (致良知), he furthermore interprets the nature of human beings as being encapsulated in the “infinite awakening mind-heart (无限智心),” which is permeated by the all-encompassing and constantly creative power of *Tian*. In

³⁶ “儒家所肯定之人倫（倫常），雖是定然的，不是一主義或理論，然徒此現實生活中之人倫並不足以成宗教。必其不捨離人倫而經由人倫以印證並肯定一真善美之‘神性之實’或‘價值之源’，即一普遍的道德實體，而後可以成為宗教。此普遍的道德實體，吾人不說為‘出世間法’，而只說為超越實體。然亦超越亦內在，並不隔離。” Mou Zongsan 牟宗三，生命的學問，台北三民書局，1970: 74. Translation is my own.

³⁷ “天道高高在上，有超越的意義。天道貫注於人身之時，又內在於人而為人的性，這時天道又是內在的 (immanent)。因此，我們可以康德喜用的字眼，說天道一方面是超越的 (transcendent)，另一方面又是內在的 (immanent) (transcendent 與 immanent 是相反字)。天道既超越又內在，此時可謂兼具宗教與道德的意味，宗教重超越義，而道德重內在義。” Mou Zongsan 牟宗三，中國哲學的特質，上海：上海古籍出版社，1997: 21.

relation to this idea of “infinite awakening mind-heart,” Mou also enhances his argument concerning transcendence of *Tian* as follows:

(The infinite awakening mind-heart) is a transcendent and universal moral substance, insofar as it encompasses the myriad things between heaven and earth, and it can be embodied by humans or any other rational beings. ...More analytically, we can say it has an absolute universality, which transcends any human and anything and cannot be grasped by empirical experience. Therefore, it is transcendent. But it is also what comprises the substance of any human and anything, and so, it is immanent.³⁸

From the above statements, we find that when Mou described the Way of *Tian* as transcendent, he meant that, as an all-encompassing and constantly creative cosmic power, *Tian* gave rises to everything in the universe, including the existence of human beings. In this sense, *Tian* can be taken to be both the ontological origin of human existence, and the origin of humanistic values as edified by Ruist moral philosophy.

Compared with the aforementioned meanings of “transcendence” used by Christian scholars, we see that Mou’s argument about the transcendence of *Tian* addresses the understandings of the “transcendence” of *Tian* as both “realm beyond humans” (Julia Ching), and as a capacity to “actively go beyond the limit” (Paulos Huang). However, it does not address the “ontological transcendence” that was pointed out by Paulos Huang, Hyo-Dong Lee, and potentially other early Christian missionary

³⁸ “（無限智心）是一超越的，普遍的道德實體（賅括天地萬物而言者）而可由人或一切理性存有而體現者。... 分解地言之，它有絕對普遍性，越在每一人每一物之上，而又非感性經驗所能及，故為超越的；但它又為一切人物之體，故又為內在的。” Mou Zongsan 牟宗三，圓善論，台北：台灣學生書局，1985: 340.

scholars. In other words, in so far as *Tian* can be portrayed as the origin of moral values, and as a self-generating cosmic power that constantly goes beyond its status quo, Mou would not disagree with his Christian interlocutors that the Ruist idea of *Tian* is transcendent. However, can the Ruist idea of *Tian*, or its metaphysically more accurate referent, *Taiji*, refer to a single reality external to the created world, and therefore be considered as a single unconditioned ontological entity? From the above analysis, we find that regarding this question, while Christian scholars disagree with each other and mostly tend to say no, Mou did not provide any answer.

Around 1970s, Mou Zong-san's student, Liu Shu-hsien (1934-2016), published a series of English articles on Ru religiosity and the transcendence of *Tian*. His views became a popular stance on issues concerning Chinese Ru scholars. The most succinct statement on the issue of transcendence from Liu is as follows:

Now the Confucian approach to the problem of transcendence and immanence becomes clear. Heaven is transcendent in the sense that it is an all-encompassing creative power which works incessantly in the universe. It is not a thing, but it is the origin of all things. And it cannot be detected by sense perceptions, because its 'operations have neither sound nor smell.' But Heaven is also immanent in the sense that it penetrates deep in every detail of the natural order, in general, and of the moral order of man, in particular. But Heaven in no sense should be regarded as something completely beyond nature; on the contrary, it is that which

constitutes the warp and woof of nature. As for man, he is beyond any doubt a creature in the world and hence a part of the natural order.³⁹

Since “Heaven” (*Tian*, 天) is both transcendent and immanent, Liu summarizes its type of transcendence as “immanent transcendence” and then compares it to Christianity’s idea of God as “pure transcendence”:

As Heaven, the creative power, works incessantly in the universe, it is immanent. As it cannot be identified with a physical thing, it is transcendent. The kind of immanent transcendence that characterizes the Confucian faith is in sharp contrast to the pure transcendence of the Christian faith in a supreme God who created, but is not part of, the world.⁴⁰

Because in the Ruist conception, *Tian* creates the world, and also simultaneously pervades and renews the world, Liu likens the theological type of this Ruist conception as “panentheism”⁴¹, yet with his caution that the Ruist idea of *Tian* was typically not conceived as a person, and therefore, in the view of today’s readers, “pan-en-nontheism” may be more faithful to Liu’s idea.

Understood as above, we find that Liu Shu-hsien’s exposition on how transcendent *Tian* is is mostly in line with Mou Zong-san’s thought. But because Liu wrote in English and he had received a more systematic training in Western philosophy

³⁹ Liu Shu-hsien, “The Confucian approach to the problem of Transcendence,” *Philosophy East and West*, vol. xxii, no.1 (1971): 49.

⁴⁰ Liu Shu-hsien, “The Openness of Confucianism,” *Global Dialogue*, vol. 22, no.1 (2000): 93.

⁴¹ Liu Shu-hsien, “Theism from a Chinese perspective,” in *Philosophy East and West*, vol. xxviii, no.4 (1978): 416.

and Christian theology, his views push the “transcendent debate” onto the sharpest edge from the Ruist side.

As for the key question of whether *Tian* should be seen as the origin of the world, Liu’s answer is very positive. As for the subtler question of whether *Tian* should be seen as identical to the world, Liu’s answer is much more nuanced: he emphasizes that *Tian* is not any physical thing, and that in contrast, the pure transcendence of God in Christianity makes God a creator, yet not a part of the world. As a consequence, we can infer that in Liu’s mind, if we define the English word “world” as the “summation of all *de facto* existences of things in any conceivable modes of past, current, and future moments of time,” Liu would still insist that *Tian* is the origin of the world, and thus, in this sense, cannot be identical to the world. However, we need to push Liu a little further, and ask him the following question about the meaning of “ontological transcendence” as specified by Lee and Huang: Does *Tian* ontologically transcend the world in the sense that it can be taken in “a deeper ontological context unconditioned by that which depend on it”? Since Liu always emphasizes that the creating *Tian* is immanent in the world, we cannot easily summarize a clear explanation of his meaning in this regard.

In other words, to reach a more clarified idea about the relationship between *Tian* and the world in the Ruist philosophy, we need sharper philosophical concepts which can place Ruism in a more accurate position for being compared with its Christian counterpart. These concepts must enable us to answer questions such as: Is it legitimate to describe the ultimate creativity of *Tian* as “being ontologically unconditioned”? Also, if such a *Tian* is also immanent in the world, does this mean that the creativity of *Tian*

depends upon things created in the world, or does it merely imply that *Tian*'s creativity can be manifested in the changing-and-becoming of cosmic realities in their *de facto* ways? Furthermore, in Mou Zong-san's and Liu Shu-hsien's views on the transcendence of *Tian*, they both address a related epistemological question of whether humans have a cognitive capacity strong enough to fully grasp *Tian*'s all-encompassing creativity. Inspired by this, in any future discussions of the transcendence of *Tian* we must also differentiate an ontological from an epistemological sort of "priority": *Tian* may be ontologically prior to the world in the sense that it creates the world, while *Tian* may be epistemologically posterior to the world in the sense that only through the world can we know anything about *Tian*'s "unfathomable"⁴² creativity. Confusion between these two senses of "priority" will certainly make the transcendent debate more difficult to navigate.

In a nutshell, Liu shu-hsien's fine analysis of the "immanent transcendence" of *Tian* propels today's comparative metaphysicians concerning the ontological status of *Tian* to devise sharper conceptual tools to organize comparisons in a more methodical way. In this sense, Liu's efforts deserve our respect, although his explicit statements regarding the transcendence debate opened more issues, rather than concluding them. Last but not least, another palpable defect of Liu's comparison is that he wasn't specific enough to point out which kind of Christian idea of God he was talking about. Given the startling variety of Christian ideas of God in the Christian tradition of philosophical theology, we tend to frown upon Liu Shu-hsien's sweeping generalization of

⁴² This feature of *Tian*'s creativity is characterized by Liu Shu-hsien in the above quotes.

Christianity's idea of God as "pure transcendence", i.e., God creating, yet not a part of the world.

The last philosopher I will draw on to present the Ruist position regarding the transcendent debate is Tu Wei-ming (1940-), perhaps still the most well-known contemporary Ruist philosopher. Paulos Huang once generalize Tu's cosmological view in three points:

Tu Weiming has emphasized three important issues concerning the ontology and eschatology of Confucianism: 1) Instead of creation *ex nihilo* by God the creator, Confucianism holds an ontology that the world is a continuous transformation of that which is already there. 2) Different from the Christian understanding that the world is dependent upon God the creator, Confucianism holds an ontology that everything is interconnected and mutually dependent. 3) Instead of a cyclic eschatology or from a beginning to an end, Confucianism holds that the cosmos is forever expanding and the great transformation is unceasing.⁴³

All these points are well grounded in Tu Wei-ming's works. In confirming points 1) and 3), we find that Tu once eloquently argued that "Because of its ceaselessness it (the creative power of *Tian*) does not create in a single act beyond the spatio-temporal sequence. Rather, it creates a continuous and unending process in time and space. It is therefore a 'lasting' event,"⁴⁴ and "If genuine creativity is not the creation of something out of nothing, but a continuous transformation of that which is already there, the world

⁴³ Paulos Huang, *Confronting Confucian Understanding*: 113.

⁴⁴ Tu Wei-ming, *Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiousness* (Albany, N.Y: State University of New York Press, 1989): 81.

as it now exists is the authentic manifestation of the cosmic process in its all-embracing fullness.”⁴⁵ In a further philosophical analysis of Ruist intellectual history, Tu Wei-ming also admits that his view of the Ruist idea of *Tian*’s creativity originates in Zhang Zai’s cosmology centering upon the all-pervasive cosmic Qi which Zhang Zai called “the Great Vacuity”:

Contrary to the idea of creation as a divine function which brings things into existence ex nihilo, the process of transformation in Zhang Zai’s thought is an unceasing operation of creativity. Thus a thing comes into existence not because it has been molded by a mysterious agent. Rather, it is the result of a continuous procedure of differentiation. In this sense, a thing becomes a thing only after it has achieved, as it were, a state of differentiation.⁴⁶

Therefore, regarding the relationship between *Tian* and the world, Tu Wei-ming’s view can be illustrated to be the following: before any concrete thing is brought into being, the world is a giant vacuity pervaded by undifferentiated Qi, and there is a creative power intrinsic to Qi whose self-differentiation and self-perpetuation leads to the ceaseless birth of things in the world, and finally, the entire cosmic process can be encapsulated by one singular Chinese term, *Tian*. In comparison to his teacher, Mou Zong-san, and his contemporary, Liu Shu-hsien, we find Tu Wei-ming’s articulation of the Ruist idea of *Tian* agrees with them about the transcendence of *Tian*’s creativity in the sense that *Tian* is thought of as the origin of things in the world, and *Tian*’s cosmic creativity never

⁴⁵ Tu Wei-ming, “The Continuity of Being: Chinese Visions of Nature,” in Mary Tucker and John Berthrong, ed., *Confucianism and Ecology: the Interrelation of Heaven, Earth and Humans* (Harvard University Press, 1998):108.

⁴⁶ Tu Wei-ming, “Neo-Confucian Ontology: a Preliminary Question,” in *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation*:149-170.

ceases. However, if pushed by the Christian question as to whether *Tian* can be understood to be ontologically prior to the *de facto* existence of the world, compared with the reticence of Mou Zongsan and the ambiguity of Lui Shu-hsien, Tu Wei-ming's view is a direct denial. In Tu's view, the Ru cosmology enunciates that the beginning of the world is actually an inchoate, undifferentiated form of the world, and therefore there is no creator or single creative act standing beyond the world which initiated it. In this way, although the transcendence of *Tian* is a stressed point for Tu's discussion on the religiosity of Ru tradition, his understanding of the term "transcendence" falls nicely into Paul Huang's judgment that in Ruism there is no understanding of "transcendence" as "ontological transcendence," which according to Huang, is what the Christian understanding of God's creativity is bursting with suggestions about.

Huang's second summary point refers to Tu Wei-ming's understanding of the mutual interconnection of all things within the cosmic process of *Tian*. Actually, for Tu Wei-ming, the mutual conditioning of cosmic realities goes so far as to make Tu hold a view that although *Tian* is the creative origin of the world, Humans can be seen as a "co-creator" in the process: "It is true that human nature is imparted from heaven, but human beings are not merely creatures and heaven alone does not exhaust the process of creativity. In an ultimate sense, human beings, in order to manifest their humanity, must themselves fully participate in the creative process of the cosmos." And, "Through reciprocity, humanity becomes interfused with the cosmic transformation and thus, as a co-creator, forms a trinity with Heaven and Earth."⁴⁷ In this respect, Tu Wei-ming's view

⁴⁷ Tu Wei-ming, *Centrality and Commonality*: 78.

is again showing its own creativity. When Mou Zong-san and Liu Shu-hsien argue for the immanence of *Tian*'s creativity, they mean that the creative power of the ontological origin of the world, *Tian*, can be manifested in humanity, as it can be manifested, though not equally, in any other form of cosmic reality. Neither has expressed a view similar to Tu Wei-ming's that *Tian* by itself is not able to fulfill its creativity at a full scale, and that therefore humans need to act as a co-creator and ultimately form a trinity with Heaven and Earth.

Regarding Tu Wei-ming's stance concerning the transcendence debate, I have two comments. First, Tu's straightforward denial of a similar "creatio ex nihilo" thesis in Ruist cosmology places him in line with the views of Julia Ching, Paulos Huang and other early Catholic missionaries. If the world starts from one potential status of the world that is already there, there is really no need to use the term "transcendence" to describe *Tian*'s creativity in its full ontological sense. However, as discussed above, Tu's view follows the Song Ru philosopher Zhang Zai, whose cosmology is usually termed, a "Qi-Rooted Doctrine" (氣本論). In Zhang's view, Qi is the highest ontological category for describing the cosmic process of *Tian*, and in this sense, Zhang has no intention of reaching into a deeper ontological context where Qi originated. From the perspective of Ru intellectual history, Zhang's view represents a cosmological lineage within Ruism which deliberately renders the cryptic phrase in the *Great Commentary*, "Ultimate Polarity creates two modes," to mean a process of a primitive, undifferentiated Qi becoming self-differentiated into concrete things. However, there are other thinkers within Ruism who hold contrasting views to Zhang's. Several examples of these

contrasting views have already been mentioned above, and they are all in a certain sense influenced by Zhou Dun-yi's and Zhu Xi's interpretations of that *Yijing* verse, "Non-polar, and then Ultimate polarity." According to Xu Dashou and Hye Do-Lee's views, this Ruist understanding of the cosmic origin of the world refers to a deeper ontological context, one which is meant to explain the origin of *Qi*, and in this sense it is unwarranted for Tu Wei-ming to straightforwardly deny any similarity between the Christian idea "*creatio ex nihilo*" and the Ruist idea of *Taiji*'s creativity solely by relying on Zhang Zai's understanding of the key *Yijing* verse. In other words, there are various understandings of *Taiji*'s creativity within the Ruist tradition, and so metaphysical comparativists aiming to parse out a more warranted answer regarding the transcendence debate, need to take these different understandings within the same tradition into consideration. I have already raised the same caution against comparativists who apply perhaps equally sweeping generalizations regarding Christian understandings of divine creativity.

Second, Tu's understanding of the "co-creator" status of human beings calls our attention to another confusion in which the transcendence debate could be easily trapped. As noted above, Ruist philosophers virtually all agree that *Tian* can be described as an all-encompassing, constantly creative power or field which is the origin of the world. However, if we look into the variety of categories that classical Ruist cosmological texts have used to describe the inner characteristics of *Tian*, we find that classical Ruist philosophers also intend to reach deeply into the concrete manifestations of *Tian*'s creativity in its cosmic unfoldings. In the *Great Commentary*, we have *Taiji* as the

highest ontological category which gives birth to everything, but we also have two modes (*yin-yang Qi* in later interpretation), four images (four seasons or five phrases), and eight hexagrams (eight natural phenomena), whose interaction explains how concrete cosmic realities change. In the text of *Zhong Yong*, we have *Tian* as the highest category, which refers to the origin of everything, but we also have Heaven (*Tian*), earth, and Humans as three co-creative capacities within *Tian* to show how *Tian*'s all creative power manifests itself in concrete terms. In other words, in order to correctly understand the "co-creative" status of human beings, and its related thesis of the mutual conditioning of all cosmic realities in Tu Wei-ming's discussion, we must differentiate two meanings of *Tian* and two modes of thinking that are equally endorsed by the Ruist texts. First, *Tian* means the all-compassing ontological context mentioned above, but *Tian* also means heaven in relation to earth and human beings. In the first sense, *Tian*'s creativity generates and pervades the cosmos, including human beings, but only in the latter sense, human beings can be described as being on a par with *Tian* and capable of co-creating the entire cosmos. Second, in relation to the first point, the all-encompassing creative power of *Tian* enables us to set it in comparison to the Christian idea of God and ask further whether *Tian* is transcendent or not in regard to its relationship to the created world. If we treat *Tian* as a minor, less-encompassing concept in parallel with earth and human beings, then *Tian* will be like the concepts of Yin and Yang, the four seasons, or the five phrases. In other words, it would simply become a cognitive tool, along with other cosmological concepts, useful in explaining how cosmic realities change in concrete terms. In such concrete terms, the mutual conditioning of all cosmic realities can be seen as a

manifestation of how the all-encompassing creativity of *Tian* works, but it cannot be said that *Tian* therefore loses its all-encompassing status since it would now be in need of cooperation with other cosmic realities in order to fulfill its creative advance. In a nutshell, the varying meanings of *Tian* represent two modes of thinking that are equally endorsed by Ruism: an ontological one that champions *Tian*, or its metaphysically more accurate referent, *Taiji*, as the ultimate creative source of all cosmic realities, and a cosmological one that treats *Tian* as a co-creative power in parallel to earth and humanity in order to explain how cosmic realities evolve in concrete terms. Although it is worthwhile to ask how these two different modes of thinking relate to one another in Ruism, it is only legitimate to investigate the ontological understanding of *Tian* in order to clarify the question of whether the Ruist understanding of it refers to any reality with “ontological transcendence” comparable to the “*creatio ex nihilo*” thesis of Christianity.

Western Comparativists.

The question of whether Ru cosmology includes a transcendent dimension also created great controversies among Western comparative scholars who either have no obvious religious affiliation or who endorse the practice of “multiple religious affiliation” and urge that religious affiliations ought not to bring unchecked biases into comparative studies. Among these controversies, we find two contrasting answers to the aforementioned key question in the transcendence debate: on the one side, stands the “correlative thinking” school which includes distinguished scholars such as Marcel Granet, Joseph Needham, A.C. Graham, Roger Ames, David Hall, etc. On the other side are scholars such as Benjamin Schwartz, Paul Gaudin, Robert Neville, etc.

The “correlative thinking” school tends to essentialize the difference between Chinese thought and its Western counterpart by saying that a mode of “correlative thinking,” which understands all facets of cosmic realities to be mutually conditioned and interconnected, underpins the essence of Chinese cosmology.⁴⁸ This essentialized view of the Chinese-Western contrast, so to speak, makes this school’s comparative conclusions more exclusive and clear-cut than virtually any of the aforementioned cases.

Roger Ames and David Hall are by far the most vocal and influential comparative philosophers in the contemporary expression of the “collective thinking” school. Since “correlative thinking” speaks to the essence of Chinese cosmology, it is for them utterly illegitimate to use the term “transcendent” to characterize it:

“We shall continue to argue here, as we have in the past, that one of the most striking features of Chinese intellectual culture from the perspective of the Western interpreter is that absence in any important sense of transcendence in the articulation of its spiritual, moral and political sensibilities.”⁴⁹ Here, “transcendence” is defined in the “strict” sense, and it is that:

“... we characterize strict transcendence in the following way: A is transcendent with respect to B if the existence, meaning, or import of B cannot be fully accounted for without recourse to A, but the reverse is not true.”⁵⁰

⁴⁸ For “correlative thinking,” see Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, Vol. II (Cambridge University Press, 1956): 280, 302, 286, 582; A.C. Graham, *Yin-Yang and the nature of Correlative Thinking* (The Institute of East Asian Philosophies, 1986): 38.

⁴⁹ David L Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking from the Han: Self, Truth and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture* (State University of New York Press, 1997): 189.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*: 190.

Unsurprisingly, Ames and Hall ascribe this sense of “strict transcendence” to the Christian understanding of God,⁵¹ which Ames sometimes portrays as “Greek and Abrahamic interpretations of origins or beginnings.”⁵² By contrast, for Ames and Hall, the Ruist idea of *Tian* is not “some ontological independent order of Being,” but is “defined as the ‘day’ and the ‘skies’ under which culture accumulates” and thus it maintains a great continuity with the human world. In this sense, “where the Judeo-Christian God, often referred to metonymically as ‘Heaven,’ creates the world, classical Chinese *Tian* is the world.”⁵³

Furthermore, since the Ruist *Tian* and the human world maintain a great continuity and mutually condition each other, Ames and Hall made an even bolder claim that ultimately there is no clear boundary between *Tian* and human beings:

“The notion, *tianrenheyi*, ‘the Continuity between *Tian* and the human world,’ does not just mean anthropomorphism (God is man-made), it also means ‘theomorphism’ (the exemplary person is god-shaped).”⁵⁴

Before we reflect on Ames and Halls’ view regarding the transcendence debate, we need to pay attention to their view of the contrast between Chinese and Western modes of thought which runs even deeper. For example, the Christian understanding of God champions an idea of *creatio ex nihilo*, which is contextless, ahistorical, and emphasizes agency and originality, rather than situation and novelty. At the same time, Chinese thought pivots upon *creatio in situ*, which is context-based, historical, and

⁵¹ Ibid.: 191.

⁵² Roger T. Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary* (University of Hawaii Press, 2011): 226.

⁵³ Ames, *Thinking through the Han*: 241.

⁵⁴ Ibid.: 244.

cherishes situation and novelty.⁵⁵ Also, while conceiving of creation as *creatio in situ*, Chinese thought doesn't include the concept of "ontology," so a typical Chinese cosmology would address a "this-that," rather than the "one-many" question. In extension, this Chinese mode of thought also leads to the absence of western ethical and political ideas such as "individual," "freedom" and "equality,"⁵⁶ etc.

Although the contrasts listed by Ames and Hall between so-called "Chinese" and "Western" thought are so divided as to make us suspicious whether they have committed an Orientalist sort of error when pursuing comparisons, their views regarding the transcendence debate are actually coherent with Tu Wei-ming's view on the relationship between *Tian*, world, and human beings.

As analyzed above, Tu identified *Tian* with the world, and understood *Tian* and human beings as mutually conditioned. In this sense, although Tu continued to ascribe a transcendent characteristic to *Tian*, he employed the term "transcendence" in the sense once implied by his teacher, Mou Zong-san. If we apply the criterion of "strict transcendence" to Tu's understanding of *Tian*, it would not qualify as transcendent.

Very interestingly, if we look into the definition of "strict transcendence," we find that the way Ames and Hall formulate it bears a striking resemblance to Aristotle's definition of "priority" regarding "nature and being," "that is, those which can be without other things, while the others cannot be without them, - a distinction which Plato used"⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Ames, *Role Ethics*: 245. Also refer to Roger T Ames, "Confucian Harmony (he 和) as Creatio in Situ," in *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences* 2 (2010): 7517-7533.

⁵⁶ Ames, *Thinking though Han*: 270-281.

⁵⁷ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book 5, 1019 a1-4, in *Aristotle* Vol.17, 18, Trans. by Hugh Tredennick (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1933, 1989).

The intellectual history of “*creatio ex nihilo*” shows that this Aristotelian understanding of “priority of nature and being” speaks to one key concept – “ontological dependence” – which drives the Christian conception of divine creation as “*creatio ex nihilo*” from its earliest inchoate form in Plato’s cosmology to its first systematic expression in Augustine of Hippo’s thought, a major topic of Chapter Three. We also find that the idea of “ontological dependence,” as firstly defined by Aristotle as “priority of nature and being” which nicely resonates in Ames’ and Hall’s definition of “strict transcendence,” also underlies Paulos Huang’s understanding of transcendence as “objective beyond the limit” and Hey Doo Lee’s understanding as “deeper context unconditioned by things which depend upon it.” In other words, it will be utterly important for scholars’ further engagement with the transcendence debate to clarify whether there may be any idea of “ontological dependence” in the Ruist conception of *Tian*’s ultimate creativity. In this sense, although Ames and Hall’s contrastive comparisons between Chinese and Western thought has engendered great controversies among comparative scholars, we would have to accept their conclusion that there is no strict sense of transcendence in ancient Chinese cosmology if “correlative thinking” is what ancient Chinese cosmology is all about.

Ames and Halls’ essentializing approach to Christian-Ruist comparison led to suspicions among scholars. For example, referring to almost exactly the same materials of ancient Chinese cosmology as Ames and Hall once targeted, Paul Goldin eloquently argues that in various Chinese cosmological texts, there are indeed ideas of “radical beginning”, “single-ordered cosmos” and “creator external to the created world” which are comparable to the Judeo-Christian conception of divine creation as “*creatio ex*

nihilo,” and yet, all of them are conceived by Ames and Hall to be absent from Chinese thought. In this way, Goldin concludes that the view prevalent among some sinologists, notably those from the “correlative thinking” school, that China has no creation myth is itself a myth, representing some unchecked intellectual bias. Besides, Paul Goldin also refutes Ames and Halls’ essentializing comparative methodology, saying: “Finally, if there is one valid generalization about China, it is that China defies generalization. Chinese civilization is simply too huge, too diverse, and too old for neat maxims. For every China-is-this or China-does-not-have-that thesis, one can always find a devastating counterexample, and usually more than one.”⁵⁸ Another scholar who made a similar critique of Ames and Halls’ comparative approach is Robert Smid:

By employing contrasts that appeal to the defining features of each tradition, Hall and Ames are able to capture many of the distinctive features of each of the traditions they compare and also to make it more likely that those features are preserved in any instance of comparison. However, it also leads them unable to address any features that are not definitive in any of these traditions but that may still be significant with respect to their comparative relation. In the case of transcendence, for example, it would be significant if all traditions were concerned with the concept of transcendence, even if not all traditions took this as a defining priority; the very existence of this concern in all traditions would reveal something very fundamental about the way human beings think about the world.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Paul R. Goldin, “The Myth that China Has No Creation Myth,” *Monumenta Serica*, Vol. 56 (2008): 21.

⁵⁹ Robert W. Smid, *Methodologies of Comparative Philosophy: the Pragmatist and Process Traditions* (New York: SUNY Press, 2010): 123.

Though proposing powerful counter-arguments to Ames and Hall's thought, the scholars mentioned so far didn't take the Christian-Ru interaction, as well as its transcendence debate, as the central focus of their scholarship. In contrast, while directly responding to the "correlative thinking" school's stance in the transcendence debate, Robert C.

Neville's thought provides an impressive case.

Regarding Ames and Hall's strict definition of transcendence and their down-to-right denial of any important sense of "transcendence" in Chinese thought, Neville points out possibilities of understanding "transcendence" in its disparate senses in different traditions:

Sometimes the transcendent is what you find when you transcend the borders, such as a Christian God beyond the world of determinations. Other times the transcendent is rather a perspective form which one can think of the world as such, as in Buddhist notions of emptiness or Buddha-mind. Transcendent here means place or perspective beyond, not a principle of explanation as in the Hall-Ames formula. Other times transcendence means change or ground beyond limits, as a moral person can transcend the limitations of his or her past, or transcend one moral stage for another.⁶⁰

Given various understandings of transcendence in world traditions, Neville suggests a "vague" definition of transcendence which is intended to bridge the gap among these understandings and thus yield great comparative value: "Suppose we say that a general definition of transcendence is that to which reference can be made, in any sense of

⁶⁰ Robert C. Neville, *Boston Confucianism: Portable Tradition in the Late-modern World* (New York: SUNY Press, 2000): 150.

reference, only by denying that the referent lies within the boundaries of a specifiable domain, whatever else is supposed or said about the referent.”⁶¹

Guided by this most general definition of “transcendence,” Neville furthermore defines the highest metaphysical principles conceived by various philosophical and religious systems as “ultimacy,” which refers to any “finite-infinite contrast” that marks something as transcendent.

From a comparative perspective, we find Neville’s definitive formula for “transcendence” still lines up with Aristotle’s definition of “priority of nature and being,” Lee’s “ontological unconditionality,” Huang’s “objective beyond limit” and Ames’ “strict transcendence.” All these definitions of “transcendence” resonate with the Greek-originated metaphysical tradition of “creation” pivoting upon the idea of “ontological dependence.” However, one crucial difference exists between Neville’s understanding of transcendence and Ames’ and Huang’s so that Neville also proposes a very different stance regarding the transcendence debate. That is, for Neville, “ultimacy” defined as such can be purely indeterminate. Its grounding ontological power will be used to specifically explain the origin of the existence of cosmic realities, but what those cosmic realities are is still determined by relationships among the cosmic realities. In this sense, the ultimate ontological creative power of “ultimacy” doesn’t impose extra or imperial order upon cosmic realities, and in the epistemological sense, the *de facto* cosmic realities are instead the only way through which human beings could know anything about ultimacy. In contrast, for both Huang and Ames, the highest principle positioning itself

⁶¹ Ibid.: 151.

on the highest end of the chain of “ontological dependence” must be determinate. It is either a “substance” (Huang) or an “independent order of being” (Ames) that not only accounts for the origin of the existence of the world, but also imposes extra order on the empirical one shown by the *de facto* cosmic realities. Of course, Huang and Ames are also different from each other in that Huang thinks a determinate, “substance”-like highest principle is respectable, representing the essence of the Christian idea of God, while Ames thinks it is one source for the crisis of Western culture and that some crucial parts of Western thought need to be replaced by the alternative Chinese thought. Regardless, for both Huang and Ames, the highest ontological principle needs to be determinate. If measured by this standard, both of them would agree that there is no “transcendent” dimension in Ru metaphysics.

Relying upon this unique understanding that what is transcendent is indeterminate, yet ontologically originating of a determinate world, Neville furthermore maps out a lineage of ancient Chinese cosmologies which is rich in this sort of “transcendence”: “In China it is the dominant tradition, illustrated by the opening lines of the *Daodejing*, by Wang Bi, and by the classic statement of Neo-Confucian cosmogony in Zhou Dunyi, among other sources.”⁶². Because this Chinese tradition doesn’t typically conceive of ultimacy as a “determinate deity”, according to Neville’s understanding that what is genuinely ultimate is indeterminate *per se*, Neville thinks the Chinese tradition did even better to represent the idea of “ontological unconditionality” which is implied by the traditional Christian conception of “*creatio ex nihilo*”: “My argument has been that

⁶² Robert C. Neville, *The Good is One, Its Manifestations Many: Confucian Essays on Metaphysics, Morals, Rituals, Institutions, and Genders* (Albany, N.Y: SUNY Press, 2016): 54.

both the category of ontological creativity and the categories of the primary cosmology are illustrated by the Chinese philosophic-religious tradition. They are illustrated there perhaps even more clearly than in the Western traditions that gave rise to my terminology.”⁶³

In a word, if “transcendence” is understood as what makes an infinite-finite contrast and thus is indeterminate itself though creating a determinate world, Neville strongly claims that there is a transcendent dimension in Ruism’s metaphysics, and in a certain sense, it is even more transcendent than the “*creatio ex nihilo*” tradition which mainly conceives of divine creation as deriving from a determinate deity.

Despite Neville’s creative reading of ancient Chinese texts and his powerful argument, Neville’s view regarding the transcendence debate has not yet been extensively engaged by concerned scholars in the debate⁶⁴. One major reason is that the sophistication and abstraction level of Neville’s thought flies high in both the Western metaphysical traditions and in his own creative readings of ancient Chinese materials. Considering the fact that Neville is not a typical sinologist, we expect that his argument would be more powerful if all the addressed Chinese materials would be read in a more systematic and detailed fashion.

⁶³ Robert C. Neville, *Behind the Masks of God: An Essay Toward Comparative Theology* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1991): 83.

⁶⁴ A minor challenge is from May Sim, “The Question of Being, Non-Being, and ‘Creatio ex Nihilo’ in Chinese Philosophy,” in John F Wippel, Ed. *The Ultimate Why Question: why is there anything at all rather than nothing whatsoever?* (Washington D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 2011): 43-62. Ames and Hall never changed their ideas, and it is very rare to see contemporary Chinese Ru scholars who have engaged Neville’s views in any substantial way.

Summary

We have illustrated the major contentions in the transcendence debate during the three stages of Christian-Ru interaction. We find that the startlingly diverse stances regarding the key debated question largely depend upon what criteria of “transcendence” scholars hold and what materials they use to engage in the debate. In retrospect, there are four major implied definitions of “transcendence”, and they can be illustrated this way:

What is transcendent in a philosophical and religious discourse can be defined as:

- (1) Something determinate ontologically unconditioned by the existing world.
- (2) Something indeterminate ontologically unconditioned by the existing world.
- (3) Something constantly advancing beyond the *de facto* existences of realities in the world.
- (4) Something beyond humans, which can be taken as the origin of both the existence and the moral values of human life.

Enlightened by these definitions, we can use the following table 1 to indicate the major scholars’ explicitly stated understandings of the term “transcendence” when they debate each other:

Categories	Names	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Christian Scholars in the First Stage	Matteo Ricci	√			
	Julius Aleni and Alexandre	√			

	de la Charme				
Christian Scholar in the Second Stage	James Legge	√			
Christian Scholars in the Third Stage	Julia Ching			√	√
	Hyo-Dong Lee	√			
	Paulos Huang	√		√	√
Ru Scholars in the Third Stage	Mou Zong-san			√	√
	Liu Shu-hsien			√	√
	Tu Wei-ming			√	√
Independent Western Comparativists	Roger Ames	√			
	Robert Neville		√		

Table 1: Scholars' varying understandings of "transcendence"

One caveat needs to be said about this table which is that for the top three figures, since they never directly used the term “transcendence” to debate their Ruist counterparts, their understandings of “transcendence” are inferred from their conceptions of divine creation.

In addition, we can use another table to illustrate these scholars’ views regarding the key question of the transcendence debate on whether the Ruist idea of *Tian*, or its metaphysically more accurate referent, *Taiji*, is transcendent in comparison with Christian ideas of the Creator-God. Understandably, scholars’ views are based upon their definitions of “transcendence,” and therefore, when reading the following table, we need to bear the first table in mind:

	Is the Ruist idea of “Tian,” or “Taiji” transcendent?
Matteo Ricci	Yes, in the sense of (1), but only yes for “original Ruism” whose metaphysical account pivots upon an understanding of “ <i>Tian</i> ” as “Upper-Lord”
James Legge	Yes, in the sense of (1), but only yes for “original Ruism” whose metaphysical account pivots upon an understanding of “ <i>Tian</i> ” as “Upper-Lord”
Julia Ching	Yes, in the sense (3) and (4). No, in the sense (1).
Hyo-Dong Lee	Yes, in the sense (1), but the “yes” answer is not interesting for the purpose of constructing “East Asian theology”
Paulos Huang	Yes, in the sense (1), (3), (4), but the sense of (1) only exists in “original

	Ruism.” No, in the sense of (1) for other forms of Ruism.
Mou Zong-san	Yes, in the sense of (3) and (4).
Liu Shu-hsien	Yes, in the sense of (3) and (4); uncertain in the sense of (1) or (2)
Tu Wei-ming	Yes, in the sense of (3) and (4); but No, in the sense of (1) or (2)
Roger Ames	No, in the sense of (1)
Robert Neville	Yes, in the sense of (2)

Table 2: Scholars’ varying views in the transcendence debate.

1.4 A Proposed Method for Scholars’ Further Engagement in the Transcendence Debate

Given these astoundingly diverse stances regarding the transcendence debate, is there any hope for future scholars to reach an agreement regarding certain aspects of the debate?

From the above analysis, we find three major reasons underlying such a diversity of views: first, scholars hold different understandings of the term “transcendence.” However, if we look into the aforementioned two tables, we find that scholars more often agree with one another regarding definitions (3) and (4) of transcendence and their applications to comparisons. That means, if “transcendence” is defined in the ways of (3) and (4), scholars within each category, i.e., within the Christian, Ruist or independent

category, not only tend to agree with one another that Ruism has its transcendent dimension, but also more easily reach agreement cross the categorical border. An example of this is that Julia Ching and Paulos Huang would have no disagreement with Mou Zong-san, Liu Shu-hsien and Tu Wei-ming in the transcendence debate if the transcendent element of Ruism is defined in the sense of (3) and (4). However, in comparison, the most contentious point of the transcendence debate focuses upon understandings (1) and (2) of “transcendence.” That is, if “transcendence” is defined ontologically, not only do scholars in different categories disagree each other, they also forcefully disagree with one another within the same category. For example, Hyo-Dong Lee’s stance is rather different from every other Christian scholar, and even Mou Zong-san and Liu Shu-hsien are not entirely in line with Tu Wei-ming at this point. This tells us that an advancement of scholarship regarding the transcendent debate will crucially depend upon a clarification of the questions of whether the idea of “ontological dependence” can be used to characterize the Ruist idea of *Tian*, or *Taiji*, and how Christianity and Ruism can be compared regarding their understandings of creation in terms of “ontological dependence.”

During the transcendence debate, the Christian understanding of divine creation as “*creatio ex nihilo*,” and the Ruist understanding of *Tian*, or *Taiji*’s creativity as “constant creativity” (生生, or Birth Birth), are the most frequently referenced ideas when scholars compare Christianity and Ruism about creation and then try to express their own stances regarding the debate. However, we find the second major reason leading to scholars’ disagreement is that they rely upon different resources from each

tradition to present their understandings of creation. For example, Matteo Ricci's understanding of "*creatio ex nihilo*" is heavily influenced by Thomas Aquinas. Roger Ames and David Hall's version is modeled on this idea's first orthodox expression around the time of the Council of Nicaea. Robert Neville's version is more comprehensive in the sense that he not only studies different theories of "*creatio ex nihilo*" from medieval to modern variations, but has also created his own unique theory of "*creation ex nihilo*." It is also possible that some scholars casually presented the theory of "*creatio ex nihilo*" in very general terms, and thus didn't specify the resource from which they derived their presentations. The same situation could be found in scholars' understandings of *Taiji*'s creativity as well. For example, Ames and Hall rarely use materials in Song and Ming Ruism to present their understanding of *Tian or Taiji*. However, the major conclusions of Hyo-Dong Lee and Paulos Huang are based upon their analysis of key Song Ruist masters' works such as Zhou Dunyi and Zhu Xi. For early Christian missionaries, their affinity to the so-called "original Ruism" manifested by major pre-Confucian classics rich with a personified understanding of *Tian*, and their corresponding critiques of Song and Ming Ruism, clearly speak to their selective tendencies when they try to present Ruism and debate their Ruist counterparts. Even Ruist scholars who use the same range of materials to present their understandings of *Taiji*'s creativity vary in their selections and emphases. For example, Tu Wei-ming is highly influenced by Zhang Zai's cosmology, while Liu Shu-hien is more oriented towards Zhu Xi's. Therefore, in order to design a more methodic comparison for the future development of the transcendence debate, two major strategies are suggested. First,

comparativists must specify which parts of which traditions will be used for comparison, and, accordingly, all their disputants must address the same parts. In other words, we need to constrain our comparative data to a well-defined range of materials for a more organized conversation between comparativists. Second, because the “creatio ex nihilo” of God and the “sheng sheng” of *Taiji* are the most frequently quoted ideas, and also because it is crucial for the advancement of the transcendence debate to clarify the logic of “ontological dependence” which is possibly shared by the two traditions, a second strategy is suggested according to the method of intellectual history. In other words, we need to trace the major historical stages for the development of the idea of “creatio ex nihilo” in Christianity, and that of “*sheng sheng*” in Ruism, in order to clarify how the logic of “ontological development” is continuously implemented by each of these traditions, and after this, we need to pursue a comparison between traditions, rather than between any specific figure or text within each tradition. Among these two strategies, the strength of the first is its affordability in the form of deep reading, while its defects can be predicted: first, the constrained focus upon specific figures or texts will make us lose sight of the continuity of each tradition’s views of creation, and second, since the figures and texts that the current disputants have addressed in the transcendence debate have added up to an amount of data broad enough to define the major features of the compared traditions concerning creation, a further constrained focus on particular figures or texts will make it difficult for its comparative conclusion to remain relevant to disputants whose argumentative foci have heretofore been outside these figures or texts. In other words, any contribution made by the first strategy toward advancing the transcendence

debate will be minimal. For the second strategy, the defects of the first strategy can be rectified. However, its obvious weakness is that a much broader range of comparative data will bring about a huge challenge for scholars' accurate understanding of them. But this challenge can also be met in two ways: first, focusing upon two particular ideas, "*creatio ex nihilo*" and "*sheng sheng*," under the guidance of the logic of "ontological dependence," will significantly decrease the range of comparative data relevant to each compared tradition. In this regard, we need to pay specific attentions to three constitutive moments of the compared ideas in their respective intellectual history: their original seeds, their classical systematic expressions from articulating theologians or philosophers, and their crucial innovations following their classical expressions. If we can pin down these crucial moments for each compared idea and furthermore showcase their continuity using a method of intellectual history, we will have a well-defined, yet strong basis for comparison. Second, "*creatio ex nihilo*" and "*sheng sheng*" are actually heavily studied by scholars in each tradition. What remains for comparativists to do is to show the continuity of these two ideas in each tradition and to compare them across boundaries. In other words, non-comparative experts (viz., specialists) and established researches can be used to test and rectify a comparativist's readings and comparisons of the concerned figures and texts so as to guarantee the accuracy of the comparativist's presentation of the two intellectual histories. After all these due considerations, we find that the second strategy is by far preferable since it will bring the broadest influence upon the transcendence debate and, if implemented methodically, will not undermine the

disciplinary nature of comparative philosophy of religion as a well-controlled and open-to-improvement comparative science.⁶⁵

Last but not least, the unsettleness of the transcendence debate is also due to the fact that comparative methodologies affect scholars' approaches of comparative studies. First, most of the aforementioned scholars are not major contributors to the methodological part of the emerging modern disciplines of comparative religious and theological studies. This is particularly true for virtually all the aforementioned Christian and Ruist scholars. Second, given the fact that most of disputants have not yet been methodologically self-reflective enough to engage in the debate, it would be no surprise if their disparate comparative motifs lead to astoundingly diverse conclusions. For example, early Christian missionaries' comparative studies were mission driven. They chose portions of the Ru tradition which were the best fit for their missionary purpose, while jettisoning the others. A similar method can also be found among independent scholars. For example, Roger Ames and David Hall's comparisons are oriented towards finding in Chinese thought a genuine alternative to Western thought, and therefore, for all those parts of Chinese thought which happen to be in line with their vision of mainstream Western thought, their methodology would not be able to carry them seriously. In comparison, we have to appreciate Hyo-dong Lee's candid statement that his purpose in constructing a post-modern "East Asian theology" already determines that the idea of "ontological transcendence" would not be very interesting for him, although he did admit the existence of this idea in Zhu Xi's thought. However, it remains doubtful whether his

⁶⁵ I will defend such a nature of comparative philosophy of religion in more details in Chapter Two.

would be a beneficial approach for the progress of the transcendence debate. Third, even for scholars who try to maintain an objective stance regarding the transcendence debate, we have not yet found in them a well-defined methodology that takes the great cultural and linguistic gap between the two compared traditions into disciplined consideration. In this regard, Robert Neville's scholarship is an exception. Robert Neville stands in the front and center of the contemporary methodological discussions for comparative religion, theology and philosophy. As I will analyze in the following chapter, Neville's stance in the transcendence debate is also a result of his comparative methodology centering upon his Peircian pragmatist use of the concept of "vague category." So, is Neville's methodology the ultimate one for further scholarly engagement with the transcendence debate? Regardless of answers to this question, we have to conclude that for the progress of scholarship in the transcendence debate, we need to develop a comparative methodology that is able to be minimally biased by one's personal comparative motives, so that it maximally addresses concerns voiced by major scholars in the debate, and also makes comparative conclusions verifiable and falsifiable so that further development of scholarship can be expected on the basis of scholars' communal critical thinking.

CHAPTER TWO

Methodology of Comparative Theology, Religion and Philosophy for the Progress of the Transcendence Debate

At the end of the first chapter, I proposed three strategic points for further engagement with the transcendence debate. Comparatively, the third point is by far the most important since only after being ensconced in an appropriate comparative methodology, can the first two points be effected. Therefore, the central question in the second chapter of this dissertation is what would be a good methodology to apply in comparing the ideas of “*creatio ex nihilo*” and “*sheng sheng*” which are central to Christian and Ruist understandings of creation? In the framework of religious studies,⁶⁶ we find at least three disciplines which are highly relevant to this project, and therefore, we need to consider them one by one in order to uncover the answer.

So, our starting inquiry will be: Is this dissertational study a project of comparative theology or of comparative religion?

2.1 Comparative Theology

In the emerging area of comparative theology, Francis Clooney and Catherine Cornille, who are among the most influential scholars of comparative theology, devised a typology of methodologies for the comparative study of religions, so my reflection will begin here.

⁶⁶ “Religious studies” refers to any scholarly study related to religion. Its further analysis on a comparative basis can be broken down into comparative theology, comparative religion, and comparative philosophy of religion.

Theology, for Clooney, is a tradition of “faith seeking understanding,” and is written for the needs of a particular faith community. Correspondingly, comparative theology should stand within a home tradition, and then search for enriching elements from other traditions, while its ultimate goal through inter-religious encounters should be to enhance and deepen the truth within the home tradition. In contrast, Clooney defines comparative religion as a “detached scholarly research,” which tries to maintain neutrality in regard to where comparison leads.⁶⁷

Clooney’s categorization of comparative methodologies nicely fits the prevalent view on the difference between comparative religion and comparative theology among religious scholars: whether or not to embrace a “confessional” foundation for comparison is the watershed. Standing in line with Clooney’s insights on the nature of comparative theology, Catherine Cornille formulated a more sophisticated version of typology. She divides comparative religious studies into four types: non-confessional, confessional, meta-confessional, and inter-confessional. Among the four types, the first refers to comparative religion, while the other three refer to comparative theology. Cornille’s criterion in distinguishing comparative religion and comparative theology is in tune with Clooney’s. Scholars of comparative theology must weigh in on the issue of truth which is central to one’s faith. If, on the other hand, comparativists try to detach themselves from the first-order issue of truth, then that is comparative religion. Cornille’s definitions of varying types of comparative theology are as follows: “Some view comparative theology

⁶⁷ Francis Clooney, *Comparative Theology, Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Hoboken, N.J.: Weley-Blackwell, 2010): 7.

as a means to gaining a more universal understanding of truth, while others regard it as a way to deepen or enrich the truth as revealed within a particular tradition. The former may be referred to as a ‘meta-confessional’ and the latter as a ‘confessional’ approach to comparative theology.”

Regarding the difference between “meta-confessional” and “confessional” comparative theology, Cornille argues:

In contrast with those who have come to view comparative theology as a meta-confessional discipline that engages different religious traditions around common questions, each tradition contributing to a deeper or higher understanding of the particular question, it is here understood as a (given) faith seeking understanding through dialogue with other-religions.⁶⁸

And the definition for “inter-confessional” is: “This hybrid approach to comparative theology thus moves away from an explicitly confessional to an inter-confessional approach which focuses on the common ground between two traditions, or else oscillates between the normativity of one and the other tradition.”⁶⁹

In other words, confessional comparative theology is like what Clooney does: A given faith seeks understanding through dialogue with other religions. Meta-confessional comparative theology is similar to what Robert C. Neville does: each tradition contributes to a deeper and higher understanding of a shared question whose constructed answer is

⁶⁸ Catherine Cornille, “The Problem of Choice in Comparative Theology,” in *How to Do Comparative Theology*, ed. by Francis Clooney and Klaus von Stosch (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008): 21.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, 24.

expected to have universal argumentative power upon all compared traditions.⁷⁰

Meanwhile, inter-confessional comparative theology is similar to what Raimon Panikkar does: a common ground of all religions is hypothesized at the beginning of the inquiry, and then, an oscillation between the normativity of one and the other traditions.⁷¹

Within this typology, I believe Clooney and Cornille's definition of confessional comparative theology is quite fit for their own comparative work. However, is their differentiation between comparative religion and comparative theology fair enough? Would Robert Neville and Raimon Panikkar accept the titles of meta-confessional and inter-confessional comparative theology in their work?⁷² In order to answer this question, I have to trace back the historical development of comparative religion as a modern discipline, and also, to further clarify Neville's and Panikkar's comparative approaches.

2.2 Comparative Religion

Comparative religion as a modern discipline begins with Max Muller. Its historical background is that after Western colonial powers pervaded other parts of the world, the communication between Christianity and non-Christian religions turned

⁷⁰ I will have a more detailed analysis of Neville's comparative methodology later.

⁷¹ Actually, according to my later analysis, "oscillation" is not adequate for describing Panikkar's methodology. Instead, Panikkar tries to "harmonize" different traditions in an open horizon by envisioning a common ground of human religions, which he called the "cosmotheoandric" intuition. The ascriptions of Neville's study to Cornille's category "meta-confessional comparative theology" and Panikkar's to "inter-confessional comparative theology" are based on my own understanding of Cornille's terms. In Cornille's article quoted above, Cornille categorized Neville's and Panikkar's studies as "meta-confessional comparative theology". However, in a private email communications with me, Cornille has a much more nuanced understanding of Panikkar: "Panikkar (like many other comparative theologians) is on the border between confessional and metaconfessional CT." (Email sent by Catherin Cornille to Bin Song on August 14, 2017). Elaborations of Neville's and Panikkar's comparative methodologies can be found in the following discussion.

⁷² I once personally asked this question to Dr. Neville, who answered, No.

intense, and likewise a scholarly interest in an objective study of religions. Max Muller argues that the discipline, “the Science of Religion,” should first aim to “find out what religion is, what foundation it has in the soul of man, and what laws it follows in its historical growth.”⁷³ As part of the answer, Muller argues that religion is grounded in a common faculty, the one that “enables man to apprehend the Infinite,” within the human mind, and that since this faculty can exert its power in different cultural and linguistic traditions, then a variety of world religions were created. Similarly, Muller believes that all of humanity share the same religious experience, and that that experience was historically expressed in different cultural and linguistic forms. In this regard, Muller formulated a typology of human language consisting of three major types: Aryan, Semitic and East Asian. Using this typology, he tried to trace the development of these languages within different cultures in order to find a law which might govern the historical development of world religions. There are two central concerns for the “Science of Religion,” as envisioned by Muller’s study: how to correctly describe religions, and how to explain their similarities and differences. For the former, Muller needed a typology of religions based upon comparison, and thus, the need for “comparative religion.” For the latter, Muller needed to hypothesize a set of rules, such as rules for sociology, anthropology, linguistics, etc., that would govern the development of world religions. As a result, Muller thinks the “Science of Religion” should be further divided into two parts: “the science of religion is divided into two parts; the former, which has to deal with the

⁷³ Max Muller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion: Four Lectures Delivered at the Royal Institution, in February and May, 1870* (Boston, MA: Adamant Media Corporation, 2001): 16.

historical forms of religion, is called Comparative Theology; the latter, which has to explain the conditions under which religion, whether in its highest or its lowest form, is possible, is called Theoretical Theology.”⁷⁴ One caveat needs to be highlighted when we read these statements of Muller’s. As an emergent new science, Muller’s religious studies retained a Christian influence, especially in the way in which he created terms for this new science. For example, when he talks about common human religious experience, he uses Christian terms, by saying, “the superscription, when we can read it again, will be, not in Judah only, but in the language of all the races of the world, the Word of God, revealed, where alone it can be revealed, revealed in the heart of man.”⁷⁵ Even so, as scholars have noticed for a long time, the science of religion as conceived by Muller has a tendency towards de-Christianization. For Muller, the most concerning tasks are right description and sound explanation. He did not intend to judge what is true or truer in regard to the first-order issue of truth central to a religious practitioner’s faith. In this way, what Muller named “Comparative Theology” is actually “Comparative Religion,” defined in Clooney and Cornille’s sense.

After Max Muller, one of the most important scholars who promoted the “science of religion” and the study of comparative religion using virtually the same methodology as Muller’s was Mircea Eliade. Eliade defined the goal of comparative religion as answering, “first, what is religion and, secondly, how far can one talk of the history of religion?”⁷⁶ a definition very similar to Muller’s understanding. However, compared

⁷⁴ Ibid., 24.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 24.

⁷⁶ Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (Lincoln, N.E: Bison Books, 1996): xviii.

with Muller, Eliade pushes the methodology for an objective study of religions one step further, and insists upon a “phenomenological” approach. For Eliade, religion cannot be explained adequately by means of sociology, psychology, economics, linguistics or art. Any such attempt, he argues, reduces religion fundamentally to something other than itself. Eliade rejected every social-scientific attempt to causally explain religious experience. As a phenomenologist, Eliade is persistent to the point that “religion must be described and understood on its own terms, or within its own plane of reference.”⁷⁷ In other words, while causal explanation was important for Max Muller when he compared religions, the focus of comparison for Eliade became mostly description and interpretation. This further step is quite understandable given the direction Muller had set for the study of comparative religion. Comparison itself doesn’t yield explanation, but it does provide incentives for description and interpretation. In my view, explanation can be subsumed under a broader sort of “interpretation,” and which explanatory approach a comparativist would take will depend upon his or her particular scholarly interest, i.e., a way of interpretation. In this way, Eliade’s insight informs later comparativists that any explanation of comparative religious data must be based upon an accurate description and a sound understanding of the data.

As for concrete comparisons that Eliade made, since comparative religion was still in an emergent stage in his time, his comparative study spotlighted similarity more than difference, which is similar to Muller’s methodology. Eliade finds that there is a “cosmic religious feeling” shared by all major world religions, and he is very interested

⁷⁷ Ibid., xi.

in finding out how human symbolic thinking reflects on and expresses this feeling. Then he tries to provide a generalization about what religion is and how it has evolved through human history. His research about “sacred time” and “sacred place” on the basis of a phenomenological investigation into different religious rituals is famous. For him, the creation of symbol systems is an imaginative response by *homo religiosus* to the presence of “the sacred” in the world.

If we compare Eliade’s and Muller’s methodologies of comparative religion, we find that they both attend to the commonality of religions more than to their differences. They both emphasize the role of language and symbolic thinking in shaping the way that humans engage with “the infinite” or with “the sacred.” Even if Eliade refused to explain religious data before he had a sound description of each religion on its own terms, like Muller, his phenomenological comparison did not address the first-order issue of truth. In other words, he would not evaluate religious traditions regarding their truth-claims. In this sense, Eliade’s and Muller’s comparative studies of religions perfectly comply with the nature of “comparative religion,” as defined by Clooney and Cornille.

Nevertheless, the shortcomings of the religious studies pursued by Muller and Eliade elicited criticisms of the discipline of comparative religion in general, and these criticisms were mainly from the post-modernists. The emphasis upon commonality rather than difference made post-modernists doubt that comparison inevitably brings prejudice, implies cultural imperialism and thus, waters down the uniqueness of each compared case. Besides, the historical approach taken by Muller and Eliade made post-modernists suspicious of whether this approach might have an intrinsic connection to evolution

theory and social Darwinism. Because Muller and Eliade didn't succeed in avoiding Christian vocabularies to structure their comparative studies, post-modernists asserted that what underlay the historical approach of the comparative study of religions is actually a Christian and European triumphalism. Everything about Christianity and European culture is the paradigm, and all other religions are just located in different stages of evolution which will ultimately progress towards Christianity.⁷⁸

Although it is hard to confirm these criticisms as completely fair, they do pose serious challenges to the discipline of comparative religion. How can scholars correctly describe the compared tradition without bringing along unchecked biases? How can scholars clarify their own perspectives, which usually motivate comparisons, in order to yield legitimate and interesting explanations or interpretation? Following these post-modernist criticisms towards the methodology of comparative religion, it is mainly for the purpose of addressing these two questions that contemporary scholars of comparative religion continue to defend the legitimacy of their discipline and to pursue their own comparisons. For Robert A Segal, comparison is necessary for any cognitive process, for to know one thing is to place it in comparison with others and thus to think of it in a category. However, the impartiality of comparison doesn't derive from any scholarly bird's eye view transcending varying traditions. Instead, the objectivity of comparison can only be reached by an open-ended process of continual hypothesizing and verification. Regarding the difference between description and explanation, Segal thinks

⁷⁸ On post-modern critiques on comparison, please refer to Robert A Segal, "In Defense of the Comparative Method." *Numen* 48, 3 (2001): 344-347, and "Introduction", in Kimberley C Patton and Benjamin C. Ray ed, *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age* (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2000): 1-22 and its related chapters.

comparison itself doesn't provide explanation, but it does trigger scholarly interest in thematizing the process of data collection so as to engender explanation. According to Segal's view, scholars can compare in any respect and from any perspective as long as they make these respects and perspectives available to a scholarly community and thus, vulnerable to rational criticism⁷⁹. For Bruce Lincoln, comparative study is utterly important because this is almost the only way to expose ideological assumptions and institutional establishments that are usually taken for granted within a tradition. In other words, comparison is necessary to critical thinking. Lincoln also furnishes principles to safeguard the impartiality and efficacy of comparison, such as "the more examples compared, the more superficial and preemptory is the analysis of each," "with regard to the universalizing type: there are no true universals, save at a level of generalization so high as to yield only banalities," and "it is time we entertained comparatism of weaker and more modest sorts that a) focus on a relatively small number of comparanda that the researcher can study closely; b) are equally attentive to relations of similarity and those of difference," etc.⁸⁰ From these statements we can tell that following the post-modern criticisms and further self-reflection by contemporary scholars upon the disciplinary nature of comparative religion, the study of comparative religion began emphasizing difference more than similarity. Also, the pursuit of "objectivity" and "impartiality" during the process of comparison is now grounded in a more sophisticated form of methodology.

⁷⁹ Segal, "the Comparative Method": 339-373.

⁸⁰ Bruce Lincoln, *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars: Critical Explorations in the History of Religions* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015): 9-12.

We have to mention one contemporary scholar of comparative religion who is able to represent a long history of methodological reflections within the discipline, and that is Jonathan Z. Smith.

To the aforementioned challenge by post-modernists about how to correctly describe compared traditions, Smith's answer is in tune with that of Segal and Lincoln. He conceives the study of comparative religion as an open-ended process of description, comparison, re-description and rectification. However, the breakthrough Smith makes is that he notices the importance of choosing appropriate categories for advancing impartial comparisons. In this regard, he learned a lot from Wittgenstein's thought about "family resemblance" and says,

I summarized only the new numerical taxonomic proposals as representing a self-consciously polythetic mode of classification which surrendered the idea of perfect, unique, single differentia - a taxonomy which retained the notion of necessary but abandoned the notion of sufficient criteria for admission to a class. Comparison would be based on a multiplicity of traits, not all of which might be possessed by any individual member of the class.⁸¹

In my view, Smith's thinking about the "multiplicity of traits" of a class that are not necessarily shared by all individual members within the class reminds us of Neville's use of "vague category" and Stalnaker's use of "bridge concept." These are all great and similar achievements made by contemporary comparative scholars when they are seeking

⁸¹ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004): 22.

the possibility and accuracy of comparison. If we use them correctly, this would be the most promising methodology for comparative religion and thus suitable for my comparative project. I will provide a detailed analysis about these similar concepts shortly.

As for the second challenge concerning how to clarify scholars' perspectives and interests in order to yield legitimate comparisons, Smith proposes his understanding of religion, as well as the study of comparative religion, to be a "situational thinking." He says: "religion is not best understood as a disclosure that gives rise to a particular mode of experience. To the contrary, religion is the relentlessly human activity to thinking through situation, an understanding that requires assenting to Levi-Strauss's dictum, 'man has always been thinking equally well.'⁸² By the same token, not only is religion situational thinking and practice, but scholars of comparative religion also pursue comparisons in order to respond to their scholarly situations. In my view, Smith's use of "situation" is very similar to Gadamer's "horizon,"⁸³ since they both emphasize the influence of their own existential conditions upon scholars' humanistic understanding of the past. If we combine the two major insights of Smith's methodology, we find that what he teaches us about the nature of comparative religion is that: 1) scholars of comparative religion have their own situations. These situations are starting points of comparative study, and they also constrain perspectives for scholars' description, explanation and interpretation of religious data; and 2) comparison, whose impartiality is featured by the

⁸² Ibid., 32.

⁸³ This dissertation will not include a presentation and analysis of Gadamer's hermeneutics, since after being devised in the middle of the 20th century, Gadamer's hermeneutical works have become classical, and thus, a must-read for philosophical learners.

use of concepts of “family resemblance” and an endless process of description and re-description, is pursued by scholars to tackle their concerned situations. For these two points, the second mainly answers the question “how” comparison will be done, and the first answers the question “why” comparison is done and its related question “so what” is the relevance of comparative study.

From Jonathan Smith’s methodological reflection, we find that what Smith has in mind is definitely not the “confessional” type of comparative theology as it was defined by Clooney and Cornille. It has no confessional basis since it is aiming for an impartial description of compared traditions and thus does not specify the content of a conclusion to which comparison could lead. However, what if a comparative study aimed for an impartial description of compared traditions, but also tried to tackle a particular scholarly situation pertaining to the first-order issue of truth? In other words, the meta-confessional and inter-confessional approaches of comparative theology, as defined by Cornille, is actually not very different from comparative religion as it is understood by Jonathan Smith. In regard to the fact that these two approaches address the first-order issue of truth central to one’s faith, or one’s own faithful life, they are “comparative theology,” according to Cornille’s definition. However, since these two approaches aim at an impartial understanding of compared traditions and do not specify the direction of comparative conclusion in advance, they are “comparative religion” according to Smith’s conception. In what follows, I will raise two examples, Raimon Panikkar’s and Robert Neville’s comparative religious studies, in order to illustrate how this blurred boundary plays out among leading scholars of comparative religious studies.

Panikkar thinks there is a common reality, featured by a “theoanthropocosmic” or “cosmotheandric” nature, which is shared by all religions and thus engaged by all humanity. In this way, he calls inter-religious dialogue an “intra-religious dialogue,” from which we find that although we are each different from others, we are together and interconnected within the same cosmic Self.⁸⁴ However, different from John Hick’s pluralistic view of inter-religious dialogue which affirms *a priori* that all religions represent the same common reality even before any substantial inter-religious dialogue starts, Panikkar’s view of pluralism is more dynamic and flexible. Panikkar says, “It (dialogue) assumes that we all share in a reality that does not exist independently and outside our own sharing in it, and yet without exhausting it. Our participation is always partial, and reality is more than just the sum total of its parts.”⁸⁵ In other words, even if we have to acknowledge a shared common reality as an ontological foundation of inter-religious dialogue so that the process of dialogue can be driven and regulated by an ideal, the common ground is ultimately earned, by bits and pieces, through a meticulously practiced dialogue. In this sense, the ground is accomplished *a posteriori*, and thus, not taken for granted in advance.

On the other hand, since Panikkar doesn’t presume *a priori* that each religion represents that same common reality in a parallel way, he also respects their specificity. He says:

the relation between religions is neither of the type of exclusivism (only mine), or inclusivism (the mine embraces all the others), or parallelism (we are running

⁸⁴ Raimon Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue* (Paulist Press, 1999): xvii-xix.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

independently toward the same goal)⁸⁶, but one of a sui generis perichoresis or circumnecessio, that is, of mutual interpenetration without the loss of the proper peculiarities of each religiousness.⁸⁷

Regarding Christian biases that contemporary religious comparativists are already alert to, Panikkar's understanding of the Christian uniqueness is in tune with his pluralistic model of inter-religious dialogue. He says:

Christ is the only mediator, but he is not the monopoly of Christians and in fact, he is present and effective in any authentic religion, whatever the form or the name. ...Further, the Christian principles have no a priori paradigmatic value, so it is not a question of just searching for possible equivalents elsewhere. The fair procedure is to start from all possible starting points and witness to the actual encounters taking place along the way.⁸⁸

As shown by comparisons Pannikar made of Christianity, Buddhism, and modern Humanism, what he aimed at through comparative study of religions is, in Neville's terms, a "mutually inhabiting" within multiple traditions, with an openness to a syncretistic blurring of boundaries, so as to be able to see "from the inside the sense in which each is true."⁸⁹ Even so, this doesn't mean that there is no contradiction among religious claims. Neither does it mean that there is no risk of "conversion" for interlocutors. But it does mean that intellectual contradiction would not lead to personal

⁸⁶ This refers to Hick's pluralism. A good summary of Hick's pluralism and other related views on the theology of religions can be found at Marianne Moyaert, *In Response to the Religious Other: Ricoeur and the Fragility of Interreligious Encounter* (Lexington Books, 2014).

⁸⁷ Panikkar, *Intra*, 9.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁸⁹ Please refer to Clooney, *Comparative Theology*: 46.

antagonism, and that conversion doesn't imply a total abandonment of one's past, but that a new harmony is established within one's mind and heart. In this way, the highest goal of Panikkar's vision of inter-religious dialogue and comparative study of religions can be encapsulated as "dynamic harmony"⁹⁰ which is accomplished on the basis of an acknowledgement of the *de facto* existence of religious pluralism, a regulative ideal of the shared "theoantropocosmic" reality, and a continually unfolding intra-religious dialogue which aims at a pervasive interpenetration of all religious wisdom.

Understood as such, we find that the aforementioned "blurred boundary" regarding the disciplinary natures of comparative theology and comparative religion can be nicely applied to Panikkar. Although Panikkar is a Christian, his Christian commitment is perspectival, rather than confessional predetermining the direction of comparison. The aim of his comparison is to learn the specificity of each compared tradition, and then to harmonize their teachings in order for him to more sufficiently engage with the inexhaustible traits of ultimate reality. Insofar as Panikkar's comparison pertains to the first-order issue of truth, it is comparative theology. However, insofar as it has no confessional basis and tries to treat compared traditions impartially, it is comparative religion.

We can see the blurred boundary between comparative theology and comparative religion would even be more manifest in the case of Robert Neville. Regarding the purpose of theological dialogue, Neville believes that "we should not think that the work of theological dialogue is only to look good in a dialogue, or to make for cultural peace

⁹⁰ This goal is clearly stated by Panikkar in his *The Cosmotheandric Experience: Emerging Religious Consciousness* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993): 2.

and mutual accommodation. Rather, it is for the sake of ascertaining the truth.”

Therefore, “in theological dialogue, the creed would be a matter of theological truth if and only if it could be communicated as an assertion about divine matters that other traditions recognize.”⁹¹ In this sense, Neville refuses to understand theology as “a (given) faith seeking understanding” which must be constrained within a bounded faith community, and then he also maintains that neither a sociological nor a voluntaristic approach to theological study is a legitimate way to argue for religious truth:

Sociological identification is the non-argument that says something is true because my group believes it. ...Voluntarism is the non-argument that asserts a belief on the grounds that it is asserted, either out of a kind of intellectual truth, an appeal to authority, or an expression of commitment. Even if ‘willing to believe’ something is necessary to put one in the position of entertaining certain crucial evidence, as the *fides quaerens intellectum* tradition has claimed, the willing as such is only a condition for knowing the truth, not evidence for the truth.⁹²

Therefore, for Neville, comparative theology has its specific locus within the Christian tradition of “philosophical theology” which aims to search for truth in ultimate reality, and the obtained truth-claims can be expected to have inter-religious relevance and cross-cultural efficacy. In Neville’s view, comparison is necessary for realizing the evangelical nature of Christian truth-claims. This is so because if any claim from any tradition be counted as truth, it must be equally true across all other traditions. In this way,

⁹¹ Robert C. Neville, *Behind the Masks of God: An Essay Toward Comparative Theology* (New York: SUNY Press, 1991): 168.

⁹² *Ibid.* 165.

comparative study of religions becomes both a resource and a test-field for Neville to refine and verify hypotheses about the first-order issue of truth.

Understood in this way, Neville's comparison can be categorized as comparative religion since it has no confessional basis. However, why does Neville still term his project comparative theology, rather than comparative religion? I believe there are two main reasons. First, most of the time, the scholarship of comparative religion features historical, sociological or anthropological approaches that do not address the first-order issue of truth. Second, Neville's commitment to the Christian tradition is a perspectival starting point which renders a particular angle for him to see other traditions, including Ruism. However, if comparative religion is defined as an impartial comparative study of religions with an aim tackling scholars' particular situations, including the one pertaining to the first-order issue of religious truth, I believe Neville would accept his comparative study as one of comparative religion with a mainly philosophical or theological interest ("theological" is defined in Neville's unique way). In retrospect, although Cornille's typology of meta-confessional and inter-confessional comparative theologies speaks to some features of Panikkar's and Neville's comparative works, I do not think either of them would be willing to accept these categories. This is because both of them have significantly drifted from the confines of any "home" tradition, and therefore it would not be appropriate for them to use any term centering on the adjective "confessional" to describe their scholarship unless Cornille can provide a more nuanced definition of the term beyond what is conventional to the "faith-seeking-understanding" traditions.

So far, I have investigated Clooney's and Cornille's taxonomy of comparative study of religions, as well as Smith's understanding of comparative religion. I also analyzed Panikkar's and Neville's comparative studies to show that there are certain cases for which it is difficult, if not pointless, to insist upon a rigid boundary between comparative theology and comparative religion. As a consequence, the most urgent issue for me is to decide where I should locate my own comparative study.

First, Ruism is not a revelatory religion, and thus, its intellectual discourse on and existential engagement with ultimate reality, the *Tian-Dao* (the Way of Heaven), is not a tradition of "faith seeking understanding." In this respect, a Ru's religious commitment to the Ruist tradition would be similar to an intellectually endorsed philosophical school. Surely, Ruism is more than a philosophy because it has a rich history of ritual-performances, spiritual and moral self-cultivation, as well as an institutional establishment which aims to internalize its philosophical wisdom within practitioners' personhood, both individually and socially. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this comparative project which aims to engage in a scholar debate, it would be adequate to understand Ruism mainly as a philosophical tradition that contains a panoply of religious ideas pertaining to the first-order issue of truth. In this sense, since Ruist philosophy is not a tradition of "faith seeking understanding," it would be unfair for any kind of comparison between Christianity and Ruism to take a strictly confessional approach. If a confessional approach were to be taken from the point of view of Christianity, a Christian bias will inevitably be brought into the comparison such that an accurate understanding of Ruism would become difficult. This consequence has been played out by similar

comparative endeavors following the missiology of the “contextual inculturation” of Christianity attempted by Christian missionaries and theologians, some of whom were analyzed in the first chapter. On the other hand, if a confessional approach were to be taken from the standpoint of Ruism, which means that if some prioritizing stance, such as proving the superiority of Ruism over Christianity, were to be taken for granted even before comparison, this will equally hurt the impartiality of comparison and make an accurate understanding of Christianity equally difficult.⁹³ In a word, because Ruism is not a revelatory tradition, and also because a confessional approach of comparative study would tend to be biased in general, as showcased in the history of Christian-Ru interaction, I conclude that the best way to categorize my comparison between Ruism and Christianity is one of comparative religion with a philosophical interest, or comparative philosophy of religion.

Two caveats need to be brought out regarding this conclusion. First, it certainly does not mean that scholars could not make a comparison between Ruism and Christianity using the methodology of comparative religion along with other interests, such as that of sociology or anthropology. However, because my comparison addresses the first-order issue of truth about ultimate reality, it will be best for me to admit that my project of comparative religion has a distinctly philosophical interest. Secondly, the reason I don't use “comparative theology” in Neville's sense is more about convention than any substantial distinction between comparative religion and comparative theology,

⁹³ We can find this sort of endeavors prominent in the first generations of contemporary Ru philosophers such as Mou Zong-san, whose purpose of Christian-Ru comparison is to prove the former as an “imperfect” religion (不圓之教), and the latter as a “perfect” one (圓教). Mou Zong-san 牟宗三, 中國哲學的特質, 52-58.

for which there is none in Neville's case. The conventional use of "theology" is heavily loaded with its Christian undertone, and unlike Neville, I do not take the Christian tradition of "philosophical theology" as my perspectival starting-point, given my educational and ethnological background. Thirdly, another difference between my project and Dr. Neville's is that although mine addresses the first-order issue of truth regarding ultimate reality, my project's primary purpose is not to construct a meta-theory of ultimate reality purporting to be cross-culturally effective. Instead, unpacking the terms "creation" and "transcendence" in the two compared traditions, and thus advancing the progress of the aforementioned transcendence debate, will be the main driving motif of my comparison. This will make my comparative methodology focus more on intellectual history, and whenever philosophical construction is needed, it will be oriented to tackling controversies among scholarly disputants, rather than constructing my own meta-theory. This last point will be elaborated more at the end of this chapter.

2.3 Methodologies for Comparative Religion with a Philosophical Interest or Comparative Philosophy of Religion

Among contemporary comparativists who share a major interest in the comparison between Christianity and Ruism, there are three whose scholarship is exactly located within the category "comparative religion with a philosophical interest," or "comparative philosophy of religion." Thus, an investigation into their comparative methodologies will be of utmost importance for parsing the most viable methodology for my comparative study. They are Robert C. Neville, Lee H. Yearley, and Aaron Stalnaker.

Interestingly enough, all three philosophers acknowledge the importance of proper comparative categories. Their methodologies are respectively featured by a discussion of the significance of “vague category,” “analogical term” or “bridge concept.” Also, they each do constructive work in order to render comparative study relevant to broader issues beyond compared traditions. In the following part of this chapter, I will analyze the methodologies of these three philosophers and try to present my own methodological standpoint afterwards.

Neville’s comparative methodology centers on the use of vague category deriving from Peirce’s pragmatic semiotics.

For Peirce, a sign that is objectively indeterminate in any respect is objectively vague in so far as it reserves further determination to be made in some other conceivable sign, or at least does not appoint the interpreter as its deputy in this office. That is, a sign is vague if it is capable of further specification in multiple ways, all of which are not necessarily compatible with another; Peirce contrasts this with a “general” sign, which is specified in the same way in every instance. The strength of this concept is that it allows for the creation of signs that are not wholly determined by the original context of their creation.⁹⁴

Understood in this way, a vague category is helpful for comparative purposes because 1) it enables us to find the similarity between two traditions so as to make a comparison possible; 2) the similarity can be specified as vaguely as possible so that it allows

⁹⁴ Robert D. Smid, *Methodologies of Comparative Philosophy: The Pragmatist and Process Traditions* (Albany, N.Y: SUNY Press, 2010): 143.

comparativists to attend to the specificities of compared traditions so that the least amount of bias is carried over from one tradition to the other; and 3) hypotheses about the similarity and difference between compared traditions can be devised so as to be susceptible of further verification and reformulation. As a result, comparison can be pursued in an open-ended process regarding the same or multiple comparative points. Correspondingly, the way a vague category is elicited is conceived as “a conception from some one tradition is extended, abstracted further, and purified of its particularities to serve as a vague ground for comparison.”⁹⁵ Therefore, the concrete comparative process “is concerned primarily with the identification, vetting, and improvement of cross-cultural categories for comparison.”⁹⁶ Given what Neville accomplished in his comparison between Christianity and Ruism, the efficacy of this comparative method is demonstrated. For example, scholars such as Roger Ames and David Hall, who lack this kind of method, have to make use of the concept of “transcendence,” which is molded upon a particular kind of understanding in the Christian tradition, to compare directly with its counterpart in Ruism, and hence, they conclude that there is no such idea at all in Ruism. In contrast, through a comprehensive survey of varying understandings of “transcendence” in the Christian tradition, Neville would be able to formulate a category of “transcendence” which is vague enough to allow him to detect similar transcendent elements in Ruism and thereby to make a new comparison possible.

As for the criteria of success for comparisons, Neville and Wildman say: “if the category of comparison vaguely considered is indeed a common respect for comparison,

⁹⁵ Neville, *Behind the Masks*: 4.

⁹⁶ Smid, *Methodologies*: 152

if the specifications of the category are made with pains taken to avoid imposing biases, and if the point of comparison is legitimate, then the translations of the specifications into the language of the category can allow of genuine comparisons.”⁹⁷ Among the three conditions, the third one of “legitimacy” speaks to the scholar’s interest and personal situation which orient comparisons towards a particular explanative or interpretative direction. Neville has a distinct metaphysical interest so that the vague category which he chooses for comparison is put to further use to construct his metaphysical system. In this way, he even claimed that “constructed together into a comparative category, they (world religions) present an extraordinary rich but logically coherent collage of visions of the ultimate, that which is most important because of the nature of reality.”⁹⁸ This is an extraordinary statement regarding the achievement of comparative studies of religion. However, in my view, Neville’s metaphysical interest also puts Neville’s comparative methodology in a difficulty. The metaphysical system constructed by Neville with the help of comparative vague categories tends to be so abstract that it is hard for people within the compared traditions to find resonances with Neville’s comparison. This renders scholars such as Robert Smid to become suspicious that in Neville’s case, “the origin for comparative inquiry seems to be grounded in sheer imaginative imagination, which is as productive for creative contributions as it is inscrutable for fundamental disagreement.”⁹⁹ Nevertheless, I believe one way to improve Neville’s method is to add

⁹⁷ Wesley J. Wildman and Robert C. Neville, “How Our Approach to Comparison Relates to Others,” in Robert C. Neville, ed., *Ultimate Realities: A Volume in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 2000): 213. Dr. Wildman, a distinguished philosopher of religion and theologian, is a colleague of Dr. Neville at School of Theology of BU, and this chapter is co-written by them.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁹⁹ Smid, *Methodologies*, 203.

Gadamer's hermeneutical consciousness (which, in my earlier analysis, is in tune with Jonathan Smith's situational thinking) to Neville's comparative formula. That means that in order to resolve the question of whether the point of comparison is legitimate, comparativists should search for comparative points among the entire histories and contemporary situations of compared traditions. Therefore, when philosophical construction is needed, after an appropriate vague category is chosen and an impartial comparative description is aptly pursued, the comparativist's philosophical creativity can be exerted in that direction to which an hermeneutical survey of situations or horizons in the compared traditions indicates. In this way, the comparison undertaken by a combination of Neville's "vague category" and Smith's situational thinking could be used to address simultaneously the concerns of whether comparison is accurate and whether the comparative point is legitimate and relevant.

The second comparative methodology that I need to comment on is that of Yearley when he compared Mencius and Aquinas concerning their theories of virtue and conceptions of courage. Similar to Neville, Yearley noticed that the pivotal procedure for comparison is "the choice of which categories to employ when we do comparisons and how best to use them."¹⁰⁰ He named his choice of comparative category "analogical term": "the notion that analogical terms have systematically related focal and secondary meaning gives us a productive approach to that problem (about the choice of comparative categories)." From this quote we can see that "analogical term" is also intended by Yearley to share a certain degree of "vagueness," and the way Yearley chooses

¹⁰⁰ Lee H. Yearley, *Mencius and Aquinas: Theories of Virtue and Conceptions of Courage* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1990): 190.

“analogical term” is also not very different: “I think good reasons exist for my initially deriving the focal meaning of most key terms from contemporary English usage; that is, from my understanding of the terms, I must adjust those chosen focal terms as the comparison proceeds...”¹⁰¹ In other words, an open-ended process of choosing and refining analogical terms is considered by Yearley to be necessary for accurate comparison. However, compared to Neville’s vague category, I don’t think Yearley’s analogical term succeeds in facilitating impartial and legitimate comparisons. My main argument is that unlike the pragmatic root of Neville’s vague category, Yearley’s method derives from Thomas Aquinas’ concept of “analogical predication.” In order to establish a hierarchy of harmony among all existing virtues that had been addressed by previous moral philosophers, Aquinas adopted two key ideas, “virtue has parts” and “analogical predication,” to orchestrate a massive number of comparisons. For example, Aristotle’s virtue of “magnanimity” is analogous to Paul’s “humility,” so these two virtues can be seen as a predication, as well as two different parts for another higher virtue. In this way, Aquinas was able to organize his theory of virtues into a hierarchical harmony aiming to include as many instances of virtue as possible. By the same token, Yearley applies Aquinas’ method of analogical predication to his comparison between Mencius and Aquinas such that some virtues can be treated as an analogical term that furnishes possibilities of comparison. For example, although Mencius never analyzed courage in the way Aquinas did, Mencius’ ideas of appropriate self-esteem are thought to be analogical to Aquinas’ idea of magnanimity, vanity and pusillanimity so that they can be

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 193.

seen as parts of the same higher virtue, “courage.” As analyzed above, Aquinas’ method centering upon analogical predication is not primarily for the purpose of comparison. Instead, it is for constructing a hierarchical harmony among enumerated virtues to fit Aquinas’ own theology. Because of this, this method of analogical predication, as well as Yearley’s methodological use of analogical terms modeled on Aquinas, lacks the dynamic and flexible nature of the vague category that Neville utilizes in accordance with the American pragmatic tradition. There were two unfortunate consequences when Yearley put his method into use: 1) he directly compared an analogical term such as the concept of “magnanimity” in Aquinas, with a purported counterpart such as the concept of “proper attitude toward fate” in Mencius. In this way a possible bias was carried over from the Christian tradition into Ruism. In this way, the higher category of virtue, such as in this case, “courage,” is not a mediatory comparative tool similar to Neville’s “vague category”, but is instead artificially constructed after a direct comparison between analogical terms. 2) Yearley’s comparative method has no clear hermeneutical consciousness which speaks to the historical situation in which a comparativist consciously locates him-or-herself. As a result, it is legitimate for us to suspect that the motif of Yearley’s comparison may be merely for the sake of comparison, which does not have much relevance to the compared traditions except for the benefits brought out in a purely intellectual exercise.¹⁰² These two consequences lead to the fact that Yearley did

¹⁰² One reviewer of Yearley’s book, Anthony C. Yu, has noticed this feature of Yearley’s comparison: “The reason for comparing what seems to be wholly disparate objects is finally arbitrary, much as human perception and rationality can be arbitrary,” in Anthony C. Yu, “Of Apples and Oranges,” *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 73, No.1 (Jan., 1993): 69-74. Similarly, George Allan urges the importance of “secondary theory” for correctly understanding and comparing Aquinas and Mencius, since it “might even lead Yearley to abandon the negative connotations he allows to hover over the adjective ‘secondary’ and to appreciate

not pay enough attention to the holistic feature of the compared tradition, and that in order to produce “textured comparison,” he had to dissect the compared traditions so much that he created possibilities of distortion and misunderstanding. For example, he distinguished human discourses into three categories: primary theory, which consists of “ways of life” providing empirical explanations and guidance on ordinary human experience, a secondary theory, which, consisting of “injunctions,” is metaphysical and addresses highly abstract principles used for explaining extraordinary natural and social phenomenon, and finally, practical theory, whose discursive level is lower than the secondary theory and higher than the primary theory and thus, mainly addresses moral issues such as virtues.¹⁰³ Based on this taxonomy, Yearley thought the difference between Mencius and Aquinas in the realm of primary theory was so diverse and rich that it is hardly available for comparison, but the similarity in the realm of secondary theory is so abstract and thin that can’t yield meaningful comparisons, either. Therefore, only in the realm of practical theories can a “textured comparison,” which allows one to find similarity in difference and difference in similarity, be pursued. However, I think it is exactly because Yearley pursued his comparison merely in the realm of practical theory that he missed the rich connection between Mencius’ ethics and his ontological assumptions, with the consequence that the holistic nature of Mencius’ thought has not been sufficiently addressed¹⁰⁴. In a word, although Yearley’s comparative method

the necessity of the burden that he, just as much as Aquinas or Mencius, must bear: the impossibility of theorizing without occupying a theoretical location,” in George Allan, “Review, Mencius (book title), *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (Jan. 1994): 175.

¹⁰³ A fine account of Yearley’s theory can be found in Allan, “review”: 169-170.

¹⁰⁴ Similar concern is raised by Aquinian scholars such as John Jenkins: “My claim against Yearley, then, is that because he fails to recognize the fundamentally formative role of Aquinas’ distinctive Christian

centering upon the use of analogical term has grasped a pivotal procedure, i.e., the choice of comparative category, for comparative study, the original model of this method, i.e., Aquinas' static and hierarchical use of analogical predication, makes Yearley unable to address the aforementioned two major concerns for the study of comparative religion, that is, avoiding unchecked biases, and rendering the comparative point legitimate and interesting.

Compared to Yearley's method, we recognize Aaron Stalnaker's comparative methodology, centering on the use of "bridge concept," as an impressive improvement based upon his critique of Yearley. In order to seek methodological resources for his comparative studies of religion, Stalnaker returns to the tradition of American pragmatism, and finds James Bohman's thought about "vocabulary vocabulary." Bohman's term "vocabulary vocabulary" means that human vocabulary is not mainly used for representing and mapping out a given set of features of realities. Instead, vocabulary is seen as an enabling condition for humans to efficiently engage with the continuously changing and unfolding realities. In the context of cross-cultural dialogues, it becomes important to choose and refine appropriate vocabulary because this is the only way for people within a given tradition to engage with new realities. In this sense, "vocabulary vocabulary" speaks to the dynamic and engaging characteristics of human vocabulary. Stalnaker makes a further connection between Bohman's thought and Richard Rorty's edifying philosophy with the conclusion that the primary purpose of the

doctrines on his views on virtue and human flourishing, his interpretation of those views is distorted." In John Jenkins, "Yearley, Aquinas, and Comparative Method," *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, Vol. 21, No.2 (Fall, 1993): 379. pp. 377-383.

comparative study of religions is to build a global neighborhood, to enhance mutual understanding and thus, to contribute to the process of edifying philosophy.¹⁰⁵

Understood in this way, the bridge concept which Stalnaker proposes as the pivoting tool for comparison is one particular case of “vocabulary vocabulary”. His main statements about the bridge concept can be quoted as follows:

Bridge concepts are general ideas, such as ‘virtue’ and ‘human nature,’ which can be given enough content to be meaningful and guide comparative inquiry yet are still open to greater specification in particular cases....The process of selection and refinement is thus in an important sense inductive, and any broader applicability any given set might possess is essentially hypothetical and subject to further testing and revision in wider inquiries.

Bridge concepts are not, then, hypotheses about transcultural universals that purport to bring a ‘deep structure’ of human religion or ethics to the surface; I am skeptical about all such deep structures or ‘epistemes’ that are supposed somehow to determine or explain thought and practice, whether for humanity as a whole, or merely within a single tradition or era. In contrast, as general topics, bridge concepts may be projected into each thinker or text to be compared as a way to thematize their disparate elements and order their details about these anchoring terms.

¹⁰⁵ See Aaron Stalnaker, *Overcoming Our Evil: Human Nature and Spiritual Exercises in Xunzi and Augustine* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2010):1-17.

Thus a bridge concept like ‘human nature’ can serve to generate what might be called a problematique for inquiry. The process works as follows: comparison provokes conceptual analysis of what at first seemed to be a straightforward idea such as ‘human nature’, which in turn provokes deeper interpretive investigations on each side, which lead to articulated positions that can be seen, at least partially, to speak to each other in various ways. Sorting out the issues thus raised spurs further ethical analysis of the subtopics in question.¹⁰⁶

From these statements, we find that the basic insight implied by a bridge concept concerning its role in comparison is very similar to Neville’s vague category. Compared with Yearley’s analogical term, Stalnaker’s comparison is a significant improvement. The use of bridge concept allows Stalnaker to attend to the holistic nature of Xun Zi’s and Augustine’s thoughts without haphazardly putting any pair of seemingly similar concepts into direct comparison. On the other hand, compared with Neville’s vague category, because the comparison made by Stalnaker is mainly located in the realm of ethics, and Stalnaker explicitly refuses to construct a grand ethical theory that could be taken to be a universal deep structure of the compared traditions, it is relatively easier for the audience of Stalnaker’s comparative study to understand its relevance. In this way, Stalnaker’s bridge concept can be seen as a middle way between the non or sub-vagueness of Yearley’s “analogical term” and the super or meta- vagueness of Neville’s “vague category.” However, there is one weak point in Stalnaker’s application of “bridge concept” in his comparison. I don’t think it is appropriate to assert *a priori* that there is no

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 17, 122.

deep ethical structure of human behaviors. As long as the comparative process is open-ended and hypotheses triggered by bridge concepts continue to be refined, a constructive effort which deepens into more universal features of ethical traditions and addresses problems shared by all humanity will be more than helpful. In my view, because Stalnaker dogmatically asserts the impossibility of “transcultural universals” and thus, preempts the opportunity of elevating the abstract level of comparative terms from bridge concept to Neville’s sort of vague category, he lacks the means to evaluate the metaphysical assumptions in Xun Zi and Augustine so that after comparison, he has to reach a more or less disappointing conclusion that, “It appears that there is no easy way to harmonize these two types of moral psychological pictures.”¹⁰⁷ Although I am not so optimistic as to assert there is a way to harmonize the two cases, I remain critical of the fact that Stalnaker’s reservation of the use of bridge concept solely within the realm of ethics forestalls the possibility of finding new comparative points, and thus new chances to build harmony between the compared traditions. To a certain degree, this conservative move runs counter to Stalnaker’s own constructive purpose of comparative study that he states as, “It (the sort of comparative ethics I have been practicing in this work) is more exploratory and experimental, but this should not be read as rejection of continuing attempts to articulate the kind of comprehensive visions of personal formation that Augustine and Xunzi created.”¹⁰⁸ In other words, as long as Stalnaker intends to address more comprehensive and broader ethical issues after making his comparison, he has to

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 286.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 299.

elevate the abstract level of comparative terms, about which I am suspicious as to whether his conservative use of “bridge concept” can be conducive.

2.4 Conclusion

After considering a variety of comparative methodologies in the disciplines of comparative theology, comparative religion, and especially comparative religion with a philosophical interest or comparative philosophy of religion, I have to determine which one of them fits my project best.

Because I will compare Ruism and Christianity regarding a key metaphysical question about “creation,” I believe a combination of Neville’s pragmatological methodology of vague category, and Gadamer’s hermeneutical or Jonathan Smith’s situational thinking is the best option. Apart from the two benefits which I have mentioned above, the impartiality and accuracy in descriptions of compared traditions and the legitimacy of comparative points, there are two additional advantages I can obtain from this combination:

(1) It will efficiently tackle the tension between holism and localism that many comparativists strive to resolve. During a debate with David Little, Jeffrey Stout once formulated a strong holistic position that, “Its (holism’s) chief consequence for comparative studies is a tendency to favor larger over smaller units of comparison. The smaller the unit of comparison, according to holism, the greater the likelihood of distortive abstraction.”¹⁰⁹ However, on the other hand, there are many comparativists,

¹⁰⁹ Jeffrey Stout, “Holism and Comparative Ethics: A Response to Little,” in *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, Vol. 11, No.2 (Fall, 1983): 313.

such as Bruce Lincoln, Aaron Stalnaker, Karen L. Carr and Philip J. Ivanhoe, who expressed the alternative localist concern that in order to accurately describe compared traditions and thus to make comparative projects manageable, comparativists had better shrink the range of comparison, for example, they may need to focus upon one or a couple of representative thinkers or one or a couple of key texts within each tradition.¹¹⁰ In my view, too strong a holism will forestall any possibility of comparison, since if each tradition is holistic and closed to itself, there will be no way to compare one with the other. On the other hand, a minimalist localism indeed increases the possibility of distortive descriptions, which was exemplified in Yearley's case. I hold that the development of human religious and philosophical traditions is like a spiral. Such traditions are holistic, but open and keep changing. In this way, the comparative methodology of vague category in Neville's case has a great advantage in unpacking different spirals in a virtuous way. That is because we can focus upon one local point which is shared by both traditions, such as the conception of "creation" and its implied relationship of "ontological dependence" among cosmic realities, then render it as a vague category, and then, through a holistic description about the conception in each tradition, we can input new specifications to the vague category and finally compare them. The pragmatic nature of the descriptive process will make the question of how much holistic elements should be taken into consideration strategic and open-ended, that is, let's include as many holistic elements as we can for the temporarily specified comparative point, and if the described conception in one tradition does not fit our

¹¹⁰ Carr and Ivanhoe's view could be found in Karen L. Carr, and Philip J. Ivanhoe, *The Sense of Antirationalism, the Religious Thought of Zhuang Zi and Kierkegaard* (Created Space, 2010): xiii.

hypothesis originally proposed according to our understanding of another tradition, let's change it and refine it. During the process, we may need to re-describe the compared conceptions, and then we also need to put newly formulated hypotheses to further tests. In this sense, a creative treatment of the tension between holism and localism will speak to the quality of the comparison.

(2) The methodology that I am proposing also addresses the question how and to what extent a philosophical construction ought to be pursued during comparison. We have to admit at first that philosophical construction is unavoidable for a comparative project. Comparison already implies a cognitive process of imaginative construction central to human perceptions about any similarities or differences between the compared ones. So, a legitimate question remains concerning how a construction can be effectively implemented. Regarding this question, I have two points to reflect on: first, construction must be premised upon an impartial, accurate description of the compared traditions, which is, according to my analysis, the strength of the proposed methodology. Second, slightly different from Neville, my hermeneutical consciousness has driven me in the first chapter of this book to investigate the entire history of Christian-Ruist interaction so as to find comparative points with which various interlocutors will feel concerned. In other words, this historical survey will make me aware of my own scholarly situation in relation to those of other scholars and thus, my philosophical construction, whenever needed, will be oriented towards tackling controversies within the aforementioned transcendence debate. In this way, philosophical construction will not only be driven by pure intellectual interest, but it will also be practically grounded.

In a word, this comparative dissertational project on “*creation ex nihilo*” and “*sheng sheng*,” will be one of comparative religion with a philosophical interest, or one of comparative philosophy of religion. Its methodology will be a combination of Gadamer’s hermeneutical thinking or Jonathan Smith’s situational thinking, along with Neville’s pragmatological methodology centering on the use of vague category.

CHAPTER THREE

The Emergence of the Christian Doctrine of *Creatio Ex Nihilo* from Plato to Augustine

Foreword to Chapters Three-to-Six: Methodological Guidelines

Beginning from this chapter, I will pursue a survey of intellectual history for the ideas of “*creatio ex nihilo*” and “*sheng sheng*” according to the methodological points I argued in the first two chapters. Because the transcendence debate was initiated from the Christian side, and also because I am writing in English, I will cover the Christian survey first, and the Ruist one in what follows. This means that after I finish canvassing the intellectual history of “*creatio ex nihilo*,” I will propose a category termed “creation,” along with the related ones, “ontological dependence” and “transcendence,” which ought to be vague enough to facilitate my reading of original Ruist materials for a comparative purpose. As mentioned in the first chapter, for surveys of intellectual history, three crucial moments need to be pinned down in order to show how the understanding of “ontological creation,” implied by the ideas of “*creatio ex nihilo*” and “*sheng sheng*,” engendered the seeds of its conceptions, its first systematic philosophical expression, and its significant development in the early modern era, respectively in Christianity and Ruism. A concrete guideline for chapters can be illustrated by the following:

In the Greek-European Christian tradition¹¹¹ of philosophical theology, which has been intensively engaged in the transcendence debate, Augustine of Hippo is the first

¹¹¹ “Greek-European” refers to the geographical basis of the tradition that this paper is concerned with. Using conventional nomenclature of Christian denominations, this tradition will include major thinkers in

philosophical theologian who constructed a systematic theology which pivoted on the idea of “*creatio ex nihilo*” following the Council of Nicaea. Accordingly, my investigation about the idea of “*creation ex nihilo*” in the Christian tradition is comprised of two parts.

In Chapter Three, the major intellectual trends which contributed to Augustine’s thought concerning “*creatio ex nihilo*” will be researched. They include: the exegetical tradition of Genesis in early Christianity, Plato’s ontological cosmology, middle-Platonism, the first philosophical formulation of “*creatio ex nihilo*” in Theophilus of Antioch (about 120-190, C.E), Plotinus’ Neo-Platonism, and the Gnosticism which is represented by the early Christian polemicists. The key idea under investigation is that of “creation,” together with other less important, yet closely related ideas such as “matter,” “time,” and “evil.” I hope in this chapter to answer the “why” and “how” questions about the emergence of the idea of “*creatio ex nihilo*” in the concerned period.

In Chapter Four, I select four theologians and philosophers who represent further development of the idea “*creatio ex nihilo*” following Augustine: Thomas Aquinas, René Descartes, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and Paul Tillich. Based upon the proposed comparative methodology, rationales for this selection can be articulated this way: firstly, I will leave out the non-mainstream theology of Christian Mysticism that is rich in discussion concerning “*creatio ex nihilo*.” This is because in addressing the transcendence debate, it is more appropriate to focus on somewhat more “orthodox” Christian thinkers that the debaters usually focus on. Secondly, I will be leaving out less

“Catholicism” and “Protestantism,” although it is not entirely fit to use these denominational terms to describe Greek philosophers and some of the early patristic fathers.

innovative thinkers whose idea of “*creatio ex nihilo*” repeats to a certain degree the same forms offered by pioneering thinkers. For example, given Thomas Aquinas’ and René Descartes’ insights into divine creation, Dun Scotus’ and Leibniz’s thoughts seem not be so appealing for comparative purpose. Thirdly, important thinkers such as Spinoza and Hegel, who addressed the problem of divine creation but not in the way of “*creatio ex nihilo*,” will also be left out. Finally, contemporary theorists later than Paul Tillich will have to be overlooked, too, since their significance is still being debated.

My positive reasons for this selection are as follows: Thomas Aquinas is one of the most analytic thinkers in the tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*” in its medieval, scholastic expression, who has provided a detailed analysis of “*creatio ex nihilo*” based upon its Augustinian interpretation. René Descartes’ theory of “created eternal truth” makes a breakthrough concerning the “intelligibility” of the created world so that it yields the traditionally theistic logic behind “*creatio ex nihilo*” at its most comparable point to non-theism. Schleiermacher invests the idea of “*creatio ex nihilo*” with rich existential interpretations, and his metaphysical analysis of the relationship between God and the created world is so emblematic that it fits my comparative purpose well. Paul Tillich is one of the most recent systematic thinkers of “*creatio ex nihilo*,” whose philosophy not only provides innovative means to resolve traditional issues such as theodicy, but also influences significantly the thought of contemporary Chinese Ru philosophers’ such as Liu Shu-hsien.

For Ruism’s part, the first time that the Ru tradition came up with an idea similar to “*creatio ex nihilo*” appeared in the commentaries by Wang Bi (226-249 C.E.) and Han

Kangbo (332-380 C.E.) on the *Dao De Jing* and the *Classic of Change*. This idea is related to their philosophical interpretation of the “*sheng sheng*” (生生, Birth Birth) of Ultimate Polarity, and I term their idea as “*generatio ex nihilo*,” since the creativity of Ultimate Polarity was understood to be a constantly creative power without a creator who is standing behind the scenes. In order to understand this non-theistic idea of “*generatio ex nihilo*,” we need to do a similar investigation of the intellectual history of ancient Chinese cosmology.

Chapter Five will be dedicated to the issue of how scholarly debates within the traditions of ancient Chinese cosmology lead to the emergence of the idea of “*generatio ex nihilo*” in Wang Bi and Han Kangbo. Here, we will see a consistent controversy between the Daoist understanding of the Dao’s creativity as one of “cosmological succession,” and the Ruist understanding of *Tian*’s creativity as one of “ontological dependence.” Major texts and thinkers include: the *Dao De Jing*, the *Appended Texts* of the *Classic of Change*, the *Zhuang Zi*, the *Annals of Spring and Autumn*, the *Huai Nanzi*, the *Weft Book of the Classic of Change*, Zheng Xuan’s (127-200 C.E.) commentary of the *Classic of Change*, along with Wang Bi and Han Kangbo.

Ru metaphysics centering upon the “*sheng sheng*” of Ultimate Polarity was developed significantly during Song and Ming Ruism¹¹². Zhou Dunyi’s (1017-1073 C.E.) ethical metaphysics pioneered it, and Zhu Xi’s interpretation of Zhou’s works underpinned it. Therefore, Chapter Six will focus upon Zhou Dunyi and Zhu Xi. After Zhu Xi, I select two Ruist thinkers, Cao Duan (1376-1434 C.E.), and Luo Qinshun (1465-

¹¹² This term refers to what “Neo-Confucianism” conventionally meant in English. It denotes the development of Ruism, mainly in the Song and Ming dynasties.

1547 C.E.), to indicate how the challenges made by Zhu Xi's followers exposed potential defects in Zhu Xi's metaphysical system, and accordingly, how we might refine Zhu Xi's thought on "sheng sheng" for our own comparative purposes.

After completing these investigations, I will do a detailed and final comparison of the "*creatio ex nihilo*" and "*sheng sheng*," to show their similarities and differences. In other words, I will provide a comparison with a rigorously devised methodology and a rich, yet well-delineated range of comparative data, which will culminate the dissertation in Chapter Seven. In this way, we find that the three aforementioned crucial moments for each tradition are: Plato's *Timaeus* vs. the *Appended Text* of the *Classic of Change*, Augustine of Hippo vs. Wang Bi, and Descartes vs. Zhu Xi. For the intellectual histories of "*creatio ex nihilo*" and "*sheng sheng*" in Christianity and Ruism, all other related ideas can be seen either in the work of inchoate predecessors or as responding consequences to these thinkers.

Two caveats need to be presented before launching our surveys of two of these intellectual histories: First, although the history of ideas is the major methodology in the following four chapters, I am examining each philosopher's or theologian's thought not mainly from the perspective of their intellectual biographies, but from a relational perspective of their thought to the development of the ideas of "*creatio ex nihilo*" or "*sheng sheng*" within each tradition. In other words, unless the development of one thinker's thought on "creation" can significantly influence our understanding of a corresponding position in one of the compared traditions, I will try to present his thought as a more or less coherent whole in relationship to other thinkers within each tradition.

This treatment is determined by the comparative nature of our project. As I mentioned earlier in Chapter Two, my thesis will be open to criticism if any expert on any individual philosopher or text can provide corrections for my presentation of each concerned thinker or text.

Second, many texts on early Chinese cosmology which will be addressed in Chapter Five are under philological debate regarding authorship and date of composition. However, since my survey of intellectual histories is for the purpose of comparison concerning the aforementioned transcendence debate, I will primarily focus on how these texts have been received philosophically in the Ru tradition. In other words, I will present my understanding of the Ru conception of creation based mainly on the received versions of these texts. Unless my knowledge of the newly developed philology on these texts can significantly modify my philosophical understanding of their received versions, I will not spend much time setting out any philological details in later chapters. For sure, my philosophical approach to textual analysis is equally open to philological criticism, because I hope that philology and philosophy will come together to help people's understanding of these texts.

3.1 Forward to Chapter Three.

From an historical and philosophical perspective, Christian conceptions of creaturehood are grounded in the Bible. An omnipotent God creates the world by his gratuitous love and absolutely free will, and as a result, without God, any goodness, beauty and order of the world will cease to exist. Nevertheless, it was only in the late second century that the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* was explicitly stated for the

first time. That happened in the works of Theophilus of Antioch (183-185, C.E.) , when he systematically refuted Plato's cosmology in his *Timaeus* and thereby highlighted the idiosyncrasy of the Christian conception of creation. If we take Augustine of Hippo (354-430, C.E.) as the decisive figure in Christian intellectual history who devised a cluster of Christian theses, such as original sin, the salvation of human beings, Christology and theodicy, all of which pivoted on the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, there had already passed almost half a millennium after the common era before a full-fledged Christian doctrinal system of *creatio ex nihilo* was constructed.

This time-consuming process of philosophical reflection within Christianity is telling. Without any doubt, the Bible has always been the seminal text for Christian piety. The Bible is also the text of authority, which Christian intellectuals continue to invoke when they have to defend themselves against criticism from outside. Nevertheless, just as it took time for the Bible to be finally canonized, from the history of early Christianity we know that a philosophically and theologically distinct theory of *creatio ex nihilo* could only have been formulated across a chronological process and in an intellectual milieu where various non-Christian philosophies and non-Christian religions were interacting with their Christian counterpart. In this intellectual complex, Christian piety as it is grounded in the Biblical texts, the Greco-Roman philosophy, especially Plato's cosmology and its latter development in Middle Platonism and Neo-Platonism, Gnosticism and its various modifications within influential emerging religions such as Manichaeism, are the key competitive and interactive elements. In this sense, it is only after we understand the nature of each of these elements and how they interact with one

another that the emergence of the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* can be historically explained and the philosophical peculiarity of the doctrine *per se* can be comprehended.

3.2 *Creatio Ex Nihilo* in the Hebrew Bible.

Apart from *Genesis*, the most famous passage in the Hebrew Bible which sounds like an explicit expression of *creatio ex nihilo* is in *2 Maccabees* 7:28:

“So I urge you, my child, to look up at the sky and the earth. Consider everything you see there, and realize that God made it all from nothing, just as He made the human race.”¹¹³

Although early Fathers such as Theophilus of Antioch and Origen literally relied upon this passage when they tried to formulate their theory of *creatio ex nihilo*,¹¹⁴ a number of modern scholars doubted whether it presented an unequivocal statement of *creatio ex nihilo* in its original context. For example, Gerhard May thinks there is here no theoretical disquisition on the nature of the creation process, but a paraenetic reference to God’s creative power. The text seems to imply no more than the conception that the world came into existence through the sovereign creative act of God, and that it previously was not there. In this way, what we have in *2 Maccabees* 7:28 is just an unphilosophical everyday turn of phrase, which tells us that something new, something that was not there before, and comes into being; whether this something new comes through a change in something that was already there, or whether it is something

¹¹³*The Good News Translation* (GNT), the American Bible Society, 1976.

¹¹⁴Joseph Torchia, O.P., *Creatio ex nihilo and the Theology of St. Augustine* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1999): 2

absolutely new, is beside the question¹¹⁵. If the priestly writer of *2 Maccabees* 7:28 has the former option in his or her mind, that is, if he or she is following the Platonic cosmology in *Timaeus* and thinks that God creates the world by giving order to an amorphous preexistent matter, it will be hard to determine whether this particular passage counts as the earliest explicit expression of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*.

Gerhard May's doubt in this respect is shared by O.P. Joseph Torchia and Torchia thinks that "the crucial phrase 'ἐξ οὐκ ὄντων' in this passage is rather ambiguous and can be translated either as 'from the non-existent' or merely 'from things which did not exist' (that is, a preexistent amorphous matter)."¹¹⁶ Furthermore, the ambiguity intrinsic to the phrase's translation and its related understanding of divine creation can be confirmed in another text of Hebrew Bible, *Wisdom XI. 17*: "And indeed you all-powerful hand which created the world from formless matter did not lack the means to unleash a horde of bears or savage lions. ...or unknown beasts."¹¹⁷

It clearly reminds us here of Plato's cosmology of world-formation in the *Timaeus*. It should be observed that both *2 Maccabees* 7:28 and *Wisdom XI. 17* were composed in the period of Hellenistic Judaism when Jewish minds were continuously being influenced by Greek philosophy which stimulated Jewish reflection on divine creation in an abstract and ontological way. Nevertheless, the implications of these two statements seem to be diametrically opposite to each other if the "ἐξ οὐκ ὄντων" in 2

¹¹⁵ Gerhard May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo, the Doctrine of "Creation Out of Nothing" in Early Christian Thought*, trans. by A. S. Worrall (Scotland: T&T Clark LTD): 7-8.

¹¹⁶ Torchia, *Creatio*, 2

¹¹⁷ *Wisdom XI. 17*, as it is quoted by Torchia, *Creatio*, 3. In GNT translation, it is "Your almighty power, Lord, created the world out of material that had no form at all. ..."

Maccabees 7:28 means what *creatio ex nihilo* does in Christian terms. Furthermore, even if a passable interpretation of *creatio ex nihilo* could be read into *2 Maccabees* 7:28, the ambiguity of this interpretation is aggravated by the fact that there was in fact no solid expression of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* in Hellenistic Judaism.¹¹⁸ Therefore, it indicates that a philosophically significant expression of *creatio ex nihilo* was not achieved directly from a first-hand reading of the Bible. If there had not been a special intellectual and religious milieu demanding responses from people's inner religious experience shaped by the Bible, they would have felt free to use any philosophical language to express their religious piety without much concern for the sufficiency or coherency of the adopted philosophical concepts. However, this kind of demand did happen to the early Christian fathers.

To illustrate the different situations of Judaism and Christianity when they faced the impact of Greek philosophy and other religions, Gerhard May says that the Christian claim that the truth has been realized by Christ brought unparalleled intensity to the debate between Christian and pagan thinkers.¹¹⁹ In other words, in order to confront a Christian confession to truth concerning the origin of the creation by God using Greek philosophy and other religious views, biblical texts on divine creation and the origin of the cosmos such as *Genesis* and other parts of the Hebrew Bible, must be interpreted in a distinct philosophical and theological way.

If we review the Christian intellectual history of more than three hundred years leading to a full-fledged expression of the theory of *creatio ex nihilo* in Augustine, we

¹¹⁸ May, *Creatio* :21.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

find that there are two significant moments in the story told in Genesis 1.1-1.5. Various interpretations of these two moments, as well as philosophical problems these interpretations engendered, constituted a topology of intellectual discourse where early Christianity was located.

Firstly, how should the “formless void and darkness” of the earth in 1:2 be understood? It is very easily read as the amorphous Platonic matter, and then the creation of God would have unfolded exactly as Plato has conceived it: the spirit of God puts order into a preexistent matter, and the world, comprised of myriad of things, each with its concrete form, is thereby created. If that is the case, what is the origin of the matter? Is it co-eternal with God? Furthermore, if matter is formless and can be identified with chaos, in what sense can it be said to be “Good”?

Secondly, how should “the beginning” in 1:1 be understood? Does it mean that the world as created by God has a temporal beginning? If God’s creation happens in time, how can any time be defined before the creation of God if God creates everything? If God’s creation is eternal and non-temporal, what then does “creation” mean? After the initiation of the world in time as the creation by God, does God need to continue to sustain the world lest the world cease to exist? For the whole process of divine creation and world-formation, is there any purpose underlying this process?

The first set of questions can be combined to be about the status of matter in divine creation, and the second as being about the status of time in the same context. As we will see later, these two sets of questions will become a powerful engine compelling early Christian intellectuals to provide a philosophically distinct and coherent theory of

creation as they were forced to compete and interact with Greek philosophy and other religious views such as Gnosticism. A full-fledged theory of *creatio ex nihilo* is just its hard-won fruit.

3.3. Plato's Philosophical Cosmology in the *Timaeus*

I

Whitehead once famously said that Western philosophy is a series of commentaries upon Plato. Although Plato's role in the Christian tradition of "*creatio ex nihilo*" is not so big as to be the only significant contributor, it can safely be said that without Plato there would not have been a philosophical formulation of "*creatio ex nihilo*." The greatest nutrition provided by Plato's thought was his philosophical argument relating to the causality of "ontological dependence" among cosmic realities, and this argument is brilliantly manifested in his dialogue of *Timaeus*, which had a decisive influence upon early Christian thinking on similar themes.

However, before we delve into textual details of the *Timaeus*, we need to probe several other key Platonic dialogues in which moments of Plato's ontological thinking are specified. This will help us to better understand the importance of the *Timaeus* to the Christian idea of "*creatio ex nihilo*."

One major breakthrough Plato makes in comparison with the pre-Socratic natural philosophers is that he explicitly explains in the *Phaedo* that his theory of Forms searches for causes that are of another type than "cosmological succession."

If someone said that without bones and sinews and all such things, I should not be able to do what I decided, he would be right, but surely to say that they are the

cause of what I do, and not that I have chosen the best course, even though I act with my mind, is to speak very lazily and carelessly. Imagine not being able to distinguish the real cause from that without which the cause would not be able to act as a cause. It is what the majority appears to do, like people groping in the dark; they call it a cause, thus giving it a name that does not belong to it. That is why one man surrounds the earth with a vortex to make the heavens keep it in place, another makes the air support it like a wide lid. As for their capacity of being in the best place they could possibly be put, this they do not look for, nor do they believe it to have any divine force, but they believe that they will some time discover a stronger and more immortal Atlas to hold every together more, and they do not believe that the truly good and ‘binding’ binds and holds them together. (*Phaedo*, 99b-c, trans. G.M.A Grube)¹²⁰

I call this an “ontological” turning-point which occurred in Plato’s conception of causality.¹²¹ According to Plato, all previous natural philosophers cannot explain why things in the universe could be “in the best place they could possibly be”; neither do they believe “the truly good and ‘binding’ binds and holds them together.” In other words, what Plato is searching for is the origin of the overall order of the entire universe. Quite obviously, if the focus of natural philosophers is to dig out the series of “cosmological

¹²⁰ All translations from Plato are done by different translators from *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper and D.S Hutchinson (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997). Page numbers of the quotes on Plato will follow its Greek version marked on the side of pages of this *Complete Works*. However, for the next section exclusively quoting Plato’s *Timaeus*, I will simultaneously use page numbers of the *Complete Works* for readers’ convenience.

¹²¹ The mode of ontological thinking in ancient Greek philosophy can be traced to philosophers earlier than Plato, such as in Parmenides’ thought. However, compared with his predecessors, Plato’s works in this regard are much more systematic. From the perspective of the intellectual history of “creatio ex nihilo,” Plato’s ontology can be taken as its seed of thought.

succession” step by step regarding the temporal succession of cosmic events, they cannot provide answers to Plato’s ontological inquiry. Alternately, Plato explained his own approach to answering his questions: “So I thought I must take refuge in discussions and investigate the truth of things by means of words. ...I assume the existence of a Beautiful, itself by itself, of a Good and a Great and all the rest.” (*Phaedo*, 99e-100d)

In this way, in order to answer the ontological question about the overall order of the entire universe which is comprised of many things, Plato turns to words. His theory of Forms, understood from this perspective, is a philosophical discourse that probes the ontological causality of things in the universe by relying on a philosopher’s knowledge of the most generic features of things signified by the logic of human words.

Obviously, my above interpretation of Plato’s theory of Forms implies that he must have a clear understanding of “ontology” as a science of “being” different from the more empirical works of earlier natural philosophers’. We can find this to be the case in other Platonic dialogues:

“Consider from the beginning: if one is, can it be, but not partake of being?” - “It can’t.” - “So there would also be the being of the one and that is not the same as the one. ...” “Is that because ‘is’ signifies something other than ‘one’?” - “Necessarily.”

(*Parmenides*: 142b5-C5, trans. Mary L. Gill and Paul Ryan)

“For I take it that anyone with any share in reason at all would consider the discipline concerned with being and with what is really and forever in every one eternally self-samed by far the truest of all kinds of knowledge.” (*Philebus*, 58, trans. Dorothea Frede)

From *Parmenides* 142b5-C5, we find that Plato's thought is gesturing towards the distinction between "essence" and "being" which is very important to later Western metaphysical thought, because the key subject of this conversation, viz., "what is the one," is considered to be different from question "whether one is." This gesture can be confirmed by the second quoted statement in *Philebus* since Plato explains that the highest knowledge pertains to both "being" and what is "self-samed" among what is real.

However, if we read these quoted dialogues together, we find that because Plato has acknowledged the difference between a question of "what it is" and one of "whether it is" to be central to human knowledge, his attempt to find causes to explain the overall order of the universe must take both questions into account. In other words, reasons used by Plato to unpack orders of cosmic events must explain both what an event is and where the "being" of that event comes from.

Nevertheless, as a systematic thinker, Plato is very dedicated to finding a singular reason able to provide both explanations. This converging effort can be witnessed in the *Republic*, where Plato argues that the Good is the reason for both the "knowledge" and the "being" of things to be known:

The sun not only provides visible things with the power to be seen but also with coming to be, growth and nourishment, although it is not itself coming to be.

Therefore, you should also say that not only do the objects of knowledge owe their being-known to the good, but their being is also due to it, although the good is not being, but superior to it in rank and power. (*Republic*, 509b, trans. G.M.A. Grube and rev. C.D.C. Reeve)

The most important sentence from this quote is the last one, which can be interpreted this way: the form of the Good is beyond being, although it is the reason for being; as for what is beyond being, it is both the reason of human knowledge about the truth of things and of their being. Considering the unfolding of the later Christian idea of “*creatio ex nihilo*,” this singular statement can be seen as a token of this later history since it claims that there is an ultimate cause explaining both what a thing is and where it is from, although from this statement, we are still not sure of how the causality of the Form of Good actually functions. Neither did Plato use any phrase here similar to “*creatio ex nihilo*” to make his case concerning the causality of the form of the Good.

Understood as such, the dialogue of *Timaeus* can be seen as a further, concrete explanation of the way in which an ultimate reason causes everything in the universe. As I said earlier, as a result, this dialogue became an engine of ontological thought about divine creation in early Christianity. But before my analysis of the *Timaeus*, we need to look into another Platonic dialogue, since I believe insights there will prepare us better to correctly understand what is at stake in the *Timaeus*. This dialogue is the *Philebus*.

In this dialogue, Plato asks a typical ontological question: what are the most generic features that a thing has as long as it is said to be? Plato’s answer consists of four cosmological categories that he thinks any answer to this question about any concrete being must address: “As the first I count the unlimited, limit as the second, afterwards in third place comes the being, which is the mixed and generated out of those two. And no mistake is made if the cause of this mixture and generation is counted as number four.” (The *Philebus*, 27 c)

According to Plato's explanation in this dialogue, what is unlimited of a thing is its quantifiable feature as a being that has no limit. For example, a thing can be hotter or cooler, bigger or smaller, and in regard to these quantifiable features themselves, there is no limit. In comparison, I will say this "unlimited" feature is similar to Aristotle's cause of materiality in his theory of four causes. The limit of a thing is what structures and thus unifies these unlimitedly quantified features of a thing, and therefore brings an overall order and harmony to the existence of that thing. For example, a healthy human body depends upon a balance between the hot and cool elements within it; there is also a need for proportionality among the sizes of bones in the human body so that they can function well. By comparison, the category "limit" is similar to what Aristotle calls the "formal cause." The mixture of limited and unlimited is the process by which a thing comes to be, and correspondingly, the cause of this mixture is what produces a thing, which is similar to the efficient cause in Aristotle's thought. What is of particular interest for us is that according to Plato, these four categories can be used to explain, in a way similar to that of the pre-Socratic natural philosophers, how a thing comes to be in the process of cosmological succession, such as how an artifact is produced by an artist. However, since what Plato aspires to is an ontological explanation targeting the overall order and being of the entire universe, what is implied in other parts of the *Philebus* clearly points to his more sophisticated version of philosophical cosmology in the *Timaeus*. In the *Philebus*, Plato thinks that there is an "all-encompassing wisdom" or an underlying cosmic soul which acts as what the fourth category, the cause of the mixture of limit and unlimited, requires. It, eternal and always self-samed, causes the being of the universe and also

brings an overall order to it which can be explained as a process of mixing the limit and the unlimited. According to this Platonic cosmological vision, which is less developed in the *Philebus* than in the *Timaeus*, every becoming thing is created and sustained by the cosmic soul, and also they, especially human beings, live and become for the sake of the cosmic soul. In other words, the cosmic soul is the initiator, sustainer and the *telos* of the entire universe.

II

For the intellectual history of early Christianity, Plato's *Timaeus* served as a key philosophical referent for late antiquity philosophical discussions regarding the origin of the universe.¹²²

In line with the basics of Plato's ontological idealism, the beginning of the *Timaeus* presents the principle that orchestrates the details of the *Timaeus*' cosmology: what becomes but never is, is the realm of visible, tangible and empirical realities, which involves unreasoning sense perception, but what always is and has no becoming, is the realm of ideas, forms and models, which can only be grasped by understanding. Furthermore, "everything that comes to be must of necessity come to be by the agency of some cause, for it is impossible for anything to come to be without a cause." As a result, Plato believed that the world in which we human beings live, as the visible universe, must have an origin, and "must come to be by the agency of some cause."¹²³ According to our above analysis, we have to learn what kind of "cause" Plato intends here.

¹²² Torchia, *creatio*, 12

¹²³ Plato, *Timaeus*, in *Complete Works*: p.1234, 28a. Translated by Donald J. Zeyl.

The origination of the world by the agency of the ultimate cause is conceived of as “a work of craft.” It is a work of craft modeled by “the maker and father of this universe” and according to “that which is changeless and is grasped by a rational account, that is, by wisdom,”¹²⁴ Plato differentiates three moments of this divine craft work leading to the formation of the world.¹²⁵ These three moments are also carefully paraphrased by Plato according to the metaphor of “modeling”: “one was proposed as a model, intelligible and always changeless, a second as an imitation of the model, something that possesses becoming and is visible. ...a third kind ...it is a receptacle of all becoming - its wetnurse, as it were.”¹²⁶

To the intelligible and changeless model belong the ideas and forms. Altogether, they are the soul of the universe, invisible but bringing order and harmony to the empirical world. Insofar as the soul is the most excellent of all the things begotten by God (which Plato calls “Demiurge”), and God himself is the most excellent of all that is intelligible and eternal, the soul of universe can be said to be the immediate fruit of God’s creation, which manifests the divine nature.¹²⁷ In the *Timaeus*, the order and harmony of the ideas and forms are mainly expressed in the algebraic proportion, the geometrical relationship, and the musical rhythm that the movement of physical phenomena manifest, which can only be grasped by a penetrating and elegant human understanding.

The receptacle of all becoming, in which things come to be, is the amorphous pre-existent and eternal matter. Because this preexistent matter is utterly formless, it is

¹²⁴ Ibid., 1235, 29b.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 1253, 50d.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 1251, 49a.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 1240, 36e.

invisible and doesn't belong to the empirical world.¹²⁸ As a result, the world of ideas and forms which is taken to be the soul of the universe, together with the amorphous preexistent matter, is the eternal constituent of divine creation which happens before the beginning of time and the origination of the empirical world. In a word, God, ideas and matter are the three principles for the origination of the world in *Timaeus*' cosmology. In relation to the four categories presented in the *Philebus*, we can see that God is the cause of mixture, ideas are the limit, and then matter is the unlimited. The process of creation is then a mixture of the limit and the unlimited by God.

The world comprising things of becoming, which comes to be and imitates the intelligible and eternal model, is our world. When models with mathematical properties and proportions are cast upon the amorphous preexistent matter, then fire, air, water and earth are formed. Each possesses a specific unity with its particular measure in relationship to the others. They are the basic elements of the empirical world, upon which a myriad of things are formed due to the mixture and interaction between various materials with different forms.¹²⁹ Because the empirical world comes from the imitation of the model, it is potentially oriented towards order and harmony. But the amorphous eternal matter is its irrevocable material. Accordingly, things in becoming are also very easily corrupted and thus they deviate from the appropriate natures which were once apportioned to each of them by divine creation. Once the deviation happens, disorder, evil, and disaster ensues.¹³⁰ There is no hint in the *Timaeus* referring to any *telos* for the

¹²⁸ Ibid., 1254 and 1255, 51a-51b and 52d-52c.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 1237, 31c-32c.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 1246-1247, 42e-44c.

becoming of the empirical world. It just keeps changing in ebb and flow, sometimes more orderly, sometimes less. In contrast, God has a purpose when he intends to create the world. God creates the visible world and thus puts order into it just because he wants to manifest his own goodness and make everything as good as he is!¹³¹ However, because of the intrinsic potentiality of the empirical world towards disorder and disharmony due to the eternal amorphous matter as their constituent, God can only “produce a piece of work that would be as excellent and supreme as its nature would allow.”¹³²

This last statement has implications for human beings’ fate. As a mixture of body and soul, the changeable and the changeless, human beings have a specific obligation to harmonize these two parts. If a person relies upon reason to control his emotions which are usually randomly stimulated by sense perceptions and thereby he performs well in this regard during the course of his life, “he would at the end return to his dwelling place in his companion star, to live a life of happiness that agreed with his character.” Nevertheless, if he continues to fail at this, he will first be reborn as a woman and then as some wild animal that resembles the wicked character he has acquired. From this perspective, salvation for human beings is “to learn the harmonies and revolutions of the universe, and so bring into conformity with its objects our faculty of understanding, as it was in its original condition.” When this conformity is complete, the goal of human life will be achieved, which is “the most excellent life offered to humankind by the gods, both now and forevermore.”¹³³

¹³¹ Ibid., 1236, 29e.

¹³² Ibid., 1236, 30b.

¹³³ Ibid., 1289, 90d.

Understood as such, if we understand the cosmological and soteriological picture in the *Timaeus* as a whole, we will find three key points either in disagreement with Christian understandings of divine creation as shaped by the Bible, or else having the potential to influence its Christian counterpart. First, which is also the most obvious, a pre-existent and eternal amorphous matter is a significant vitiation of the omnipotence of God. Although there is a mention in the *Timaeus* of the origination of the intelligible model of ideas and forms by God, the assertion that God needs the preexistent matter to accommodate these ideas and forms in order to finish His craftwork of creation is explicit. This conception will make divine creation no different from human creating, which always needs preexistent material to receive human ideas. In this conception, divine creation would not bring anything utterly new, either. Ultimately, it just changes the pattern in which the preexistent material gets organized. As we will see later, for early Christian intellectuals who were committed to constructing a truly divine theory of creation, much energy will be spent on debating this aspect of Platonism. Second, as the earlier quotation shows, divine creation in the *Timaeus* can make a visible world good only inasmuch as its nature allows. This means that the amorphous matter, which is co-eternal with God and His ideas, will always have the potential to corrupt any established order and harmony in the created cosmos. That is the reason that the cosmos in the *Timaeus* appears to keep changing with its ebbing and flowing, without any intrinsic *telos* to progress towards. In this way, matter is evil, while idea is good, or body is evil, while soul is good. This unbridgeable dualism is intrinsic to Plato's cosmology in the *Timaeus*, which will provide an impetus to another even greater dualistic tradition in late antiquity.

That dualistic tradition is Gnosticism, which generally maintains that the visible world is created by a bad God, who fights with the good God dwelling above, so that the world is just a on-going battlefield full of turmoil, disorder and evil. Without any doubt, Christians who believe in *Genesis* which says that everything created by God is thought by God to be good, must avoid this sort of Platonic and Gnostic dualistic thinkings. On the other hand, an unreserved recognition of the existence of evil in the created world in Platonism and Gnosticism also presents a serious problem of theodicy for Christians. The emergence of a full-fledged doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* depends upon, as we will examine later, whether Christianity can directly face this challenge and sufficiently resolve the related issue of evil. Third, for Plato, the divine creation depicted as a craftwork comprising three indispensable moments, God, ideas and matter, is a process of necessity. The necessity contained in the ideas and forms which dwell in the soul of the universe, the divine Intellect, is determined to be embodied in the changing and becomings of the visible world. This world is saturated by “nature,” from which nothing, not even the gods, can be free.¹³⁴ As a consequence, this Greek idea of nature will hardly square with the Christian belief in the absolute freedom of God in his creation. This is also a controversial point driving early Christian philosophers to the theory of *creatio ex nihilo*.

Another issue parallel to the one of “matter” in this Platonic philosophical cosmology needs to be highlighted in order to account for what is at stake in the

¹³⁴ Ibid., 1250, 48a and 1270, 68e.

intellectual history of early Christianity which leads to *creation ex nihilo*. This issue is that of time.

According to the *Timaeus*, the cosmos comes to be through the agency of an ultimate cause, which means that it has an origin. Once created, the cosmos will exist and proceed for ever. But why would an originated thing exist forever? Apparently, this understanding of cosmic time is problematically asymmetrical. The basic strategy Plato employs to resolve this issue is to try to water down the literal meaning of “origin” of the cosmos, and instead to highlight the ontological dependence of the visible world, as well as its embedded time, upon divine creation.

For Plato, the origin of time coincides with the origin of the universe. They are generated together by the same act of divine creation: “Time, then, came to be together with the universe so that just as they were begotten together, they might also be undone together, should there ever be undoing of them.”¹³⁵ It entails that the creative act which is depicted to be God putting his ideas into an amorphous matter ought to occur before the origin of both the universe and time.¹³⁶ In other words, it happens actually eternally and non-temporally. It implies that whenever the temporal beginning of the universe is and however human beings know and measure it, time is created by God together with the universe scaled upon it. The emphasis upon the ontological and causal dependence of the universe upon divine creation finally leads to a beautiful description of time in Plato’s cosmology: time is the “moving image of eternity”:

¹³⁵ Ibid., 1241, 38b.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 1243, 39e.

So, as the model was itself an everlasting Living Thing,¹³⁷ he (God) set himself to bringing this universe to completion in such a way that it, too, would have that character to the extent that was possible. Now it was the Living Thing's nature to be eternal, but it isn't possible to bestow eternity fully upon anything that is begotten. And so he began to think of making a moving image of eternity: at the same time as he brought order to the universe, he would make an eternal image, moving according to number, of eternity remaining in unity. This number, of course, is what we now call "time."

For before the heavens came to be, there were no days or nights, no months or years. But now, at the same time as he framed the heavens, he devised their coming to be. These all are parts of time, and *was* and *will be* are forms of time that have come to be. Such notions we unthinkingly but incorrectly apply to everlasting being. ...These, rather, are forms of time that have come to be - time that imitates eternity and circles according to number.¹³⁸

I think the theory of time crystalized in these paragraphs is of utmost importance to the later development of the understanding of time in both Western philosophy and Christianity. According to this theory, the past, now and future modes of time, no matter how they change and evolve in the empirical world, are created altogether as an unsummed totality in the same divine creation. In this way, no matter how time is

¹³⁷ Living Thing is the thing with soul and intellect. In Plato's mind, the whole visible universe is a living thing with its own body and soul, which is furthermore an imitation of the model of Living Thing in the invisible and divine realm.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 1241, 37d-38b.

empirically measured and scaled in various scientific frameworks, ultimately, it still depends upon the divine creative act in an ontological sense. It becomes therefore possible to say that the world exists forever while still having been created, or the world has a beginning but no end while it still is created, or the world has no beginning but an end while it still is created. Moreover, it is also allowable to conceive that God both originates and sustains the existence of the visible world from underneath, since divine creation transpires eternally and non-temporally. In this way, the term “eternal” will secure a particular ontological connotation. No matter how long the visible world lasts, even perhaps forever, it is only the divine creation conditioning the being of this world that can be termed “eternal” in a fully ontological sense. As a result, any possible empirical measurement of actual cosmic time will have no implication whatsoever upon its ontological status of creaturehood.

Although this theory of time in the *Timaeus* has not been systematized and many later Platonic philosophers continued to polish it when they faced criticism from outside, the basic idea involved in this theory will become crucial to the formation of the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* concerning the concept of time.

3.3 Middle Platonism

Middle Platonism refers to Platonic philosophers who lived from the second half of the first century B.C.E. until the first half of the third century C.E. It tended to formulate a theology which bears an affinity with Christian thinking. On the one hand, the cosmology of the *Timaeus* was systematized into a theory made up of three ontological principles: God, Ideas and Matter. They were thought to be equal in rank, and

the eternity of matter, the stuff from which the world is made, was generally accepted. On the other hand, stimulated by the Jewish-Christian monotheistic thinking, middle Platonists were looking for a singular, universal ground of being and therefore pressed on towards the suppression of the three-principle scheme, thereby trying to provide a more transcendent expression of the first principle.¹³⁹ Of the latter tendency, Neoplatonism embodied in Plotinus' theory of Oneness and Emanation is the consummation, which we will analyze in next section of this chapter.

In particular, middle Platonists continued to debate the issue of time in the theory of world-formation broached in the *Timaeus*, that is, whether the ordered cosmos had an origin in time and how any origin of time can be understood in the context of divine creation. Considering the development of early Christian thought parallel to middle Platonism and Neoplatonism both concerning time and in some of its content, we find that the discussion of the issue of time among Platonic philosophers paved the way for early Christian intellectuals to nearly reach a consensus regarding the conception of time in a Christian context, which consensus is nicely expressed by Augustine's interpretation of *Genesis* which we will analyze later.

The engine to start the debate was Aristotle's criticism of the *Timaeus*: "There are those who think it possible both for something ungenerated to perish and for something

¹³⁹ May, *Creatio*, 4-5.

generated to remain imperishable, as for example, in the *Timaeus*, where he says that the world has been generated but nevertheless will last for all time.”¹⁴⁰

Aristotle notices here the asymmetry of time in the *Timaeus* concerning how a generated world could last forever. Or, how could an ever-lasting world be generated? In response to Aristotle’s criticism, the middle Platonic philosopher, Calvenus Taurus (c. C.E. 145) makes a more detailed analysis of the word “create” in this context. He says “the cosmos is said to be ‘created’ as being always in process of generation,” or “One might also call it ‘created’ by virtue of the fact that it is dependent for its existence on an outside source, to wit, God, by whom it has been brought into order.”¹⁴¹ In this way, it is reasonable to assert that the cosmos is always changing while still in need of a transcendent God to sustain its existence. This view is echoed by another philosopher, Albinus (fl. c. C.E. 145). While Albinus posits an everlasting generation of the universe, he also recognizes the need for an unbegotten cause that is responsible for sustaining this ongoing process: “Since what is continually becoming cannot account for itself, it requires some external cause.”¹⁴²

Following this thread of philosophical thought which elevates the status of divine creation from the horizontal cosmic dimension to a vertical and ontological one, Sallustius differentiates two kinds of creation: creation by means of skill or natural process and creation by means of function. According to his analysis, those who create by skill or natural process are prior to what they create; conversely, what they create is

¹⁴⁰ Aristotle, *De Caelo I*, 10, 280a 23-32, trans. W.K.C. Guthrie in *Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1939), as quoted in Torchia, *Creatio*: 23.

¹⁴¹ Torchia, *Creatio*, 24.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 24

subsequent to their creator. Those who create by function, however, bring their creatures into being simultaneously with themselves. For Sallustius, the God must create by means of function.¹⁴³ If we follow Sallustius' thought, it is not only possible to assert the eternity and non-temporality of divine creation, the synchronicity or simultaneity of divine creation with the on-going generated world at each moment can also be acknowledged. In my view, per my analysis in last section, this understanding of time is a corollary to Plato's theory. Since God creates the universe and its time all together, and also since the world needs an ultimate cause to sustain its continuous existence, the divine creation sustains itself eternally both above the totality of time and within the process of time. If we see it from the latter perspective, it is simultaneous in each moment, while if we see it from a more transcendent one, it is non-temporal. It is because of the ontological dependence of the entire world-process upon the divine creation that we can talk about it both eternally and synchronically, both transcendentally and immanently.

Of course, not all middle Platonic philosophers held similar views. For example, by virtue of their teachings that the world had a temporal origin, Atticus and Plutarch stood opposed to those philosophers who viewed the everlastingness of the world and its ontological dependence upon God at the same time.¹⁴⁴ Nevertheless, Sallustius' interpretation of the *Timaeus* and his solution to the problem of time in the context of divine creation, as it is anticipated in Taurus and Albinus, became dominant in the later development of the middle-Platonic interpretation of *Timaeus*.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 29.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 25.

I think that the main reason that Sallustius' model of time won over its competition was its capacity for sticking to an ontological mode of thinking while simultaneously remaining immune to new hypotheses of time proposed by the empirical sciences. Assuming that any mode of time in the visible world depends upon an ultimate cause in a vertical and ontological way, philosophers could now focus on constructions of their ontological systems and keep making their best cases. In a Christian context, we find that although an assertion of an everlasting world feels at odds with the view in *Genesis*, a refined philosophical thought on the relationship of the ontological dependence of the world upon God provides the same benefit to Christian intellectuals as to Platonists. It allows them a more nuanced interpretation of what the "beginning" means in Genesis 1:1. We will find that the first systematic Christian theory of time in Augustine will be developed along the same lines of middle Platonic thinking.

3.5 The First Christian Philosophical Doctrine of *Creatio Ex Nihilo* in Theophilus

It is well-acknowledged among scholars that it was Theophilus of Antioch (183-185, C.E.) who, for the first time, articulated a philosophical conception of *creatio ex nihilo* in Christian intellectual history. Given the historical analysis that we have pursued so far, it will be no surprise that it was during a course of controversy with various Platonic cosmologies rooted in the *Timaeus* that Theophilus stated his theory of *creatio ex nihilo*.

Keeping in line with his Christian piety as grounded in the Bible, Theophilus' main reasons for refuting Platonism were: one, if matter is as unoriginated as God, God can no longer be thought of as in the fullest sense creator of everything. As a result, the

omnipotence of God cannot be preserved. Two, if God has to create the ordered cosmos based upon pre-existent matter, there would be no difference between Him and a human craftsman who out of a given material makes what he wants.¹⁴⁵

Based upon these criticisms, Theophilus claims instead that the creation of God as expressed in the biblical story can only be the God Who creates everything out of nothing using an absolutely free will. Nothing exists which is in the full sense co-eternal with God. Even if the world could exist forever after its beginning, it still exists in time which is created by God. “God was himself space, was self-sufficient and was before all times.”¹⁴⁶

Stated in this way, we can see that the tenor of Theophilus’ first philosophical formulation of *creatio ex nihilo* is based on the absolute unconditionality of divine creation, as well as on the converse absolute dependence of all cosmic beings upon it. In other words, from the very first beginning, when Christian philosophers tried to use *creatio ex nihilo* to articulate the essence of divine creation as described in the biblical story, the “nothingness” never refers to “something” or some status of being which is capable of existing before the beginning of cosmic time, if there was any beginning of it at all. The “nothingness” here indicates God’s creative act as the ultimate condition of cosmic realities that conditions all the other realities while being itself not conditioned by anything, since it is the final cause which brings everything from non-being to being. In other words, the Christian philosophy of creation endorses a cross-like “sacred canopy” from its first moment. Vertically, it tries to grasp the ultimate ontological condition of all

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 158.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 161-2

beings in the world, while horizontally, it also attempts to be stretched widely enough to address all determinate and empirical realities within the world's all possible created range.

3.6 A Potential Form of “*Creatio Ex Nihilo*” in Plotinus’ Neo-Platonism

Between Theophilus of Antioch, who was the first Christian theologian philosophically formulating the idea “*creation ex nihilo*,” and Augustine, the first theologian to systemize the idea of *creatio ex nihilo* into orthodox Christian theology after the Council of Nicaea, Plotinus’ Neo-Platonism is the most important philosophical achievement which produced a perennial impact on the later development of Western thought on “*creatio ex nihilo*.” As is well-known, Plotinus’ key metaphor for describing the productive act of the One is “emanation,” “flowing,” or “overflowing,” which sounds not quite congenial to “creation.” However, the fact that he continued pushing forward with Plato’s ontological agenda of explaining the entirety of the world using a single principle makes his thought so cutting-edge in his time that, we can admit, any further development of divine creation may probably be counted as constructive only if it has first digested Plotinus’ metaphysics. This is proved by the substantial connection between Plotinus’ and Augustine’s thoughts. In this section, I will try to argue why Plotinus’ ideas can be considered to be a potentially more intricate form of “*creatio ex nihilo*” in comparison with this idea’s earlier formulation in the Christian tradition, and the way in which Plotinus’ idea of creation influenced the thought of later Christian theologians/philosophers.

I. Creation or Emanation

It seems that the main obstacle making scholars hesitant to recognize Plotinus' idea of "emanation" to be similar to the Christian idea of "creation" is that the emanation of the world from the One is necessary, while creation is predicated upon the absolute freedom of divine will.

However, even though it is a consistent affirmation in Plotinus' thought that the One "exists of necessity" (*Enneads*, 3.2.3.1-5)¹⁴⁷ and that for the causation whereby the One brings the world into existence, there is nothing "random or by chance," we find that here, "necessity" is not meant to be contradictory to "freedom." Instead, using theistic language, Plotinus stresses that the making of reality for the One is "free," "independent" (*Enneads*, 6.8.15) and "according to its will" (*Enneads*, 6.8.13.) The main reason for the compatibility of these two sorts of statements is that the necessity of the One's productive act is mainly understood as being implied by the One's "self-causation," "self-determination," and thus self-sufficiency. In other words, there is no constraint from outside which determines the One's act, and in this sense, it is both necessary and free. Because "self-determination" is a major trope for the later development of the Christian idea of "divine freedom," such as in Augustine's or Thomas Aquinas' cases, we can't assert that the emanation of realities from the One is not creative merely on the basis of its literal emphasis upon "necessity."

¹⁴⁷ All quotes from Plotinus in the dissertation come from Plotinus, *Enneads*, Intro. and Ed. by A.H. Armstrong (Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 2014). Their remarks according to the original Greek version will be quoted in parentheses.

On the other hand, one idea that is associated with that of divine freedom in God's creation in the Christian tradition is the "ontological contingency" of the entire created world, as we have witnessed in the case of Theophilus of Antioch. That means, since God creates the world in an absolutely free way, the world depends upon Him, rather than the other way around. In a certain sense, God does not need the world and thus, it is also possible to imagine a totally different world than the current one. Is there any similar idea of "ontological contingency" of the produced world upon the One in Plotinus' thought? The answer is affirmative.

"...it would be more absurd to deprive the Good itself of self-determination because it is good and because it remains on its own and *does not need to move to something else, since the other things move to it and it has no need of anything.*" (*Enneads*, 6.8.6; emphasis is my own.)

"But we must say that he is altogether unrelated to anything; for he is what he is before them; for we take away the 'is', and so also any kind of relations to the real things." (*Enneads*, 6.8.8)

The last clause of the second quote means that since the One is the "generator of being," and thus, "beyond being," it remains what it is even if we don't use "is" to predicate it and accordingly, cut away all intrinsic relationship between the One and the many beings that are produced by the One. In other words, it is because the many beings non-reciprocally depend upon the One that the One has no needs and thus is unrelated to any lower realities. It is quite obvious that Plotinus indeed enjoys an idea of "ontological contingency" for the entire produced world upon the One. Together with other ideas such

as the “freedom” and “self-determination” of the One’s productive act, this makes for another proof that Plotinus’ cosmogonical thought centering upon “emanation” can be understood as analogous to the Christian idea of “creation.” This conclusion is enhanced by the fact that Plotinus frequently used alternative words such as “make,” “produce,” and “bring into existence,” to describe the causal relationship between the One and derived realities. Apparently, the meanings of these terms are more comparable to “creation” than to “emanation.”

Nevertheless, despite the fact that we can find these similarities between Plotinus’ thought and Christianity, which should be no surprise, since the time in which Plotinus lived was a time in which all kinds of intellectual trends communicated and debated with each other, we continue to find elements in Plotinus’ thought that are typically Greek and atypically Christian. One vivid example is Plotinus’ answer to the question “Why the One overflows”:

If the First is perfect, the most perfect of all, and the primal power, it must be the most powerful of all beings and the other powers must imitate it as far as they are able. Now when anything else comes to perfection we see that it produces, and does not endure to remain by itself, but makes something else. This is true not only of things which have choice, but of things which grow and produce without choosing to do so, and even lifeless things, which impart themselves to others as far as they can: as fire warms, snow cools, and drugs act on something else in a way *corresponding to their own nature*—all imitating the First Principle as far as they are able by tending to everlastingness and generosity. How then could the

most perfect, the first Good, remain in itself as if it grudged to give of itself or was impotent, when it is the productive power of all things? How would it then still be the Principle? Something must certainly come into being from it, if anything is to exist of the others which derive their being from it: *that it is from it that they come is absolutely necessary.*(*Enneads*, 4. 2)

From the above analysis we know that it is in the sense that the productive act of the One is not constrained by anything outside of itself that the act can be seen as both “necessary” and “free.” However, apart from the meaning of “self-determination,” “freedom” also points to the aspect of an act that it can be otherwise than it is. In other words, if we look into the details of divine freedom in later Christian thought of “*creatio ex nihilo*,” we find that theologians quite often entertain the idea that God can choose not to create, and therefore, divine creation can be said to be absolutely free in this new sense. However, we don’t find a similar idea in Plotinus’ thought.

According to *Enneads*, 4. 2, the reason that the One overflows is that it has to. This is the only way that the One, as the first and most perfect, is what it is. In other words, this is the One’s nature, and therefore, as the One, it cannot not-overflow. Obviously, this preempts the possibility for Plotinus to think about the non-existence of the produced world. As a consequence, although his idea of “ontological contingency” of the produced world upon the One makes him realize that there is no intrinsic relationship between the One and the produced world, his view of the “nature” of the One as a necessarily overflowing agency prevents him from entertaining an even more radical idea of ontological contingency. This more radical idea would imply that there can be no

relationship between the two at all, and thus, the produced world could possibly be entirely non-existent.

In this way, I would like to categorize Plotinus' cosmogonical thought centering upon the emanation of the One as being located half-way between the Greek idea of nature and the Christian idea of radical ontological contingency of the entire world. His persistent emphasis upon the contingency of the world dependent on that single principle, the One's productive act, provides more nuanced philosophical language for later Christian theologians to express their similar, yet disparate idea of "*creatio ex nihilo*". However, his intimate relationship with his Greek heritage, particularly the Platonic tradition, makes his cosmogony still typically Greek.

II. Plotinus' Continuity with Plato and the Tradition of "*Creatio ex Nihilo*"

Understood as such, to explore the continuity between Plotinus' and Plato's thought, and accordingly, to assess to what degree Plotinus' understanding of the productive act of the One can be interpreted as "*creatio ex nihilo*," is another perspective helping to deepen our knowledge of Plotinus' thought and its influence upon Christianity.

In my previous analysis of ontological motifs in Plato's thought, I argue that in the *Phaedo*, the way in which Plato distinguished himself from pre-Socratic natural philosophers is by finding reasons to explain the overall order and being of cosmic realities. In the *Parmenides*, Plato vaguely pointed out that there is a difference between the "essence" and the "being" of each existing thing, and thus, varying reasons need to be furnished for explaining each of these aspects. Correspondingly, in the *Republic*, Plato

took the form of the Good as an ultimate principle which is “beyond being,” and thus, that it can be used to explain both what a thing is and where it is from.

In comparison, what Plotinus provides in his *Enneads* can be seen as a development of Plato’s ideas. He used a singular principle to explain the overall order and being of cosmic realities in an ontological way. We can see that this is the case from the following quotations:

Why are the legs and feet as long as they are? Because this is as it is, and because the face is as it is the feet and legs are as they are. And in general the harmony of all the parts with each other is their reciprocal cause; and the reason why this part is, is that this is essential humanity; so that the being and the cause are one and the same. But these came in this way from a single source which did not reason but gave the reason why and the being together as a whole. It is the source there for being and the why of being, giving both at once.... (*Enneads*, 6.8.12.14)

It is very clear that the One is thought by Plotinus to furnish the explanation both for why things fit together in the universe, i.e., its overall order, and where their “being” comes from. Correspondingly, for the One, since it is the principle for both the order and the being of the entire universe, its essence and being are the same. (*Enneads*, 6.8.12.14-7).

In this way, I find that Plotinus’ principle of the One supplies an intensifying effort based upon Plato’s ontology which seeks a singular principle to explain both what a thing is and why it exists. However, considering Plotinus’ idea of a “chain of being,” I need to modify this statement. Actually, what a thing is, i.e., its essence, is more directly explained by the “Intellect” which consists of forms and logical possibilities. But because

Intellect is the first outcome of the overflowing of the One, and thus, all forms in the Intellect are thought to be a consequence of the productive act of the One, it is safe for us to characterize the One, for Plotinus, as the reason for both the essence and the being of all realities.

From the intellectual history from Plato and middle-Platonism, until Theophilus of Antioch, we know that to use a singular principle to account for the overall order and being of the world, and then to follow the ontological thinking of Plato will lead, in Christian thought, to the philosophical formulation of “*creatio ex nihilo*.” Since Plotinus’ thought is, according to my analysis, significantly driven by this motif, it will not be surprising for us to find similar expressions of “*creatio ex nihilo*” in his thought. A caveat needs to be added here that since Plotinus’ thought is not strictly centered upon “creation,” it may be more accurate to characterize these expressions as “*emanation ex nihilo*”.

First, we find a very impressive statement from Plotinus that the self-causation of the One is to be described as “[making] itself from nothing (*oudenos*)” (*Enneads*, VI, 8.7.54).

Second, the following quotation puts Plotinus safely in the tradition of creation/emanation “*ex nihilo*”: “It is because there is nothing in it [the One] that all things come from it: in order that being may exist, the One is not being, but the generator of being. This, we may say, is the first act of generation: the One, perfect because it seeks nothing, has nothing, and needs nothing, overflows, as it were, and its superabundance makes something other than itself. ” (*Enneads*, V. 2.1)

Because Plotinus has denied that, in his vision of the “chain of being,” any causation working above the tier of Intellect is “temporary” (such as *Enneads*, III.2.1.22-6), we need to infer that the “nothing” he is talking about in these quotations is in line with Theophilus of Antioch’s quotation which characterized divine creation as “*creatio ex nihilo*.” In other words, the “ontological unconditionality” of the causation of the One vis-à-vis all caused realities in the world is its core implication. Since this is the case, I would like to pinpoint two further features of the “*emanation ex nihilo*” of the One in Plotinus’ thought in order to show possible influences of this idea upon the later development of Christian thought.

First, since the productive act of the One is unconditioned, it is legitimate to read a mystical commitment into it. In other words, the non-reciprocal ontological dependence of derived realities upon the One leads to a mystical attitude of Plotinus affirming that nothing characteristic of derived realities can be fully and equally characteristic of the One. Therefore, we find in the *Enneads* that since the One generates form, shape, and being, it is itself “formless,” “shapeless,” “beyond being,” and other similar statements. The most impressive claim among them is perhaps what, in my view, betokens a variety of similar mystical views of later Christian theorists towards the unfathomable creative power of divine creation:

But we see self-determination not as that Good’s incidental attribute but itself by itself, by taking away the opposing factors from the self-determinations in other things; we might say this about it by transferring what is less from lesser things because of incapacity to find what we ought to say about it. All the same, we

could find nothing to say which is applicable to it, or even really about it; for all noble and majestic things come after it. (*Enneads*, 6.8.8.1-15)

In other words, all we know about the One must be inferred from our knowledge about the derived realities, while on the other hand, because of the ontological priority of the One, nothing about derived realities can be said fully and equally about the One.

Second, since the One is “beyond being” and nothing in derived realities can qualify it fully, and since it is certain that for Plotinus the One is the cause of the entire world, it is possible for Plotinus to positively, not negatively, affirm that the One is after all an “activity,” a “generator of being,” or “productive power.” Considering that “unconditionality” is an essential feature of this ultimate activity, “sheer making,” which produces everything in the world from nothing, may be the best way to describe the productive act of the One. The following quotation, in my view, represents this conjecture of mine very well:

- What then are “all the things”?
- All things of which that One is the principle.
- But how is that One the principle of all things? Is it because as principle it keeps them in being, making each of them exist?
- Yes, and because it *brought them into existence*.
- But how did it so?
- By possessing them beforehand.
- But it has been said that in this way it will be a multiplicity.

- But it had them in such a way as not to be distinct: they are distinguished on the second level, in the rational form. For this is already actuality; but the One is the potency of all the things.
- But in what way is it the potency?
- Not in the way in which matter is said to be in potency, because it receives: for matter is passive; but this [material] way of being a potency is at the opposite extreme to making. (Enneads, V.3.15.26-35)

Marvelously, many of Plotinus' terms, in my view, anticipate some of key moments in the later intellectual history of "*creation ex nihilo*". His way of describing the One as an "activity" is similar to Aquinas' view of God as "pure act to be"; "generator of being" is similar to Tillich's "ground of being." As mentioned above, the emphasis upon the ineffability of the productive power of the One presages the tradition of Christian mysticism. Finally, his language of "sheer making" also implies a perennial debate within the tradition of "*creation ex nihilo*" concerning how unconditional the divine creativity could be.

From the above analysis about the continuities between Plato's and Plotinus' thoughts, and between the latter and the Christian tradition of "*creatio ex nihilo*," we will be able to find a prerequisite for any philosopher or theologian to possibly fashion an idea of "*creatio ex nihilo*" similar to the Greek/Christian case: it must include an idea of "ontological dependence," or according to Aristotle's typology of all possible meanings of "priority," they must have an idea of "priority of nature." Aristotle once characterized "Prior" in relation to "nature and being" in this way: "that is, those which can be without

other things, while the others cannot be without them, - a distinction which Plato used” (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1019a1-4).

In both Plato’s and Plotinus’ thoughts, the priority of nature concerns a relation of non-reciprocal dependence in which, in a series of items, the posterior depends on the prior and cannot exist without the prior, whereas the prior exists independently of the posterior and is not eliminated with the destruction of the posterior.¹⁴⁸ What is most important is that the relationship of “dependence” is presented as happening synchronically among related items in the series. Also, because the ultimate item is what conditions all the other derived ones in the final analysis, the relationship of dependence can also be thought of as “eternal” or “non-temporal” in the sense that all temporal modes among conditioned terms are non-reciprocally dependent upon the ultimate. Relying on this insight, it is also easier for us to understand the relationship between “transcendence” and “immanence” as this may be implied by this series in the “priority by nature.” The conditioning power of the ultimate item in the series “transcends” all other terms in the sense that it is prior by nature to all of them, and thus, everything characteristic of the derived items cannot be fully and equally characteristic of the first. However, the ultimate is “immanent” in all the derived items in that all these items are a manifestation of the conditioning power of the ultimate, and thus, we can still say something about what is the first and ultimate by means of our knowledge of its consequences in the derived, with a condition that what we say cannot be adequate to the ultimate. In other words,

¹⁴⁸ On this point, please also refer to Dominic J. O’Meara, “The Hierarchical Ordering of Reality in Plotinus”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, Edited by Lloyd P. Gerson (Cambridge University Press: 1996): pp. 356-385.

“transcendence” and “immanence” will always be mutually defined in a series of the priority of nature, or “ontological dependence.” If there is no immanent manifestation of the ultimate, there is no way for human knowledge to reach the first, and thus, no way to differentiate what is transcendent from what is immanent. On the other hand, once we make sure derived realities are the immanent manifestation of the conditioning power of something beyond them, we are also immediately certain about how transcendent that ultimate’s conditioning power can be.

III. “*Emanation Ex Nihilo*” is still not quite “*Ex Nihilo*”

This last section on Plotinus will address a final issue that I think is of great significance for our understanding of the role of Plotinus in the intellectual history of “*creation ex nihilo*.” In a further analysis, we find that the overflowing of the One, understood as an unconditional act of sheer making, is actually not that “unconditional” after all. Consequently, how thoroughly Plotinus executed the criteria of “unconditionality” in his thinking about the ontological productive act of the One will constitute our final analysis.

First, I expounded above that the overflowing of the One is not straightforwardly “creating” since Plotinus lacks an idea of the radical contingency of the entire world. For him, the One necessarily overflows since this is its nature, and as a consequence, it is impossible for Plotinus to conceive of the possibility of the non-existence of the entire world and accordingly to formulate a more radical version of “*emanation ex nihilo*”. Thus, the unconditionality of divine creation, expressed in the “absolute freedom” of

divine creation and the corresponding “gratuitous love” of the Creator God in Christian thought, has no parallel in Plotinus.

Second, although the productive power of the One is considered by Plotinus to make all derived realities from nothing, “Intellect”, as the immediate fruit of this overflowing power, is conceived to be a necessary instrument for the One to finish its making. Because “Intellect” includes all forms and measures that speak to the intelligibility of the entire world, its necessary instrumentality implies that the overflowing of the One cannot be irrational and unintelligible. In other words, for Plotinus, the overflowing of the One cannot be irrational, and he is certain that the material world must be intelligible even before it is actually produced, because the overflowing of the One into the material world must follow the intelligible specifications of Forms as they exist in the world of Intellect. The following quote may be a good illustration of Plotinus’ thought in this regard: “But as first existence it [the One] is not in the soulless and not in irrational life; for this also is too weak to exist and is a dispersal of rational principle and an indefiniteness; but in so far as it advances towards rational principle, it leaves chance behind; for that which is in accordance with rational principle is not by chance.” (Enneads, VI.8. 25-30.)

Here, we can say that Plotinus has confused the concept of “irrationality” and “non-rationality”. According to the relationship of “priority by nature,” if the One is ontologically prior to the world of rational principles, the Intellect, it can be said to be “non-rational” because rational principles cannot exhaust its overflowing power. However, saying it is impossible for the One to be not “in the soulless and not in

irrational life”, this means that the One cannot generate other possible worlds that is different from the one which has been conditioned by rational principles, the Intellect. If Plotinus means the latter, quite obviously, the overflowing power of the One is not so unconditioned as to what ought to be implied in his thought by the idea of “*emanation ex nihilo*.”

Actually, whether the intelligibility of the created world exists prior or posterior to divine creation is a consistent debate in the later intellectual history of “*creatio ex nihilo*.” Since they are confined by a theistic and Platonic mindset, most Christian theologians and philosophers entertained an idea similar to Plotinus that divine creation is necessarily intelligible because God cannot create something that is not confined by divine intelligence which contains all forms, measures and logical possibilities. In my view, this theistic and Platonic obsession about the intelligibility of the world undermines the emphasis of “*creatio ex nihilo*” upon the “unconditionality” of divine creation. From the above analysis, we can see that this potential insufficiency of the Western tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*” has already been detected in Plotinus’ thought.

Last but not least, the non-thoroughness of Plotinus’ thought concerning the unconditionality of the overflowing power of the One is also manifested in his view of matter. Different from Plato, Plotinus considered matter to be equally a derived reality produced stage after stage from the One. However, he simultaneously maintained that as the residue of the productive power of the One, matter lacks any kind of form and thus, is utterly evil, merely a kind of “non-being.”¹⁴⁹ How can a generator of being, the One,

¹⁴⁹ Please refer to footnote 148 to see the related discussion.

generate something of utterly “non-being”? Also, how can the Good, the most perfect One, produce something purely evil? These may be the most annoying questions for Plotinus since it challenges the coherency of his system. As we will discover later, it is Augustine who picked up these remaining questions which are implied by Plotinus’ system and who provided answers to them in a more Christian way.

IV. Conclusion

In a word, I think it is difficult to overestimate the influence of Plotinus on the Western intellectual history of “*creatio ex nihilo*.” His persistence in using a singular principle to explain everything in the world provides a fundamental drive for later Christian thought to specify and deepen its idea of “*creatio ex nihilo*.” His metaphysics of the “chain of being” also provides a basic language for later theologians/philosophers to address any implicated issue using the idea of “ontological dependence” or “priority by nature.” Last but not least, the potential insufficiencies or incoherences within Plotinus’ thought demand responses from the tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*.”

3.7 Gnosticism in the View of Early Christian Polemicists

For the presentation of the intellectual history of early Christianity which leads to Augustine’s systematic account of divine creation as “*creatio ex nihilo*,” there is one term that cannot be overlooked: Gnosticism.

According to Karen King, in traditional Western scholarship the term “Gnosticism” deals mainly with one of these three connotations:

- (1) all varieties of early Christianity that are characterized ... as having too little or too negative an appreciation of Judaism.

- (2) an outside contamination of pure Christianity, either as the force that contaminated Christianity (as in the theories of Gnosticism as an independent religion) or as a form of contaminated Christianity (where Gnosticism is understood to be a secondary deviation from the pure Gospel); and
- (3) any of a number of traditions said to be closely related to this contaminated Christianity, whether or not they contain explicitly Christian elements, such as Hermeticism, Platonizing Sethianism, Mandaeanism, Manichaeism, the Albigensian heresy, or the tenets of the medieval Cathars.¹⁵⁰

It can be confirmed from these historical uses of “Gnosticism” that the term concerns the construction of Christian identity to connote mainly a “religious other,” this term being used by Christian polemicists to argue for the legitimacy of Christian orthodox views. This is the case not only for the early patristic fathers that actually engaged themselves with these polemics, but, due to the fact that for a long time these polemical fathers’ portrait of Gnosticism was the only available material for modern scholars’ study, the “orthodoxy”-vs-“heresy” controversy is also influential for modern scholars’ understanding of the so-called “Gnostic” tradition. However, recent studies of this tradition, inspired by the excavated materials in Egypt in 1945 and labeled the codex of “Nag Hammadi,” began to systematically challenge the status quo in traditional studies of Gnosticism, and thus tried to recover more of the historical truth either about the tradition itself or about unnoticed biases once brought into Gnostic research. Therefore, we can say the current situation for the study of Gnosticism is muddy because many

¹⁵⁰ Karen L. King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003): 4.

traditional categories which had been used to constitute the framework of this study are currently under challenge.

Nevertheless, for the purpose of my study, I think it will be enough to focus on how the early Christian polemicists refuted the “Gnosticism” that they envisioned in their time. This does not mean that I do not endorse the contemporary Gnostic scholars’ concern that historical studies should always be alert to the underlying power structure of any historical picture presented by one specific group of people. However, to understand how Christian polemicists refuted Gnosticism and how they argued for their own contrary views is still of paramount importance for us to understand the philosophical gist of the idea of “*creatio ex nihilo*,” as it was gradually figured out by these early Christian theologians. On the other hand, although traditional categories have proved to be insufficient to cover all the varieties of worldviews represented by the Nag Hammadi codex, they are not totally inaccurate. In this way, I maintain that the Gnosticism refuted by the patristic fathers is one significant portion of the Gnosticism-related literature, the essential features of which modern scholars are still trying to pin down. Therefore, I will focus upon the features of Gnosticism represented by the medieval Christian orthodox tradition in the analysis which follows.

There are two resources in modern scholarship concerning Gnosticism which are highly relevant to our purpose. One is a definition of the term “Gnosticism” that is generally agreed upon by the 1966 international conference on Gnosticism, and another is a generalization of the features of Gnosticism from a Protestant historian of the Christian church, Adolf Von Harnack. I find that the views expressed in these resources on

Gnosticism have nicely mapped out the portrait of Gnosticism as it was represented and refuted by early Christian polemicists, as well as by neo-Platonic philosophers such as Plotinus. Therefore, in the remaining parts of my analysis of Gnosticism, I will make use of these two resources' portraits of the Gnostic tradition in order to illustrate what is at stake in the debate between Gnosticism and other intellectual trends which led to the philosophical formulation of "creatio ex nihilo" in early Christian theology, especially in Augustine's thought.

The definition of "Gnosticism" is given in the first resource as:

A certain group of systems of the Second Century AD... The Gnosticism of the Second Century sects involves a coherent series of characteristics that can be summarized in the idea of a divine spark in man, deriving from the divine realm, fallen into this world of fate, birth and death, and needing to be awakened by the divine counterpart of the self in order to be finally reintergrated. Compared with other conceptions of a "devolution" of the divine, this idea is based ontologically on the conception of a downward movement of the divine whose periphery (often called Sophia or Ennoia) had to submit to the fate of entering into a crisis and producing - even if only indirectly - this world, upon which it cannot turn its back since it is necessary for it to recover its *pneuma* - a dualistic conception on a monistic background, expressed in a double movement of devolution and reintegration.¹⁵¹

Furthermore, the features of Gnosticism generalized by Harnack are:

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 170.

- (1) Gnostic thought distinguishes between the supreme God and the creator, and hence between redemption and creation.
- (2) The supreme God was separated from the God of the Old Testament, and hence at least some parts of it could no longer be accepted as revelation of the supreme God; the Old Testament did, however, give an essentially accurate portrait of the world creator.
- (3) Matter was considered to be independent and eternal.
- (4) The created world was conceptualized either as the product of an evil being or intermediary acting out of hostility to the supreme God, or as a “fall of humanity.”
- (5) Evil was understood as a physical force, inherent in matter.
- (6) The absoluteness of God was dispersed in Aeons (“Real Powers and heavenly persons”)
- (7) Christ revealed a previously unknown God.
- (8) Gnostic Christology distinguished Jesus in his human appearance from the heavenly Aeon of Christ, resulting in the belief that (a) Jesus was only a human being because he and Christ were entirely unrelated; or (b) Jesus’s soul was formed in heaven and only appeared to pass through Mary’s womb; or (c) Jesus’ earthly appearance was a mere phantasm. The saving action of Christ was to reunite to God everything that had been severed from Him by an unusual connection to matter.
- (9) Humans were divided into two or three classes, depending on whether they possessed spirit and soul or only a material nature. Only the spiritual were

“capable of Gnosis and the divine life... in virtue of their constitution” (that is, the spiritual were saved by nature)

- (10) Christian eschatology, including the second coming, the resurrection of the body, and the final judgement, was rejected entirely. Instead, Gnostics thought the spiritual person enjoyed immortality here and now, while waiting for future delivery from the sensuous world and entrance into heaven.
- (11) As an addendum, Harnack noted that Gnostic ethics were based on a contrast between the “sensuous and spiritual element of human nature,” and therefore Gnostics were capable of only two kinds of practice: strict asceticism or libertinism.¹⁵²

Although these features are intrinsically interconnected, (1)-(5) are particularly relevant for our study, and they are also at least partially represented in the quoted definition.

Based upon these features, we can understand what is at state for the debate about “divine creation” among related intellectual trends in early Christianity.

The most jarring element for a Christian ear is obviously Gnosticism’s anti-cosmic dualism. The division of the Supreme God and the world creator will not only make Gnosticism the opposite of Christian theology, it also confronts intellectual efforts in middle and neo-Platonism to use one singular principle to provide ontological/cosmological explanations for the entire universe. In this regard, we can see that Plotinus’ “the One” is a direct response to the Gnosticism’s dualistic view. For

¹⁵² Ibid., 62-63.

Christian theologians, what “*creatio ex nihilo*” implies is a monistic commitment to one singular supreme principle of divine creation, and also a refutation of this Gnostic view.

However, the refutation against the Platonic idea of the independence and eternity of “matter” is a drive for patristic fathers to search for their unique philosophical expression of divine creation as “*creatio ex nihilo*.” In other words, regarding the issue of whether matter enjoys an independent ontological status, we can see that both Plato’s *Timaeus* and Gnosticism stand in the same camp in opposition to Christianity.

Last but not least, the problem of evil is still a prick in the eye for both Platonic and Christian thinkers. To refute the starkly dualistic view of Gnosticism, Plotinus treats matter as the measureless, orderless, and thus, utterly valueless residue for the all-encompassing overflowing power of the One. In a certain sense, this idea is a refutation of Gnosticism since it insists that matter is also a product of the One, and according to Plotinus, matter always has the potentiality to be “covered” by the “Soul”, and thereby to become good again. However, Plotinus’ frequent statements such as that “matter is intrinsically evil” or “matter is non-being” make us suspicious about whether his monistic commitment to the goodness of the One is robust enough to incorporate this intrinsic evil power of matter. In other words, “theodicy” will constitute a tough problem for any philosophical effort which tries to use a singular principle to explain all the facts in the world. How does a supremely good principle produce something in the world which is blatantly evil? In Plato, this issue emerged but did not get answered. Plotinus tried to tackle it, yet in an insufficient way. In early Christianity, however, this issue was systematically treated by Augustine of Hippo, and so, in the following, our discussion

needs to turn to Augustine. As I argued earlier, Augustine was the first systematic Christian thinker who incorporated the philosophical idea of “*creatio ex nihilo*” into other parts of the orthodox position of Christian theology which had been constructed after the Nicaea Council. In this way, once we make clear the status of this idea in Augustine’s thought, we will be able to grasp its standard expression in Christian theology in general, and thereby reach a more appropriate position to place the Christian tradition into comparison with Ruism.

3.8 The idea of *Creatio Ex Nihilo* in Augustine’s Thought

What is salient in Augustine’s thought for the tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*” is that distilling all the debates about “divine creation” among Platonists, Gnostic thinkers, and patristic fathers, Augustine systemized his idea of “*creatio ex nihilo*” into an orthodox position of Christian theology which came into existence after the Council of Nicaea. In this sense, Augustine provided a foundational understanding of “*creatio ex nihilo*” for the later development of mainstream Christian theology. I will even claim that the basic features of Augustine’s idea of divine creation have not been significantly challenged in Western thought up until René Descartes, which clearly speaks to the importance of Augustine’s thought.

Because Augustine’s thought stands at the crossroad of various intellectual trends, it will be necessary for us to make sure what it was that Augustine inherited and transformed concerning his predecessors’ thoughts in order for us to appreciate his contribution to the tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*.”

I. The Similarities and Differences Between Augustine and his Predecessors.

For Gnosticism, the major example of which, in Augustine's case, is Manichaeism, its anti-cosmic dualism, as well as its denigration of the world creator God in the Old Testament, is a major opponent against which Augustine fought. In this regard, Augustine not only inherits the same enthusiasm as his predecessors, the Patristic Fathers such as Irenaeus and Tertullian, he also shares the same interest as the Neo-Platonists such as Plotinus in attempting to organize a metaphysical worldview using a single principle. However, we must also be aware that Manichaeism once played a positive role in the growth of Augustine's intellectual life. According to Augustine's own representation of Manichaeism in his polemical works, the major reason that Manichaeism was able to bring challenge to the authority of the Old Testament was that Manichaeism sticks to literal meanings of the scripture, and thus brings up doubts concerning the theological truth implied by a literal interpretation of the scripture. Therefore, in order to refute Manichaeism and still keep the authority of the Old Testament in its proper position in the Christian orthodox tradition, Augustine has to implement a less anthropomorphic understanding of the scripture. Thus, he emphasizes the importance of a spiritual interpretation as an alternative to a literal one. This can be clearly seen in the following quotation: "The spiritual believers in the Catholic teaching do not believe that God is limited by a bodily shape. When man is said to have been

made to the image of God, these words refer to the interior man, where reason and will reside.”¹⁵³

Here, Augustine refutes Manichaeism’s challenge to the rationality of the Old Testament’s portrait of God as someone who has bodily shape, and emphasizes that an alternative spiritual understanding is the reading which is actually correct. In a word, Manichaeism’s literal understanding of the Christian scriptures pushes Augustine to elevate the metaphysical rank of his own interpretation and thus be able to provide a spiritual interpretation which is understood by Augustine to be theologically truer.

However, this also puts Augustine into a complicated position regarding Platonism. Quite obviously, in order to provide this kind of spiritual interpretation of the Christian scripture, a new set of philosophical language will be needed. For Augustine, this language is mainly inspired by Platonism, particularly Plotinus’ Neo-platonism. We can see this is the case from his autobiography:

At that time, after reading those books of the Platonists and being instructed by them to search for incorporeal truth, I clearly saw your (God) invisible things which “are understood by the things that are made.” I was made certain that you exist, that you are infinite, although not diffused throughout spaces, with finite or infinite, that you are truly he who is always the same, with no varied parts and

¹⁵³ Augustine, *De Genesis Contra Manichaeos*, 1.5.9. Please refer translations of Augustine’s works to *The Works of Saint Augustine: a translation for the 21st century* (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 2012). Their page numbers according to original Latin as shown in the English translations as quoted. This passage is also quoted in Roland J. Teske, S.J., *Saint Augustine on Genesis: Two Books on Genesis Against the Manichees and on the Literal Interpretation of Genesis, an Unfinished Book* (Washington D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 1991): 14.

changing movements, and that all other things are from you, as is known by ... the fact that they exist.¹⁵⁴

In hindsight, we find that major Platonic ideas about “divine creation” remained and played significant roles in Augustine’s thought. The followings are among the most impressive:

- (1) Divine creation in Augustine’s thought is still modeled on the Platonic three-fold ideas of creation spelled out in the *Timaeus*. Creation is thought of as God imposing forms into an amorphous matter such that a variety of things with measure, form and order are created.
- (2) The Neo-platonic idea of a “chain of being” also plays an important role in Augustine’s thought in that he conceives the entire world to be comprised of a variety of ranks of beings from God, angels, souls, and spiritual beings down to corporeal beings. In Augustine’s thought, this “chain of being” is a proof of how the entire universe can be seen as a graded harmony of created beings in a hierarchy, so that the overall goodness of God’s creation can thereby be appreciated.
- (3) The key insight of “ontological dependence,” or “priority of nature,” which is initiated by Plato and systematically explored by middle and neo-Platonic philosophers, is preserved by Augustine. This enables him to say that God is the creator of time, and thus, for Augustine, the aforementioned “process” of divine creation as forms imposed upon amorphous matter is actually non-temporal.

¹⁵⁴ See Augustine *Confessioes*, VII, 20 (26): CC xxvii, 109. Quoted in Torchia, *Creatio*, 141.

Beyond this, a philosophy pivoting on the idea of “ontological dependence” provides Augustine’s basic vocabulary for organizing his spiritual interpretation of the Christian scriptures, which is much predicated on the “invisible truth” of created realities, for the sake of his refutation against Gnostics. In a non-exaggerative way, we can say without this idea, Augustine would not be Augustine.

Understood in this way, on the issue of divine creation, we can summarize the relationship between Augustine’s thought about both Platonists and Gnostics as follows: Augustine adopts Platonic philosophy in order to form a distinct Christian understanding of divine creation and in order to refute Gnosticism. However, this generalization also requires us to articulate the differences between Augustine’s thought and Platonism so as to appreciate how distinct Augustine’s Christian understanding actually is.

First, the emphasis that amorphous matter is not a pre-existent condition for divine creation is a common point that Augustine shared with his patristic predecessors. For Augustine, no created things except the Son of God and the Holy Spirit can be co-eternal with God, and thus, matter, as much as any other similar created thing, is also created by God from nothing. Considering the fact that Plotinus has already tried to use a singular principle to derive the existence of matter, and that equally the dependence of matter upon divine creation has already been articulated by earlier Christian thinkers, Augustine’s emphasis on the creaturely status of amorphous matter can be seen as a re-emphatic, rather than an innovative idea.

Second, in my analysis of Plotinus' thought concerning "*emanation ex nihilo*," I argue that his idea of divine creation is different from the Christian case because Plotinus' view is that it is by necessity that the One overflows, and this view is supported by the Greek idea of "nature." As the One, its nature determines that this ultimate principle cannot not overflow. In this way, it is impossible for Plotinus to entertain an idea of the ontological contingency of the entire universe as radical as its Christian counterpart. However, Plotinus' idea is radically transformed by Augustine's Christian idea of "*creatio ex nihilo*". Augustine holds that divine creation is totally free, not only in the sense that it is not determined by things external to the nature of God, but also because ultimately, there is no Greek conception of "nature" that determines the act of divine creation. Alternatively, the ultimate reason for God's creation is just his will, which is unconstrained by anything else and can actually withdraw from creating if He wills. In this way, it is the Christian piety of the absolute free will of God during his creation that transforms the Greek, Platonic idea of nature, and hence, enables Augustine to reach the more radical idea of "*creation ex nihilo*". This radical idea can not only enable Augustine to entertain an idea of the possible non-existence of the entire created world, it also enables him to imagine the possibility of other worlds which could equally be created by God.¹⁵⁵ In this regard, I think the following two quotations are representative enough for us to understand how radical Augustine's idea is in comparison with his Platonic predecessors:

¹⁵⁵ See Augustine, *De Continentia* VI, 16: PL xl, 359. Quoted and discussed in Torchia, *Creatio*, 245.

But if they say “why did God decide to make heaven and earth?” ...they seem to know the cause of the will of God though the will of God is itself the cause of all that exists. For if the will of God has a cause, there is something that surpasses the will of God - and this we may not believe. One who says, “why did God will to create heaven and earth” is looking for something greater than the will of God, though nothing greater can be found.¹⁵⁶

In all cases divine providence ... recalls to its true and essential nature whatever manifests defect, i.e., tends to nothingness, and so strengthens it. But you say, why do they become defective? Because they are mutable. Why are they mutable? Because they have not supreme existence. And why so? Because they are inferior to him who made them. Who made them? He who supremely is. Who is he? God, the immutable Trinity, made them through his supreme wisdom and preserves them by his supreme loving-kindness. Why did he make them? In order that they might exist. Existence as such is good, and supreme existence is the chief good. From what did he make them? Out of nothing. That out of which God created all things had neither form nor species, and was simply nothing. Therefore, the world was made out of some unformed matter, that matter was made out of... nothing.¹⁵⁷

In light of these two quotations, major questions about divine creation are answered by Augustine in a distinctively Christian way. Why does God create? It is simply because God loves what God freely wills to create. As a consequence, any attempt to find what

¹⁵⁶ See Augustine, *De Genesis contra Manichaeos* I, 2(4): PL xxxiv, 3/1, 175. Quoted and discussed in Torchia, *Creatio*: 117.

¹⁵⁷ See Augustine, *De Vera Religione* xvii, 34 – xviii, 36: CC XXXII, 208-209. Quoted and Discussed in Torchia, *Creatio*: 116.

prompted the divine love to create would lead to an infinite regress and thus, the only legitimate way to stop this regress is to put the final word upon God's will. Compared with Augustine's Platonic predecessors, the radical contingency of the created world which is implied by the gratuitous nature of the utterly voluntary act of divine creation, is distinctive of Augustine's thought. Then, how does God create? First, out of nothing, which means divine creation doesn't rely upon anything except God himself. Since God is the ultimate cause of being, beyond God's creative act there is simply absolute non-being. In other words, God's creation is utterly unconditioned. Second, divine creation is concretely conceived as a non-temporal "process" such that the Trinitarian God imposes forms into amorphous matter so that a myriad of things in the world are created.

Compared with its Platonic predecessors, the distinctive feature of Augustine's answer to this second question is its Trinitarianism. This is no surprise since we already mentioned that Augustine's intellectual life took place in the period after the Councils of Nicaea, and thus Augustine deliberately formulated his idea of *creatio ex nihilo* within the accepted Christian orthodox position. In his Trinitarian idea of God, the previous Platonic idea of divine creation by a Demiurge who imposes forms into matter is transformed as the task of the Holy Spirit, which represents the divine wisdom of God, imposing forms into amorphous matter. And the human consciousness of the overall order and goodness of the created world was redeemed by the Son of God so that humans could be saved by their original union with the gratuitous love and utter beauty of divine creation.

Even so, if we look into these two quotations carefully, we will find there is a tension regarding Augustine's answer to the motif of God's creation. In the first

quotation, Augustine puts the final word for the motif of divine creation upon divine will. However, in the second quotation, the motif is the goodness of the existence of the created things in the world. In other works, Augustine specifies that the goodness of the created world is particularly manifested by the overall “graded harmony,” the “supreme measure, form and order” of the created world. This overall order is embedded in divine wisdom, and we will discover in what follows that resorting to the overall order of the entire world as it is created and maintained in divine wisdom actually becomes a major strategy for Augustine to deal with the issue of theodicy. Divine wisdom is about divine intelligence, but gratuitous love as the driving motive of divine creation is about divine will. If the former is affirmed as the major motive of divine creation, then the latter will be in potential conflict with it, because if divine will necessarily wills the overall order of the world which is conceived by divine intelligence, we cannot say divine will is totally free or is undetermined by anything external to it.

If we examine this potential conflict in the light of Plotinus’ system, it will become more illuminated. In Plotinus’ view, the immediate outcome of the One’s overflowing is Intellect, and it contains forms and orders of the entire created world which thus speaks to the intelligibility of the world. In other words, the major function of the Intellect is to explain what a thing is in the context of the thing’s worldly cohort, while all things still need to attribute their existence to the all-encompassing overflowing power of the One. Therefore, the major function of the One is to explain where the world is from, i.e., the origin of being. The way Plotinus deals with these two separate functions in his metaphysics is by saying that all forms and orders also derive from the overflowing

power of the One, and thus the answer to the question of what a thing is is actually subordinated to the question of where a thing comes from. Because of the supportive Greek idea of “nature,” this relationship of subordination does not necessarily lead to a conflict in Plotinus’ case since it is legitimate to say that the overflowing power of the One naturally produces an ordered world. However, the situation is more complex in Augustine’s Christian treatment of the issue. For Augustine, in a way similar to that of Plotinus, divine intellect is the answer to what a thing is, and divine will is the answer to where a thing comes from. The difference between Plotinus and Augustine is that Augustine attributes the final reason of the being of the world to divine will, but divine will is also thought of as totally free and undetermined by anything external. In this way, if Augustine simultaneously claims that divine creation must be conceived as the imposition of forms and orders which are preconceived by divine intelligence unto the amorphous matter, he must explain whether these forms and orders are a restriction on divine will. In other words, is the intelligibility of the created world before or after the free act of divine creation? If the world needs to be intelligible even before its creation, the act of divine will to create is necessarily constrained. But if a world can be unintelligible due to the absolute free creation of divine will, to what extent can divine creation be understood by human beings, or even understood at all? In my view, this significant question, which is insinuated but not explicitly addressed by Augustine’s thought, pertains to another even more important issue in the tradition of “*creation ex nihilo*” concerning how “unconditional” the purported unconditioned divine creation can be. We will find in Chapter Four that the tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*” following

Augustine will continue to reflect on this issue, and Western thinkers' answer to the issue did not significantly change after Augustine until René Descartes.

II. Augustine's Theodicy.

In order to understand the distinct contribution made by Augustine to the tradition of "creatio ex nihilo" in comparison with his Platonic predecessors and his Gnostic rivals, the last but not least point we must analyze is his theodicy.

We have already argued that the conception of evil in both the Platonic tradition and in Gnosticism is a big issue for early Christian thinkers. Plato's *Timaeus* treats matter as the reason that things in the world keep changing, and thus is the reason that it is corrupted and so deviates from the overall beauty and order imposed by the creative Demiurge from above. In Plotinus' Neo-Platonism, although he used a singular principle to explain the origin of everything, including matter, he still claimed that matter is intrinsically evil, originating in non-being, and is thus the last residue of the overflowing power of the One. In comparison, Gnosticism's anti-cosmicism voiced a starker version of dualism between an Evil creator and the supreme Good God. In this way, evil was solidified and reified more than in any other tradition of the late ancient Mediterranean world. Standing in this complex intellectual arena, Christian thinkers, who argued for "creatio ex nihilo" using a singular principle to explain the order and being of everything, thus must provide a more consistent solution to the issue of theodicy. Why does the supreme good God create both good and evil creatures? We find that Augustine's thought about "creatio ex nihilo" is intended to directly address this issue, although my view of whether he provided a successful solution will be explicated as follows.

The way for Augustine to resolve the issue of theodicy can be summarized as follows:

God is being, utterly unmovable, and being is good, so the created world as the result of the supreme creative power of God as Being itself, is also good. This goodness is particularly manifested in the overall measure, form and order of the entire universe. Also, according to Augustine, matter, as equally a creature of God, always has the potentiality to act as the bearer of form and order, and thus is intrinsically good, too. Therefore, if anyone sees something evil in its various particular forms, this just implies the insufficiency of human wisdom to appreciate the overall goodness of the entire world.

However, something evil in particular does indeed exist, and therefore Augustine also has to answer the question of why something could become evil in particular in a created world which is generally good. For Augustine, that out of which God creates things in the world is nothing. Nothing not only entails the “unconditionality” of divine creation in the sense of “ontological independence,” which we analyzed above; it also means privation of being. Therefore, since being is good and God is being, “nothingness” is non-being and thus, bad. The reason that particular things can change, and thus become corrupted and so deviate from the good nature and order that is created by the omnibenevolent God is because, since they have been created out of nothing, particular things partake of the nature of “nothingness” and therefore have an intrinsic potentiality of for corruption and becoming evil.

Furthermore, Augustine distinguishes metaphysical evil from moral evil. Metaphysical evil merely pertains to the unstable, and thus finite, status of created beings.

For example, the natural, physical suffering and mortality of human beings is seen as a kind of metaphysical evil since they epitomize the finite creaturely status of human beings. However, moral evil is related to the misuse of human free will, i.e., original sin, and thus, must be harshly punished by divine justice. Ultimately, metaphysical evil and moral evil are interconnected with one another in the human case since Augustine sees that the metaphysical evil of human beings is a result of divine punishment caused by the original sin of humanity. In this sense, Augustine believes that only by relying on the grace of Jesus Christ, can human beings be redeemed from their original sin, and thereby be allowed to return to the original good order of the entire created world. This is the process of salvation which can be earned by Christians.

What I have generalized above on the basis of my reading of Augustine's works resonates with another scholar, Joseph Torchia's overview of Augustine's theodicy. I will quote two major paragraphs in Torchia's work, and then provide my own analysis in the following:

In the *De Natura boni*, Augustine's treatment of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* emerges in the context of his deliberations on the problem of evil against the flawed theodicy of the Manichaeans. In this particular work, the chief significance of the doctrine lies in what it reveals about the ontological character of creatures. Created being (that is, being created from nothing) is characterized by mutability and an openness to corruption, in both metaphysical and moral terms. This fact sets creaturely natures apart from the Divine nature in a decisive manner: as the

supreme Creator of mutable things, God must be wholly immutable. By virtue of their origins, then, creatures exhibit a tendency toward nothingness.

But the recognition of such “metaphysical” evil does not commit Augustine to the thesis that evil must exist. It merely underscores the fact that created being is different from Divine Being. Accordingly, the natural tendency toward nothingness inherent in mutable reality must be distinguished from the corruption of created natures that is initiated and intensified by sin. Herein lies the source of evil. When sin entered the created order, the metaphysical evil that characterizes mutable beings (that is, the limit or negation bound up with created being) gives way to a moral and physical evil that permeates the whole of creation.¹⁵⁸

Since this is the case, is Augustine’s theodicy satisfactory in light of its pivotal idea of “*creatio ex nihilo*”? I don’t think so.

First, the nothingness that “*creatio ex nihilo*” refers to according to its underlying Greek conception of “ontological dependence” is and only is the unconditionality of divine creation. In this sense, the non-being of “nothingness” means that without God as the ultimate generator of being, there is no being at all. However, if Augustine reads an intrinsic “goodness” into “being”, and thus “privation of goodness” as evil into “nothingness”, this is already a great leap from the original philosophical insight of “*creatio ex nihilo*”. This is because the unconditionality of divine creation, i.e., the nothingness out of which God creates, doesn’t necessarily connote a positive power of “non-being” that can counteract the effect of the creative power of God as Being itself.

¹⁵⁸ Torchia, *Creatio*, 180.

However, although Augustine argued repeatedly that the non-being out of which God creates is not a positive power which can counteract the power of being because it is only a privation of being, his way of locating the potential for created things to change, become corrupted, and thus deviate from the overall good order of divine creation within the “nothingness” out of which God creates thereby attributes positive power to “nothingness.” In other words, if non-being is the origin of evil, and God is the origin of good, and things in the world contain an equal tendency towards evil or goodness, I do not feel that this picture is not as dualistic as the Gnostic one. In this sense, Augustine’s embedding of “good” and “evil” within the formula of “*creatio ex nihilo*” is an apparent monistic endeavor underlain by a dualistic recourse to the equally positive powers of “good” and “evil” which play their separate and contrasting roles in the process of ultimate creation as “*creatio ex nihilo*”. In particular, the idea that God is absolutely immutable enhances this dualistic commitment in the sense that everything mutable in the world is seen as bad, and only the immutable divine world is utterly good. Again, not very different from the Gnostic anti-cosmic dualism.

Second, if the first point speaks to a philosophical inconsistency within Augustine’s theodicy, his way of treating all metaphysical evil as potentially pervaded by moral evil which is caused by the commission of human sin is, in my view, far more unsatisfactory in the existential sense. To argue that an innocent newborn baby’s congenital heart disease is actually the punishment of God for human original sin which has essentially no relationship with any moral status of that baby, as Augustine claims, is the manifestation of divine justice, but for me, this is a proof of God’s malevolence.

Based upon these two points, I think Augustine's way to deal with the issue of theodicy is unsuccessful. His conception of "non-being," out of which God creates, as evil, as well as his identification of God as Being itself and thus as the origin of good, contradicts his monistic commitment to using a single principle to explain the order and being of the entire created world. By the same token, his conception that the intrinsic finitude of created things, including human beings, is a punishment from God for the original sin of humanity, violates, from my perspective, the fundamentals of human moral intuition, and thus cannot be thought to be satisfactory, either.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Creatio Ex Nihilo” in Continuum

4.1 Thomas Aquinas

As Aquinas was composing his *Summa Theologiae*, the medieval Christian world was rediscovering Aristotle’s works through their Arabic translations. Regarding the theory of creation, Aquinas’ thought is an extraordinary synthesis of Greek philosophy and Christian theism in reliance upon his own fabulous capacity for thinking through rigorous concepts.

In my view, Aquinas’ theory of creation is based upon his adoption of Aristotle’s argument of the “unmoved mover” outlined in the *Physica*, which is nicely summarized in the following statement:

If we ask Aquinas why is there something rather than nothing whatsoever, he would distinguish different meanings for the term ‘something’ before replying. If by ‘something’ we mean whatever falls under the subject of metaphysics (being as being), Aquinas would argue that any such entity must ultimately consist in an essence and a distinct act of existing. Therefore it must depend upon something else for its existence, or be efficiently caused. Therefore, if, as he claims, recourse to an infinite regress of caused causes of existence adequately explains nothing, any such being must ultimately depend upon an uncaused cause of existence. On the other hand, if we take the term ‘something’, as it appears in the ultimate why question more broadly, so as to include not only all that falls under being as being but even the cause or principle of the same, Aquinas would agree... No causal

explanation can be given for this since God himself has no cause. He is the uncaused cause. Aquinas would never entertain the thought that God could be regarded as an efficient cause of his own existence. He explicitly rejects as self-contradictory the suggestion that anything might efficiently cause its own existence.¹⁵⁹

Traditionally, this is called the cosmological proof of the existence of God in contrast to Anselm's ontological proof based upon a semantic analysis of the word "God". However, it is very important for us to discern that, actually, Aquinas' argument is formulated exactly within the Christian tradition of the conception of God as the ultimate creative agent producing a series of "ontological dependence" by which all proximate realities in the world are conditioned. In this way, there is no concept other than "*creatio ex nihilo*" which can afford the nature of divine causality indicated in Aquinas' argument. If Augustine could be seen as the first Christian theologian who embroidered the idea of "*creatio ex nihilo*" into the system of Christian theology, the major contribution made by Aquinas can be recognized as his incredibly meticulous analysis of the nature of divine causality based upon the Aristotelian logic.

This can be seen from Aquinas' understanding of the "nothingness" from which God creates. First, "Aquinas explains that by 'nothing' we should not understand any kind of pre-existing subject or substratum from which things might be produced. By using the expression 'from nothing' Aquinas simply means that what is created is not

¹⁵⁹ John F. Wippel, "Aquinas Aquinas on the Ultimate Why Question," in John F. Wippel ed., *The Ultimate Why Question: why is there anything at all rather than nothing whatsoever?* (Washington D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 2011): 6 .

produced from something, that is, from any kind of preexisting subject.”¹⁶⁰ Second, Aquinas also identifies a second meaning that “Nonexistent is prior to existence in a created thing in the sense that if the creature were simply left to itself without being caused by God, it would not exist.”¹⁶¹ In particular, Aquinas explains that the priority involved in this latter usage is a priority of nature, but not necessarily one of time¹⁶².

Among these two points, if the first one points to Aquinas’ criticism of the Greek thought as it is specified in Plato’s *Timaeus* : divine creation is about God putting forms into pre-existing matter, the second one directly speaks to the nature of “ontological dependence” implied by the Christian idea “*creatio ex nihilo*,” and in this sense, the second point can subsume the first one.

In the remaining parts of my analysis of Aquinas, I will try to articulate how Aquinas used “*creatio ex nihilo*” to formulate his own theory of creation, as well as his distinctive views about related issues such as divine providence and human freedom, which will be very helpful in unpacking controversies in the aforementioned transcendence debate. A potential incoherence in Aquinas’ view of “*creatio ex nihilo*” will be addressed in my conclusion.

I

In my view, Aquinas’ answers to the following two issues will be able to help us understand how he used “*creatio ex nihilo*” to formulate a theory of creation in his own

¹⁶⁰ *ibid.*, 90

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 90

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 90

distinctive way: first, concerning the possibility of an eternal world, and second, creatures as causes of *esse* (being).

Regarding the issue of whether the world had a temporal beginning, Aquinas thinks that it is impossible for human reason to demonstrate whether the world had a temporal beginning, and thus that human beings can only obtain this kind of knowledge through revelation. In other words, in Aquinas' view, it is possible that the world is eternal, and that this doesn't contradict the idea that God's creation is "*creatio ex nihilo*." The major argument Aquinas made to support his view was to show that there is no contradiction between the terms, "to be wholly created by God" and "not to have a beginning in time," and thus, that an eternal world is possible. First, about the nature of divine cause, Aquinas holds that "it is not necessary that he (God) precede his effects in time," since God is "a cause that produces effect not through motion but instantaneously."¹⁶³ Second, the preposition "*ex*" (out of, from, or after) in the "*creatio ex nihilo*" certainly imports some affirmative order of non-being to being. However, the "after" order may be of two kinds: "order of time" and "order of nature." As mentioned above, since within "*creatio ex nihilo*" non-being is prior to being by nature, rather than by time, there is no reason to hold that an eternal world is impossible. Both arguments speak to the insight that since the world is ontologically dependent upon God throughout all its possible temporal sequences, it is totally compatible to hold the idea of "an eternal world" (here, "eternal" means "everlasting") or "a world with a beginning," and then,

¹⁶³ Aquinas Aquinas, "On the Eternity of the world." Its translation follows the Leonine Edition of Aquinas' works, vol. 43, *Sancti Thomae De Aquino Opera Omnia* 85-89 (Rome 1976), translated by Robert T. Miller, which can be found at <http://dhspriority.org/Aquinas/DeEternitateMundi.htm#f2>, retrieved Feb. 6th, 2018.

simultaneously to claim that the world is created by God from nothing. In other words, whether a world has a beginning or not doesn't influence its ontological dependence upon divine creation. Nor does the condition of "ontological dependence" imply that the "non-being" from which God creates is always simultaneous with "being" if the world has always existed, or else if "at some time nothing exists." This is because the priority of non-being over being is not one of time, and thus divine creation sustains all kinds of time relationships in the world, even while in the meantime it transcends them and can be manifested by any of them. In this way, the "non-temporality" of divine creation due to its ontological priority over the being of any creature, including the modes of time, is a key insight expressed by Aquinas when he tries to explain why "God is eternal": "But God, as has been proved, is absolutely without motion, and is consequently not measured by time. There is, therefore, no before and after in Him; He does not have being after non-being, nor non-being after being, nor can any succession be found in His being. For none of these characteristics can be understood without time. God, therefore, is without beginning and end, having his whole being at once. In this consists the nature of eternity."¹⁶⁴ Here, eternity means "non-temporality", rather than "everlastingness."

Interestingly enough, understood in this way, the cosmological proof of the existence of God provided by Aquinas must not be understood as strictly cosmological. That is because the idea "an eternal, everlasting world" is compatible with "*creatio ex nihilo*," and in this sense, we can infer that the efficient cause exerted by creatures in the

¹⁶⁴ Aquinas, Aquinas. *On the Truth of the Catholic Truth: Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. by A.C. Pegis, (New York: Image Books, 1955): Book One, Chapter 15, p.98. This book's title will be shortened as "SCG" in what follows.

way of “cosmological succession” is able to extend backwards into infinity without harming the ontological integrity of the entire cosmic picture. Aquinas specifies his point in this way: “an infinite series of efficient causes wherein each depends upon that which is prior to it is not repugnant when such causes are related to another only *per accidens*. Viewed from this perspective, therefore, it is not impossible for one man to have been generated by another to infinity.”¹⁶⁵ In other words, as long as the efficient cause exerted by creatures among each other is understood in the sense of “efficient cause *per accidens*,” it doesn’t matter whether this series of creaturely efficient cause has a temporal beginning or not. Regardless, God, as the ultimate uncaused cause, always grounds the series. This distinction between creaturely cause as efficient cause *per accident* and divine creation as uncaused cause leads us to Aquinas’ analysis of the issue of whether creatures can be seen as causes of “*esse*” (being).

Aquinas’ concern with the issue of creatures’ causal power derives from his theological epistemology. This epistemology urges us to seek the knowledge of God by investigating the effects of God’s creation via human reason. Because God doesn’t lack any form of imperfection and God’s perfection is not in any proportion to that of any creature, according to Aquinas, the knowledge of God can only be obtained through negation: to make sure what God is not. Furthermore, God is infinitely different from the effects of His creation, while He is also the cause of his effects. As a consequence, the terms used by human reason to refer to both God and His creatures are neither univocal nor equivocal. In other words, human reason can only know God through His effects by

¹⁶⁵ John Wippel, “Aquinas Aquinas on the Possibility of Eternal Creation,” in *Metaphysical Themes in Aquinas Aquinas* (The Catholic University of America Press, 1995): 202.

negation and in an analogical way. Ultimately, Aquinas denies that in this life human beings can arrive at quidditative knowledge of God.

We will find that these epistemological claims nicely fit Aquinas' cosmological proof of the existence of God. He begins with the *de facto* existence of creatures in the world, and then tries to find an ultimate cause which sufficiently explains the existence of creatures. However, this poses another question for Aquinas: creatures can also cause effects. Empirically, the causal relationship among creatures is for common use by human reason to explain the production of new outcomes, and especially to ascertain whether an outcome is necessary or contingent. What then is the relationship between these natural causes and the uncaused cause of divine creation?

Insofar as God's creation is the sole source of being, no creaturely cause can be called creation. Aquinas is very clear about this point throughout all his writings. An emblematic statement can be found at *Summa Theologica*, I, q.45, a. 5: "To produce the act of being (*esse*) in the unqualified sense, and not in so far as it is this or such, belongs to the nature of creation. Therefore, it is evident that creation is an action that is proper to God himself."¹⁶⁶

In regard to the distinction between creaturely causes and the divine cause, Aquinas uses several pair of categories to make his case. First, "cause of becoming" vs. "cause of being." In *De Veritate*, Aquinas comments that among lower causes some are causes of becoming such as those which induce a form from the potentiality of matter through motion, for instance, when an artisan makes a knife. A cause of being, on the

¹⁶⁶ Quoted by John Wippel, "Aquinas Aquinas on Creatures as Causes of *Esse*", in *Metaphysical Themes in Aquinas Aquinas* (The Catholic University of America Press, 1995): 172.

other hand, is that upon which the act of being (*esse*) of an effect depends as, for instance, the existence of light in air depends upon the sun. “So too, the existence of a creature would cease if God’s creative action were to cease, since God is both a cause of becoming and a cause of being with respect to creatures.”¹⁶⁷ I understand the dual character of divine creation as both a cause of becoming and a cause of being in this context as such: since divine creation is ontologically prior to any creaturely causation, the creaturely causes of becoming are actually a manifestation of the higher ontological cause of being brought about through divine creation. And in this sense, God is both a cause of becoming and a cause of being with respect to the created effects as *explanandum*.

Second, “efficient cause *per accident*” and “efficient cause *per se*.” In *De Potentia*, Aquinas noticed that

an efficient cause causes something insofar as it induces a form or insofar as it disposes matter (to receive a form). Hence, as a thing depends upon its form and matter, so does it depend upon its efficient cause to the extent that the form of the effect depends on it. Aquinas notes that there is a kind of efficient cause on which the form of the effect does not depend *per se* and in terms of its nature as form but only *per accidens*. It is in this way that the form of fire which is generated depends upon another generating instance of fire. The two instances of fire are only numerically distinct or, as he puts it, distinguished by a material division, that is, by the division of matter. Ultimately, however, one must

¹⁶⁷ Quoted by *ibid.*, 179.

conclude the existence of a higher and incorporeal principle (which he eventually identifies as God) upon which the form of the effect depends *per se* and for its specific nature as a form.¹⁶⁸

In my view, this distinction speaks to the fact that in an empirical way a creaturely efficient cause can be discerned by human reason to explain the succession of the form of an effect from its non-existence to existence, or from its existence in this way to its existence in that way. However, this can't explain where the form, as a mode of being, ultimately comes from, and this latter question can only be sufficiently explained by divine creation as an efficient cause upon which the form of the effect depends *per se*.

Third, “a cause of being in the unqualified sense” and “a cause of being this or such.” This distinction is presented by his statements in SCG Book II, Chapter 21. Here, Thomas maintained that

esse is the first effect, which is evident from its universality. Therefore the proper cause of *esse* must be the first and universal agent, God. Other agents are not the cause of the act of being as such but are a cause of being this, such as being a human or being white. The act of being as such is caused through creation, which, he continues, presupposes nothing, that is, no subject. Through other productions ‘this’ (*hoc*) being or ‘such’ (*tale*) being is produced.¹⁶⁹

In other words, in regard to the sheer being (*esse*) of effects, creaturely causes can only be seen as producing it under the condition that these causes act with the creative power

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 180.

¹⁶⁹ Thomas' view is quoted and analyzed by John Wippel, “Thomas Aquinas on Creatures as Causes of Esse,” in *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas* (The Catholic University of America Press, 1995): 181.

of the First Cause. On the other hand, in regard to what concrete type of *esse* an effect has, i.e., in regard to why an effect enjoys a mode of being as “this” or “that,” creaturely causes can be seen to have their own powers that provide perfections which determine and particularize *esse* with effects in some way. In a simpler way, I think we can put the distinction between a creaturely cause and the divine cause depicted here as follows: what a thing is, i.e., what is its form of being, depends upon its relationship with other things, but whether a thing is, i.e., why there is something rather than nothing, totally depends upon God. Nevertheless, given the unconditional ontological priority of divine creation, the distinction between the question of what a thing is and that of whether a thing is is ultimately trivial since even the form of a thing can only be sufficiently explained by recourse to the First Cause. This has already been illustrated by Aquinas’ use of his second pair of distinguishing notions, “efficient cause *per accidens*” and “efficient cause *per se*,” which I analyzed above.

In a word, creaturely cause is a “cause of becoming”, “efficient cause *per accidens*” and “a cause of being this or such” can answer the question of what a thing is, and provide an empirical explanation for why a thing takes place in a mode of cosmological succession. In contrast, divine creation as “cause of being,” “efficient cause *per se*” and “a cause of being in the unqualified sense,” specifies the origin from which the form of an effect ultimately comes, and thus answers the ultimate ontological question of why there is something, rather than nothing. We can now see that underlying these complexities in Aquinas’ terminology is his ontological awareness that tries to locate the features of a thing in different ranks. Causes in a lower ontological rank cannot

explain the effect that is produced by a cause in a higher ontological rank; meanwhile, the causation in the lower rank can be seen as the manifestation of the power of causes in the higher rank. This is the main reason that Aquinas was able to see that the production of an effect resulted from a sort of “co-working” of all causes in both the lower ranks and the higher ranks, while simultaneously being able to be precise enough to assign different features of an effect to different causes. John. F. Wippel summarized Thomas’ thought about ontological ranks of causes as follows, and I think it will confirm my claim:

(According to Thomas), God must be said to be the cause of every action of every natural thing. The higher a cause is, the more universal and efficacious it is, and therefore the more profoundly does it enter into its effect and reduce it from a more remote potentiality to actuality. But every natural agent is (1) a being (*ens*), (2) a natural thing, and (3) of such or such a nature. Of these the first (being) is common to all things; the second applies to all natural things; the third applies to things within one and the same species; and a fourth, if we wish to add accidents, applies to this individual. Because of this, an individual natural agent cannot through its action produce another thing which belongs to a similar species except in so far as it functions as an instrument of something which is the cause of that entire species and, indeed, of the total being (*esse*) of lower nature.¹⁷⁰

Therefore, in regard to the question of whether a created cause can be seen as the cause of “*esse*” in an effect, Thomas would answer that the causation of the particular determination (this or that kind or form of being) is directly owing to the created efficient

¹⁷⁰Ibid., 186.

cause insofar as it operates by its own inherent power as a principal cause, which, of course, is ultimately a manifestation of the power of causation within divine creation as the First Cause. On the other hand, Causation of the act of being itself (*esse*) can be assigned to a created cause as an instrumental cause coincidentally acting with the power of God, and to God himself as the principal cause of the same.

II

Considering my analysis of Thomas' understanding of "*creatio ex nihilo*" so far, we can also find another point which will be important to our comparative project as long as we correctly understand that the "causation" implied by the idea of "*creatio ex nihilo*" concerns ontological dependence, rather than cosmological succession. We will then understand that for the sake of "efficient cause" (this is actually what we largely mean by "cause" in modern science), "*creatio ex nihilo*" doesn't impose an extra order upon the empirical order of cosmological succession, and therefore neither will it change our knowledge of whether cosmic changes are necessary or contingent. That is because whether the effects are necessary or contingent, the entire process of cosmological succession still ontologically depends upon "*creatio ex nihilo*," and thus divine creation doesn't change the modal status of cosmic events which are knowable through empirical methods. We can see that Aquinas held this view when he addressed the topic of divine knowledge and human freedom.

According to Aquinas, whether an effect is necessary or contingent depends upon its relationship with its proximate cause in a particular mode of time. However, God's vision is eternal, beyond any mode of time. Therefore, what is viewed as future by a

proximate cause is actually present in the vision of God as the First Cause. In this way, the eternal mode of being is definitely different from its temporal modes, although the latter can be seen as a manifestation of the former. Aquinas' view can be generalized this way:

In brief, he reasons that when various causes are ordered to one another so as to produce a given effect, that effect is not to be regarded as contingent or as necessary by reason of its first cause but by reason of its proximate cause. This is so because the power of a first cause is received in a second cause in accordance with the latter. Thus God's science is the unchanging cause of all other things. But effects are often produced by God through the activities of second causes.

Therefore, by means of necessarily acting second causes God produces necessary effects. And by means of contingently acting second causes God produces contingent effects. Presumably, Thomas would have us conclude that by means of freely acting second causes God produces free effects.¹⁷¹

By relying upon this understanding of the nature of divine causation in "*creatio ex nihilo*," Thomas provided a solution to the traditional conundrum of Christian theology: the seeming contradiction between divine knowledge and human freedom. For me, in theistic terms, this is a very successful solution.

III

So far, I have examined Thomas' understanding of the "nothingness" in "*creatio ex nihilo*," his reflections on the possibility of an eternal world, his thought about whether

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 258.

creatures can be understood to be causes of *esse*, and his related solution to the issue of divine knowledge and human freedom. In my view, in all these considerations, Aquinas sticks to the implications of “ontological unconditionality” and “ontological dependence” of the idea “*creatio ex nihilo*” quite thoroughly: if God is ontologically the First Cause, His creation would not be conditioned by anything. However, this insight doesn’t persist through other aspects of Aquinas’ thought. In these aspects, I don’t think he sustains well his knowledge of this radical nature of divine creation, and if we take these aspects of his thought into consideration, we will find that what Aquinas has in mind about divine creation is actually less about “*creatio ex nihilo*,” and more about what Plato has written in his *Timaeus*: God puts forms into the inchoate matter to produce diverse creatures. According to this latter conception, divine creation is a way of limiting and particularizing God’s infinite abundance of being, the divine plenitude, by using distinct forms, each of which has a different mode of perfection, so as to produce an harmonious hierarchy of cosmic beings which will manifest God’s absolute goodness. In this way, divine creation has its “reason” for conditioning the production of creatures, and thus can’t be said to be a strict form of “*creatio ex nihilo*.”

Thomas’ thought in this regard is mainly manifested in his defense of the unrestricted freedom of divine creation.

In Thomas’ mind, because God created the world in an absolutely free way, and the continuous existence of the world depends upon God’s unceasing conservation, the world would cease to exist if divine creation were to stop. However, according to Thomas, “God will not do this because the divine power and goodness are better

manifested by the fact that he keeps things in existence.”¹⁷² But ought we then to think that the manifestation of God’s perfection through the creation of world is a motif which necessarily constrains God’s creation and thus limits His freedom? Aquinas’ answer is that it does not. That is because:

There is no necessity for God to produce the whole of creation, that is, to create at all. The divine goodness is so perfect in itself that, even if no creature whatsoever existed, God’s goodness would still be completely perfect in itself. As Thomas succinctly puts it, the divine goodness is not the kind of end that is produced or results *from* those things that are ordered to it. Rather it is the kind of end *by which* those things which are ordered to it are themselves produced and perfected.¹⁷³

In that case, if there is no necessity for God to produce the whole of the world, is there anything to cause God to will to create this being rather than that being? Thomas replies that a *ratio* (a reason or explanation) can be given for God’s willing other things besides Himself. Thomas also points out that God wills his own goodness as an end and He wills all other things as ordered to it. Therefore, His goodness is the reason (*ratio*) that he wills such things.¹⁷⁴ This does not, however, mean that this “*ratio*” is a cause which necessarily determines God’s creativity. As argued above, because no creature’s perfection is on a par with God’s, it is not necessary for God to intend anything other than Himself for the manifestation of His all-perfection. In other words, the existence of the

¹⁷² Wippel, “Ultimate Why Question”, 91.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 99.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 100.

entire world as created by God is totally gratuitous, i.e., freely endowed, from the perspective of divine creation.

Even so, we have to acknowledge that Thomas' use of the term "reason" indeed brings some limit and condition to divine creation. Actually, Thomas spells out different ways in which reasons may be assigned for God's willing: "God wills man to have reason in order for man to exist. He wills man to exist in order for the universe to be complete. And he wills the good of the universe because this befits his own goodness."¹⁷⁵ Here, we find an harmonious hierarchy of cosmic beings that befits the absolute goodness of God and can be taken to be an overall "reason" for divine creation. Furthermore, because these "reasons" are forms in God's intelligence that are endowed with different degrees of perfection, this mechanism of divine creation brings up another question concerning the relationship between God's intelligence and God's will. For Thomas, if there is any necessity implied in divine creation, it is a necessity by supposition, not a necessity *per se*. For example, if God wills the existence of humankind, He must also will the existence of human reason, since without reason humankind would not exist. However, this leads to the conclusion that God will not will what is incompatible with suppositional necessities, which means that God's will must abide by basic intellectual laws which exclude logical impossibility.¹⁷⁶

In this way, we find that what Aquinas has in mind concerning divine creation is not very much different from Plato's creative theory in the *Timaeus*. God has infinite abundance of being, and He limits and particularizes it using "reasons" and "forms" that

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 101.

¹⁷⁶ See SCG, Book One, Chapter 84.

are diverse manifestations of divine perfection, and while doing this, He can't contradict basic intellectual laws. In my view, Aquinas' position concerning divine creation, expressed in such theistic terms, dramatically undermines the philosophical rigor and theological power of the Christian idea of "*creatio ex nihilo*." If God creates by means of forms and reasons, we won't be able to say that He creates the world from nothing. In particular, the harmonious hierarchy of cosmic beings which Aquinas thinks of as God's reason for His creation is actually anthropocentric, and the concrete process conceived of by Aquinas by means of which God creates such a world is also very anthropomorphic. In Aristotle's terms, if Aquinas did not succeed in imposing order into the world from above in the realm of "efficient cause," he instead did enforce a biased anthropocentric and anthropomorphic order from the perspectives of "formal cause" and "final cause." No matter what happens successively in the cosmos, the value of human beings is the highest, and the evolution of the entire cosmos has one singular *telos* to fulfill: to manifest the pure goodness of God's creation, which prioritizes human beings over sub-human beings, intelligence over non-intelligence, and mind over body, etc.. I have to interpret this consequence of Aquinas' thought to be that his commitment to theism compromises his incisive philosophical insight about "*creatio ex nihilo*."

4.2 Descartes' Theory of "Created Eternal Truth"

After Aquinas, a major breakthrough in the tradition of "*creatio ex nihilo*" was achieved by René Descartes.

From the above analysis, we can conclude that, for Aquinas, God cannot will what is logically impossible, which statement is a refinement of Augustine's similar

view. Furthermore, if God wills anything necessary, it will be “suppositional necessity,” which abides by logical laws and is strictly located in the realm of being with logical possibilities. This view is also shared by other medieval theologians such as Duns Scotus, who maintains that necessary truths and logical possibilities are naturally caused by divine essence, and thus that God cannot fail to produce these objects since they have a necessary relationship with divine essence.¹⁷⁷ As described above, I interpret this part of Aquinas’ thought, with its anthropomorphic and anthropocentric implications, to be a theistic compromise of the philosophical rigor of “*creatio ex nihilo*”: divine will is conditioned by logical possibilities, entailed by divine essence and envisioned by divine intellect, and thus divine creation is conceived of as a conditioned process whereby God endows pre-existing logical possibilities with existence, and thus realizes parts of them in the world.

By contrast, Descartes’ idea is more voluntaristic than any of his medieval predecessors. For Descartes, eternal truths, which refer to the world of forms, imply the diversity of perfections in Augustine’s and in Aquinas’ thought, but are exemplified mainly by mathematical truths in Descartes’ case, and can only be characterized as “necessary” or can only refer to what is “logically possible” from the perspective of human beings. In Descartes’ mind, they are created by God, inscribed into the human mind as “innate ideas,” and thus are what enable human beings to know the essentials of

¹⁷⁷ On this point of Duns Scotus’s philosophical theology, please refer to Richard Cross, *Duns Scotus*, (Oxford University Press, 1999): 50-51.

the created world.¹⁷⁸ In other words, eternal truths are eternal only to the human mind, but this is not the case for God. For Descartes, as for every other created creature, eternal truths are also freely created by God.¹⁷⁹ What is most important in Descartes' theory is that there is really no substantial division between divine intelligence and divine will.¹⁸⁰ Neither is there any similar idea about the "logical sequence" of divine creation as it was conceived by Augustine and Aquinas. For Descartes, eternal truths are not pre-existing objects limiting the capacity of divine will to create. Instead, eternal truths become true only because God wills them to be. In this sense, it is not after divine intelligence understands eternal truths that divine will wills them. It is the other way around: God wills eternal truths to be eternally true for the world he creates, and then divine intelligence simultaneously understands them as truth, that, simultaneously, they are created. Because divine will is conceived by Descartes to be without being conditioned by any pre-existing "reasons," Descartes also believes that if God wills it, He can create eternal truths that are totally opposite to what has currently been understood by humans. Further, because the creative power of God is infinite, human reason can never comprehend why God creates the eternal truths that are currently understood as such by human beings, rather than not creating them at all. In this way, the

¹⁷⁸ See "À Mersenne, 15 avril 1630," in *Descartes: Oeuvres Philosophiques, Tome I, édition de F. Alquié* (Paris: Classique Garnier, 1992): 265. The edition is abbreviated as "A" in the following quotation. I once discussed Descartes' theory of created eternal truth in the context of the development of his metaphysical thought in 宋斌 Bin Song, 论笛卡尔的机械论哲学-从形而上学与物理学的角度看 *Descartes' metaphysical philosophy – from the perspectives of metaphysics and physics* (中国社会科学出版社: 2012) :41-49. In this dissertation, I discussed the same theory from a completely different perspective, and if readers are looking for more details of my discussion of this theory using the method of intellectual history, please refer to my published book.

¹⁷⁹ See "À Mersenne, 15 avril 1630" A I 259-261.

¹⁸⁰ See "À Mersenne, 27 mai 1630" A I 267-268.

“incomprehensibility”¹⁸¹ of divine creation becomes a major theme in Descartes’ theory of created eternal truth.

Here, I have to articulate several points regarding my understanding of Descartes’ theory and its groundbreaking role for the development of the Christian idea of “*creatio ex nihilo*”:

First, the period in which Descartes formulated his theory of “created eternal truth” in his letters (around 1628-1630) marked a transition in Descartes’ thought from epistemology to metaphysics. At the beginning of his philosophical career, Descartes was an epistemological foundationalist, who tried to find an absolutely secure ground for the “new science” featured by the mathematization of nature and a mechanistic model for scientific explanation. Before his thought transited to metaphysics, the foundations Descartes had found for human knowledge were two unmistakable faculties of the human mind: intuition and deduction. Because the main role of deduction consists of transmitting the certainty of human knowledge achieved by “intuition” when that knowledge pertains to an inferential series, deduction is premised upon intuition, and thus the real foundation of human knowledge is intuition. In “intuition,” Descartes thinks that human mind is so attentive to the object, and the resulting perception about the object is so clear and distinct that we would not have any doubt about what we have perceived about the object.¹⁸² In other words, in “intuition,” what we have perceived is identical with the way objects display themselves so that our knowledge exactly corresponds to

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 265.

¹⁸² See “Règle Utiles et Claires pour la Direction de L’esprit en la Recherche de la Vérité”, in *Oeuvres de Descartes*, Tome X, Publiées par Adam and Tanery (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1996): 368. This edition of Descartes’ works will be abbreviated as “AT” in the following quotation. The quoted title is Jean -Luc Marion’s French translation of Descartes’ original Latin work.

reality, and thus “intuition” can be seen as the birthplace of true knowledge. However, around the year 1628, Descartes changed his mind. He no longer thought that “intuition,” a human faculty, could be a foundation solid enough to ground the certainty of human knowledge. The main reason was that he had been coming to an understanding of the radical finitude of human consciousness: all human thoughts and deeds happen in time, and it is only within a limited span of time that humans can be attentive to a certain object in their mind.¹⁸³ In other words, “intuition,” as only one faculty of human consciousness, is temporal, volatile and thus short-lived. If this faculty is ultimately non-eternal, how can it be the foundation for eternal truths? Therefore, when Descartes’ thought experienced a transformation from its epistemological to its metaphysical stage, he decided to re-search for the foundation of human knowledge within the ideas about “God” and “Self.”

Descartes’ theory of created eternal truth was one of its outcomes.

I believe that when Descartes turned to the idea of “God” to seek the foundation of human knowledge, he was aware of Aquinas’ or Scotus’ solutions to similar issues. He may have formulated a similar theory about divine intelligence to say that eternal truths are implied by divine intelligence and are thus necessarily intended by divine will to be eternally true. However, the major traction preventing Descartes from stepping into the established view of medieval scholasticism was that he had emphasize the role of human will, such as “attention,” in the act of “intuition” while affirming that this faculty can ground the certainty of human knowledge. As a result, when Descartes’ thought turned to metaphysics, the first distinction that he established between human will and divine will

¹⁸³ See “L’entretien avec Burman,” AT V 148.

was that the latter is “eternal” and “immovable.” According to Descartes, once God creates mathematical and logical truths, He will not change them, and as a result, they are seen by human beings as “eternal truths.” However, Descartes also believed in the “greatest perfections,” the “great and inexhaustible power,” and correspondingly, the unconditioned, absolute freedom of divine creation.¹⁸⁴ His commitment to both the unconditionality and the immovability of the divine will allows Descartes to finally reach his conclusion about divine creation that it is both absolutely free and ultimately incomprehensible, as I have briefly summarized above. In this sense, the foundationalist epistemology of Descartes, which spearheaded the origination of modern science, is one of the decisive factors leading to Descartes’ innovative understanding of “*creatio ex nihilo*.” Because human cognitive power is explored in a more revolutionary way than it was in medieval scholasticism, the difference between the human mind and the divine mind is also reflected in a new dimension.

Second, as I briefly mentioned above, one of the most important consequences of Descartes’ theory is that he reformulates the relationship between divine intelligence and divine will and puts it in contrast with the relationship between human intelligence and human will. For Descartes, human will is passive. It can only judge, i.e., approve or disapprove, of the ideas which are presented by human intelligence whose main role is to receive and look into ideas that are either innate within the human mind or affected from outside. However, divine will is active, and it is exactly the same as divine intelligence. For Descartes, this means that first, divine will doesn’t need to merely will the objects

¹⁸⁴ Please refer to the two letters written to Mersenne quoted above.

that divine intelligence has presented. God can will whatever He wants, and then freely create whatever is actually created. On the other hand, what divine intelligence understands as true is actually solely due to the free willing of divine will. In this sense, what is necessarily true for the created world is not necessarily intended by God. Instead, only because God freely intends some idea or statement as necessary, can it be seen as eternal truth. In comparing Descartes' with his medieval predecessors, we find that both Aquinas and Duns Scotus believed that divine intelligence was the same as divine will. But their idea of "identity" tilted toward divine intelligence rather than divine will: for them, divine will can only will what divine intelligence has understood. But for Descartes, divine intelligence can only understand what divine will has freely willed. This reversed order in Descartes' understanding of the relationship between divine intelligence and divine will leads, in my view, to the most important consequence of Descartes' theory of "created eternal truth": the de-anthropomorphization and de-anthropocentralization of divine creation.

The de-anthropocentric consequence of Descartes' theory is very obvious. According to Descartes, what is eternal about mathematical truths are only eternal for human beings. Such truths are not necessarily intended by the divine will. In this way, what is logically possible *per se* cannot be solely and fully assessed by human intelligence.

The de-anthropomorphic consequence goes even further. Since the relationship between divine intelligence and divine will is not like the human case, we cannot think of divine creation operating in accordance with any logical sequence which might remind us

of the old Platonic idea in the *Timaeus*. In this way, even God would not understand what he will create before He freely wills what will actually be created. In other words, any logical possibility can be understood by human beings as possible only after what has been delivered as divine creation. There is no ultimate reason for God to create this, rather than that, and in this way, the model of divine creation for Descartes becomes a genuine “sheer making,” a continuous emergence of novelty from within the abyssal inexhaustible power of divine creation. In other words, except through the *de facto* existence of creatures as the outcome of divine creation, we can’t understand anything about it at all. In this way, the act of divine creation becomes infinite (in the sense that all finite creatures are created), unconditional (in the sense that nothing proceeding from divine creation can be understood), and singular (in the sense that no sequence can be imagined to explain divine creation), which, in my view, is a very reasonable, yet groundbreaking, development of the idea of “*creatio ex nihilo*.”

Last but not least, if we correctly understand the de-anthropomorphic consequence of Descartes’ theory of created eternal truth, we will appreciate that the “incomprehensibility” theme concerning divine creation actually goes beyond what Descartes intended it to be. One of Descartes’ immediate purposes in emphasizing this “ineffable” aspect of divine creation was that he wanted to expel “teleological explanation” from the realm of natural science and thus to promote his mechanistic philosophy as a new mode of natural philosophy. According to Descartes’ view of created eternal truth, there can be no reason intelligible to human beings before divine

creation actually happens.¹⁸⁵ However, in relation to the Christian idea of “*creatio ex nihilo*,” the “incomprehensibility” of divine creation endorsed by Descartes connects him with the Greek and Christian mysticisms which are expressed in Plotinus’ Neo-platonism, medieval Christian mysticisms such as Pseudo-Dionysius’ and Meister Eckhart’s thought, as well as contemporary Christian mysticism such as the thought of Rudolf Otto and Paul Tillich. In particular, along this mystical lineage within the Christian tradition, the “incomprehensibility” of divine creation is not anti-rational. It is actually just non-rational, and with a certain interpretation, can even be seen as pro-rational. This is because, as in Descartes’ thought, the non-rationality speaks to the infinite, unconditional, and inexhaustible fecundity of the divine creative power. Anything that human beings can understand concerns the *de facto* existence of creatures, and thus, before the act of divine creation delivers, there is no way for human beings to comprehend what is possible. In other words, the power of divine creation is ultimately beyond what human intelligence can grasp, and in this sense, it is non-rationale. On the other hand, the only available way for human beings to understand divine creation is through its creatures. In this way, the idea of divine creation as a singular, all-encompassing creative act will continually drive human beings to understand the created world as a whole. As a result, the idea of “*creatio ex nihilo*” can be taken as an ideal for regulating the use of human reason in order to try to achieve the soundest and most complete understanding of the world. Interpreted in this way, the “incomprehensibility” of divine creation is pro-rational, rather than anti-rational. As is well-known, Descartes

¹⁸⁵ Readers can find a fine analysis between Descartes’ metaphysics and physics in Daniel Garber, *Descartes’ Metaphysical Physics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

may be counted as the first modern radical rationalist, and this proves to a certain degree that a mystical commitment to the incomprehensibility of divine creation can be pro-rational, rather than anti-rational.

Nevertheless, after this analysis, I have to say that all these points about “*creatio ex nihilo*” are mostly implicit in Descartes’ theory of created eternal truth. He did not fully abandon the traditional Christian theistic idea of God. Instead, this traditional idea still played a major role in his more mature metaphysical argument.

In the *Meditations*, Descartes grounds the certainty of human knowledge on the idea of God slightly differently from what he had articulated in his theory of created eternal truth around 1630. Now, Descartes uses an argument based upon the natural intentionality of divine creation. Descartes says that inferring knowledge about things outside human mind through the clear and distinct perceptions that humans have about these things is the spontaneous, and also the only way, for human beings to acquire such knowledge. If humans were able to make mistakes in this regard, God would be a cheat and His creation would have irresolvable problems. Therefore, the aforementioned capacity for human beings to obtain objective knowledge is natural, and thus cannot be doubted.¹⁸⁶ We can now see that there are several points in this new development of thought that run counter to the groundbreaking insight implied by Descartes’ theory of created eternal truth: first, it is anthropocentric. It argues that the conditions of things in the world correspond naturally to human perceptions about them. And according to

¹⁸⁶ Descartes’ thought on this point is best illustrated by scholars’ discussion of the issue of the “Cartesian circle.” Please refer to Bin Song, “The Cartesian Circle and the Principle for the Certainty of Knowledge” (in Chinese), *Review of Phenomenology and Philosophy in China*, 2014 (15): pp. 23-56.

Descartes, this is part of the intention of God's creation. Second, it is anthropomorphic. God is a good creator in the sense that He would not botch his creation, making creatures intrinsically fallible and vulnerable. What is implied by Descartes' idea that "God is not a cheat" is that divine creation has a good *telos* which human beings can understand and rely on. Obviously, this is far away from Descartes' endorsement in his theory of eternal created truth that there can be no reason for God's creation which is fathomable by human beings before divine creation actually takes place.

As my final word in this section on Descartes, I would say that I disagree with his general epistemological approach, which I have named above as "epistemological foundationalism." As human beings, I believe we can never know whether our perception of things in the world is "clear" and "distinct" enough to make the related knowledge absolutely certain and free of doubt. All knowledge is conditioned, and human cognitive capacity is fallible. Even those "eternal truths," which Descartes thinks can be represented by the mathematical knowledge of his time, are actually not so eternal as he thought. In the time when it seemed that Euclidean geometry could not be doubted, it is understandable that that Descartes would have liked to have sought a foundation of human knowledge by means of that kind of geometry. However, in the contemporary context, we no longer have any reason to hold onto the discovered foundation. This also means that Descartes' effort to ground the absolute certainty of mathematical truths upon the clearness and distinctness of human perceptions, which is furthermore grounded upon the good intentionality of divine creation, is debatable, if not unsustainable, given historical hindsight. In this way, I suggest that any further theorization of "*creatio ex*

nihilo” ought to return to the original insight that Descartes expressed in his theory of created eternal truth: we can only know the conditions of divine creation through its outcomes, and therefore the non-rational, and potentially pro-rational character of the “incomprehensibility” of divine creation can be seen as a regulative ideal for scientific progress. In this sense, we would not encapsulate divine creation into a single uniform formula which is suitable only for human needs.

4.3 Schleiermacher

As a pioneer of modern theology, despite the fact that Friedrich Schleiermacher did not frequently highlight the idea of “*creatio ex nihilo*” in his writings, he still firmly stands in this tradition. This means that, in my view, his phenomenological description of human religious consciousness and his accordingly existential argument for the Christian doctrine of Trinity can only be understandable according to the tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*” which we analyzed above. In this way, the genius of Schleiermacher can be thought of as consisting of the reformulation of the traditional ontological argument of “*creatio ex nihilo*” but from an existential approach.

What may impress modern readers at first is that the way that Schleiermacher argues that “the feeling of utter dependence” as the foundational dimension of human immediate self-consciousness is all about “*creatio ex nihilo*.” Through a phenomenological description of human self-consciousness centering upon the interaction between human freedom and the world, Schleiermacher finds that human freedom exists but is not absolute. “Freedom is a transcendent act, it is ... exercised...always in a context of and in reciprocity with the social and natural orders of

being. Freedom exhibits both autonomy and receptivity, or limitation.”¹⁸⁷ In other words, in regard to the relationship between human freedom and the world, humans are relatively dependent. However, Schleiermacher recognizes a deeper “feeling of absolute dependence” within this feeling of human freedom as being relatively dependent:

Yet, both self and world are contingent, and point beyond themselves to a transcendent Whence: “The self-consciousness accompanying our entire self-activity (and because this is never zero, it accompanies our entire existence) and which negates absolute freedom, is already in and for itself the consciousness that the whole of our free, self-active being derives from elsewhere.”¹⁸⁸

From the feeling of relative dependence to the feeling of absolute dependence, this is a decisive move for Schleiermacher’s thought. However, I think we can only understand this move from the traditional theological perspective of “*creatio ex nihilo*.” If the feeling of relative dependence points to the relative activity of human freedom as a subjective power in the face of its encountered power of objective reality, the feeling of absolute dependence refers to a totally different relationship of causality. The former is “natural order,” which is defined by patterns of “cosmological succession,” while the other is “ontological contingency” of the entire created world, which includes both human freedom and its encountered non-human world. Therefore, the way Schleiermacher explains the feeling of absolute dependence as the foundational dimension of human self-consciousness can be seen as an existential paraphrase of a pre-existing Christian insight

¹⁸⁷ Williams, Robert R. *Schleiermacher the theologian: the construction of the doctrine of God*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978): 35.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 35. The quote is from Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, trans. H.R Mackintosh & James Stuart Stewart (New York: Harper & Row, 1963): §4.3, whose title will be shortened to “GI” in what follows. quotes.

that the entire created world is dependent upon an ontological creative act of “*creatio ex nihilo*.”

We can confirm that this is the case when we go further into the details of Schleiermacher’s thought on the issue of the relationship between God and the world.

Regarding the nature of “divine causality,” Schleiermacher says:

The divine causality is equal in scope to the finite only insofar as it is opposite in kind. For if it were like the finite in kind - as is often the case in anthropomorphic ideas of God - it would belong to the sphere of interaction and therefore would belong to the natural order as a part of it. In the same way, if the divine causality were not equal in scope to the finite, it could not be set over and against it without disrupting the unity of the natural order, for there would be some finite causality for which there would be some divine causality, but not for some other finite causality.¹⁸⁹

In other words, the ontological unconditionality of divine creation does not impose extra determinations to the natural empirical order embodied by sequences of cosmological succession. Schleiermacher’s insight here reminds us of Thomas Aquinas’ similar thought on the relationship between divine providence and human freedom.

Concerning this relationship, Schleiermacher’s explanation of the “omnipotence” of God, is as following:

The concept of omnipotence contains two elements: first, that the natural order comprehending all space and time is grounded in the divine causality, which as

¹⁸⁹ GI, §51.1. Quoted and discussed by Williams, *Theologian*: 69.

eternal and omnipresent is opposite in kind to all finite causality; and second, that the divine causality expressed by our feeling of utter dependence is fully exhibited in the totality of finite being, and therefore everything for which there is a causality in God happens and becomes real.¹⁹⁰

There is but one unified divine causality: “The entire omnipotence is, undivided and unabbreviated, the omnipotence that does and affects all.” The divine causality forms a unity, such that “there is no point at which we can relate only to the absolute (which by way of stricter contrasts we ought to call not ‘unordered’ but ‘ordering’) exercise of omnipotence and not the ordered exercise, and vice versa.”¹⁹¹

My view is that we can only understand these apparently complicated statements of Schleiermacher’s according to the tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*.” According to my previous analysis of the intellectual history of “*creatio ex nihilo*,” especially as it is manifested in Aquinas’ exquisite analysis of different kinds of causalities, we find that the divine causality implied by “*creatio ex nihilo*” is of a different order from the ordinary causality which we can know from the *de facto* regularity of temporal successions among cosmic entities. The former answers the ultimate ontological question of where the world as a whole is from, or whether there is after all something rather than nothing, while the latter answers the penultimate ontological question of what a thing is in relation to other things in the same existing world. Because divine causality functions

¹⁹⁰ GI § 54. Quoted and discussed by Williams, *Theologian*: 90.

¹⁹¹ Williams, *Theologian*, 92. The quotations are from GI, §54.4.

on a higher ontological level, although it does not answer directly the penultimate question, every answer provided by ordinary causalities can be seen as a manifestation of divine causality. In this way, the conception of divine causality as “*creatio ex nihilo*” is totally compatible to any modal description of cosmic events: whether a cosmic event is empirically contingent or necessary, it is always ontologically dependent upon “*creatio ex nihilo*.” Understood as such, the relationship between the divine causality implied by “*creatio ex nihilo*” and ordinary causalities, which are called by Schleiermacher, “finite causality,” will be exactly what Schleiermacher formulated above: “The divine causality is equal in scope to the finite only insofar as it is opposite in kind” (GI, § 51.1).

By the same token, Schleiermacher’s other related ideas on the relationship between God and the world also become intelligible. In general, the relationship between God and the world is described by Schleiermacher this way:

God is thus bipolar: he is like the world and related to it, but qualitatively other than the world. Conversely he is qualitatively other than the world, but related to it and immanent in it. God is different from the world because his being is not actualized in degrees of more and less. On the other hand, God is expressed in the world in the natural order, and does not disrupt the unity of the natural order.¹⁹²

Regarding the idea of eternity, another important focus in the tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*,” Schleiermacher’s view is reassuring:

The eternity of God should be understood positively as the “absolutely timeless causality of God conditioning all times and time itself” (GI, § 52). This absolutely

¹⁹² Ibid., 69.

timeless causality is not apprehended by itself apart from the world, but only along with the world as it conditions and constitutes time and temporal succession. The order of time is based in divine eternity. Eternity does not mean divine remoteness from the world or an infinite “before” prior to the creation of the world. Eternity is a constituent element in the divine presence in the world. When combined with omnipotence, eternity means the constancy and immutability of the divine causality. It exists and is active in such a way that more and less do not apply to it.¹⁹³

Regarding the related idea of infinity, Schleiermacher’s view is as follows:

The world is the transcendental terminus ad quem, or the spatial-temporal horizon of finitude. It is conceived as a quantitative infinite magnitude, or a potential infinite. ...At the formal ontological level, Schleiermacher is saying that God produces both finite actuality and the potential infinity of the world. This means that God’s power is both always manifest in every time and yet never exhausted in any.¹⁹⁴

Continuing in the same line of thought, Schleiermacher certainly doesn’t lack a mystical commitment concerning the ineffability and inexhaustibility of divine creation, which is also frequently expressed by the tradition “*creatio ex nihilo*”:

“ ‘We ... have strange, dread, mysterious emotions when the imagination reminds us that there is more in nature than we know.’ The transcendent Whence of utter

¹⁹³ Ibid., 88.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 98.

dependence exceeds the limits of imagination and is the limit principle of the imagination. It is formless, beyond form.”¹⁹⁵

In a word, Schleiermacher’s aforementioned understanding of the God-world relationship, eternity, infinitude and mystery can all be seen as a cluster of ideas that convey traditional metaphysical insights of “*creatio ex nihilo*.”

Since this is the case, the last question I have to ask before concluding my analysis of Schleiermacher’s idea of divine creation is how thorough Schleiermacher’s understanding of “*creatio ex nihilo*” is. According to my previous analysis, there are degrees of “thoroughness,” depending upon how a thinker would maintain the idea of “unconditionality” of divine creation implied by the idea “*creatio ex nihilo*.” For example, although Augustine and Aquinas speak about “*creatio ex nihilo*,” their views of the prior existence of an intelligible world of “forms,” “ideas,” or “logical possibilities” before the actual act of divine creation undermined their commitment to the unconditionality of divine creation. By comparison, Descartes’ theory of created eternal truth pushes the idea of “unconditionality” to its limit, and thus could be seen as a legitimate and more thorough development of the idea of “*creatio ex nihilo*.” However, we also noticed that even within Descartes’ thought, his dogmatic assertion about the ultimate intelligibility and rationality of divine creation undermines the insights expressed by his theory of the “created eternal truth.” In other words, in the Christian tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*,” whether and how theologians stick to the criterion of the

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 39. The quotation of Schleiermacher’s words is from Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 69.

unconditionality of divine creation varies. From a comparative perspective, regarding Schleiermacher's exposition of the omnipotence of divine causality, I think his thought can be counted as one of the most thorough among all the Christian philosophers/theologians we have mentioned. We can see this is the case through his attitude towards the Platonic and Leibnizian image of God:

Like Spinoza, Schleiermacher rejects the Platonic and Leibnizian image of God as an artificer who creates by surveying an infinitude of merely abstract possibles, selects the best set of compossibles, and actualizes them. Not only is the image of God anthropomorphic, it suggests that possibility is antecedent to or independent of God's power. Not only is the concept of pure actualized possibility self-contradictory, it also contradicts the notion of God as Creator since it posits something not dependent on God. Schleiermacher objects that "the whole productive activity is assumed to be critical and selective, and therefore secondary" (GI, §59). Further, for God to create by selection and choice is not to enhance but to limit the perfection of creation, because to choose is to negate, and negation means limitation, and this implies that God does not do all that he can. As *posse ipsum*, God is the ground of possibility and actuality; he produces everything that can be, without limitation. Thus the creation is good, because God is sovereign over his work: "The world, as the whole content of the divine formation and production, is so perfectly enclosed within the divine causality that there is nothing outside of the whole which can gain an influence on the whole" (GI, §55.1) and undo God's work. Thus both elements in Schleiermacher's

doctrine of omnipotence form a coherent whole, and express the Reformation view of divine sovereignty.¹⁹⁶

In this quotation, Schleiermacher's thought concerning, "there is nothing outside of the whole which can gain an influence on the whole," represents how thorough his understanding of "*creatio ex nihilo*" is. According to this view, anything we can say about divine creation can only derive from our knowledge about the *de facto* existence of the world. Apart from this created world, nothing essential can be said about what God is as He exists prior to creation, although we are indeed certain that God exists as the ultimate cause upon which the entire created world is dependent. In this way, all the Platonic ideas about "logical possibilities," as they were addressed in Augustine's, Aquinas' and Leibniz's thoughts, cannot be conditions of divine creation since we can assert nothing apart from the *de facto* outcomes of that creation. As Descartes nicely points out, the intelligibility of the world is also dependent.

In the final analysis, Schleiermacher encapsulated his idea of God as, He is a "coincidence of opposites"¹⁹⁷, both opposite in kind and equal in scope to the world.

Schleiermacher's third alternative to complete separation and to complete identification of God and world can be stated in a succinct formula: God is opposite in kind and equal in scope to the world. We have seen that Schleiermacher's term for God's qualitative difference from the world is absolute inwardness, which includes the negative attributes of eternity and omnipresence.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 94.

¹⁹⁷ This is Robert R. Williams' generalization of Schleiermacher's view on divine causation, which I think is really adequate. Please refer to *ibid.*, 70.

Conversely, his term for God's equality in scope to the world is absolute vitality, which includes the positive attributes of omnipotence and omniscience.¹⁹⁸

We find that Schleiermacher's idea of God as a "coincidence of opposites" is a very good summary of the asymmetrical nature of divine creation implied by "*creatio ex nihilo*." Ontologically, the world depends upon God, while God does not depend upon the world; however, epistemologically, all we can know about the creator-creature relationship between God and the world depends upon the *de facto* existence of the world. This two-fold relationship of asymmetry between divine creation and the world entails that Schleiermacher's thought on the "coincidence of opposite" is very adequate to portraying the nature of "*creatio ex nihilo*."

4.4 Paul Tillich

Paul Tillich's thought is one of the most recent innovative Christian theologies concerning "*creatio ex nihilo*." In my view, Tillich is also one of the most adamant thinkers in the tradition of "*creatio ex nihilo*" who perseveres in its monistic commitment, while simultaneously trying to provide a solution to major traditional Christian conundrums such as theodicy in a modern context. In the following analysis of Paul Tillich, I will focus upon these points: his idea of "*creatio ex nihilo*" in general, the meaning of "non-being," the relationship between "finite" and "infinite," and the issue of time, which I believe are all useful for our comparative purposes.

I. The Three Roles of "*creatio ex nihilo*"

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 85.

In Part II of *Systematic Theology I*, “Being and God”, Tillich provides the most systematic exposition of his conception of God. Tillich stands in the tradition of conceiving God’s creativity as *creatio ex nihilo*; meanwhile, his way to parse the implications of this idea and the issues which he wants to address are both pertinent to his specific historical situation and much more complex than most of the previous explanations of this idea. Therefore, I view *creatio ex nihilo* as a capstone of Paul Tillich’s theology.

Tillich’s thought on “*creatio ex nihilo*” in general can be described as follows:

When God performs *creatio ex nihilo*, He creates the world as a whole. As the power of being, it imparts being to every creature. Since *creatio ex nihilo* creates the world as a whole, it also creates time. Past, present and future are three types of time that God creates all together. That implies that God’s creation of the world as a whole is eternal, and that at the same time the world-process is intransigently oriented towards the future, which also speaks to the underlying belief that God’s power of creation is inexhaustible. Based upon these basic ideas of *creatio ex nihilo*, which I think are shared by most of aforementioned philosophical theologians in the Christian tradition, Tillich parses out three ways to understand *creatio ex nihilo*: divine creation is initiating, preserving and directing. Initiative creation means every being ontologically depends upon God as the power of being, so God is the initiator of every being including time. Since God as the power of being creates everything, then at every moment of the cosmic process this grounding power of being continuously supports the being of the world. In this sense, God is also the preserving power of being. Last but not least, God as power of

being is an inexhaustible power of being to overcome non-being and thus continues to move the world to proceed from non-being to being. In this sense, God becomes a directing power of being which provides both an ideal for human creation and a capacity for humans to realize this ideal.

II. The Concept of “Non-Being”

Based upon my survey of the intellectual history of the Christian tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*,” we find that Tillich’s basic thought concerning this idea is actually very traditional. However, starting from his analysis of the meaning of “non-being,” we will be able to find the innovation he brought to the tradition.

In order to pin down the role of non-being in his theological ontology, Tillich maintains a twofold understanding of “non-being” which is implied by *creatio ex nihilo*, and tries to combine these two together. The first meaning of “non-being” in its Greek origin is “*ouk on*.” “*Ouk on* is the ‘nothing’ which has no relation at all to being.”¹⁹⁹ while the second is “*me on*.” “*Me on*” is “the ‘nothing’ which has a dialectical relation to being.” Tillich continues to explain that, “The Platonic school identified *me on* with that which does not yet have being but which can become being if it is united with essences or ideas.”²⁰⁰

According to Tillich’s further exposition of these two concepts, “*ouk on*” refers to the absolute unconditionality of the divine creation in the sense that every creature ontologically depends upon it. Tillich says that this “*ouk on*” has no relation with being, because it doesn’t refer to any lack of being in contrast to some actual status of being.

¹⁹⁹ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol.I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012): 188.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 188.

The “*ouk on*” character of *creatio ex nihilo* is that beyond the divine creation nothing can be conceived of as a higher condition of reality. Here, we find a key difference from Augustine, as well as from the long-standing scholastic tradition in medieval Christianity. Augustine sees non-being as a privation of being, and thus, according to our earlier analysis, he read an unfortunate dualism into his own understanding of *creatio ex nihilo*. In contrast, Tillich’s differentiation of the two meanings of “non-being” is so important that the application of this differentiation into other parts of his theology leads, in my view, to a more successful solution to the issue of theodicy, which we will examine later.

On the other hand, in Plato’s dialogue of *Timaeus*, the divine creation is depicted as the casting of ideas and essences by God upon an amorphous material. In the dialogue, Plato doesn’t mean that this process of creation took place at some concrete time. It refers more to a type of ontological dependence by cosmic creatures upon the divine creation. The difference between the Christian idea of *creatio ex nihilo* and the Platonic idea is that the Platonic one uses three principles to depict the sequence of ontological dependence rather than just one. However, insofar as the amorphous material lacks the status of being of actual creatures, the amorphous material, when placed in the sequence of creation, can be thought of as a sort of “non-being” rather than as being. In this way, we can define this type of non-being as cosmological, in contrast with the absolute unconditionality of “*ouk on*” as an ontological type of non-being. In other words, the ontological non-being refers to the unconditionality of the divine creation, while the cosmological non-being refers to the lack of a concrete type of being. It thus enables us to talk of any type of cosmic change from non-being to being. Since being is always in process, non-being in this

cosmological sense can never be eliminated from the process. Otherwise there would be no change at all. In this sense, Tillich claims that this “*me on*” type of non-being has a dialectical relationship with being.

Interestingly enough, according to Tillich’s understanding, these two types of non-being, despite their difference, are finally combined with each other in the Christian concept of *creatio ex nihilo*, and so constitutes a specific type of religious anthropology. In Tillich’s thought, this combination is crucial for being able to deal with the issue of theodicy and to conceptualize an idiosyncratic version of ontology with God as the ground of being, rather as a supreme being.

Tillich says:

The *nihil* out of which God creates is *ouk on*, the undialectical negation of being. Yet Christian theologians have had to face the dialectical problem of nonbeing at several points. When Augustine and many theologians and mystics who follow him called sin “non-being,” they were perpetuating a remnant of the Platonic tradition. ...They meant that sin has no positive ontological standing, while at the same time they interpreted nonbeing in terms of resistance against being and perversion of being. The doctrine of man’s creatureliness is another point in the doctrine of man where nonbeing has a dialectical character. Being created out of nothing means having to return to nothing. The stigma of having originated out of nothing is impressed upon every creature.²⁰¹

²⁰¹ Ibid., 187-188.

In this brief account by Tillich about the Christian idea of *creatio ex nihilo*, we can see that the fact that human beings are created from nothing and then return to nothing ought to be an empirically confirmable one, since every human being has his or her moments of birth and death. In this sense, we can say that the nothingness mentioned here is a cosmological one. However, once the nothingness from which human beings are born and to which human beings return is understood correlatively and analogically to be sharing the ontological connotation of the “*ouk on*” type of nothingness of *creatio ex nihilo*, it becomes ontological. This means that non-being becomes an essential dimension of human nature as a finite being. As Tillich noticed, “non-being” is the resistance of a human being as a finite being against being, and thus “non-being” is the ontological origin of “sin.” Symmetrically, we can also talk of the “*ouk on*” type of non-being in *creatio ex nihilo* as a resisting power against being. But the difference between the non-being which belongs to the finite beings and the non-being which pertains to *creatio ex nihilo* is that, as the ground of being, *creatio ex nihilo* can never be overcome by non-being. In other words, as long as there is a world in existence, non-being can never prevail over being in *creatio ex nihilo*, since the existence of a world is the starting point of our intellectual and existential inquiry to which *creatio ex nihilo* issues as the answer.

On the basis of this deeper ontological reflection, it is also easy for us to understand the human condition in Tillich’s terms. Every human being, as a finite being, strives for being, but also consists of non-being. As a finite being, there is no guarantee that he or she is able to overcome his or her non-being. Only by participating in the

ground of being, which participation is traditionally termed, “grace,” he or she may have the “courage to be,” and thus preclude his or her being swallowed by non-being. In other words, the differentiation of the “*ouk on*” from the “*me on*” type of “non-being,” as well as their combination in the overall ontological worldview consisting of both divine and human realities, enables Tillich to conceive of “*creatio ex nihilo*” as a monistic dynamic act by which being perennially overcomes non-being, while he can also simultaneously depict the finite human realities as a depending process in which being overcomes non-being. Here, the difference with Augustine is obvious. For Augustine, conceiving the “*ouk on*” type of non-being to be directly a privation of being, i.e., the “*me on*” type of non-being, divests him of an opportunity to understand “*creatio ex nihilo*” as a monistic, yet dynamic process of the perennial overcoming by being over non-being. From this, Augustine’s dualistic conception of “*creatio ex nihilo*” and his unsuccessful treatment of the issue of theodicy follow.

III. Finitude and Infinitude

Based upon this dialectical relationship of being and non-being, Tillich also provides a distinctive analysis of the relationship between the finite and the infinite, which echoes his existential analysis of faith in the *Courage to Be*. It will also lead to an ideal portrait of human existence in Tillich’s philosophy of history, which we will examine in next section.

In regard to the relationship between the finite and the infinite, Tillich says:

It (infinity) is defined by the dynamic and free self-transcendence of finite being.

Infinity is a directing concept, not a constituting concept. It directs the mind to

experience its own unlimited potentialities, but it does not establish the existence of an infinite being. ...The power of infinite self-transcendence is an expression of man's belonging to that which is beyond nonbeing, namely, to being-itself. ...The fact that man never is satisfied with any stage of his finite development, the fact that nothing finite can hold him, although finitude is his destiny, indicates the indissoluble relation of everything finite to being-itself. Being-itself is not infinity; it is that which lies beyond the polarity of finitude and infinite self-transcendence. Being-itself manifests itself to finite being in the infinite drive of the finite beyond itself.²⁰²

As shown by this quotation, Tillich doesn't understand the finite and the infinite to be totally separate from each other and thus lying in two fundamentally different ontological domains. In other words, Being-itself is not a being, neither is it a finite being nor an infinite being. Being-itself is what makes being possible. However, beings are always produced and reproduced in a process. This process is a self-transcendence of finite beings towards the infinite, which is made possible by Being-itself. Several theological points can be inferred from this dialectic and dynamic understanding of the relationship between the finite and the infinite:

- (1) Although any finite being cannot be claimed as infinite, the infinite is always manifested in the self-transcendence of the finite. In this sense, there is no rigid boundary between the secular and the holy. Every secular element insofar as it strives for self-affirmation and self-transcendence is at the same time sacred.

²⁰² Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology II* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957): 191.

(2) Demonic power in this process consists of any form of reification of the finite being as a pseudo-infinite one. That means, if any finite being stops self-transcending and blocks the whole cosmic process into a stalemate, it will become a demonic power. In Tillich's words, if the ultimacy with which people are concerned is not really ultimate, then it yields idolatry and demonic power in human history.

(3) A finite being as a finite being *per se* doesn't have the self-transcending power towards the infinite. Being-itself, as the grounding *creatio* of being *ex nihilo*, is the ultimate power of being. Only in a deep union with this power of being, can a finite being fulfill its intrinsic *telos* of existence as an endless self-transcendence towards the infinite.

Among these three points, the first addresses the relationship between the sacred and the secular. The second answers the question of where the demonic power comes from. And the third one provides a portrait of human nature as *homo religious*.

IV, Time

Given the above analysis, Tillich's understanding of time also becomes an intriguing issue, as it always does for the tradition of "*creatio ex nihilo*." In the last part of his three-volume systematic theology, Tillich's analyses of time in general and the historical dimension of human existence in particular seem to encapsulate all the wisdom that has unfolded logically in his previous volumes, and most importantly, these analyses eventually provide an idealistic portrait of what human life ought to be. In the context of

this study, we can see that Tillich's understanding of *creatio ex nihilo* continues to play a foundational role for his conception of time.

Tillich's analysis of time starts from his inquiry about the meaning of "*eskhatos*." He says: "the 'last' in the temporal sense is not the 'final' in the eschatological sense."²⁰³ This implies that first, Tillich's eschatology is deliberately disentangled from any empirical understanding of the "end." Instead, Tillich says: "The end is the fulfilled aim, however this aim may be envisioned. Yet, where there is an end there must be a beginning, the moment in which existence is experienced as unfulfilled and in which the drive towards fulfillment starts. The beginning and the end of time are qualities which belong to historical time essentially and in every moment."²⁰⁴ The end mentioned here is not defined as merely something temporal in the empirical sense. Tillich connects it to the normative sense of "aim." But why should this quasi-empirical but fully normative type of "end" be in every moment of historical time? I think only in reference to *creatio ex nihilo*, can we get the answer. As analyzed above, *creatio ex nihilo* as the ground of being is the initiative, preserving and directing power of creation. Insofar as it creates the past, present and future types of time all together, its grounding power fleshes out at every moment. However, finite beings consist of non-being and being. Whether they can continue to be depends upon whether they can be united with the ground of being and thus dare to push forward regardless of negative factors resisting the power of being. In this way, union with *creatio ex nihilo* as the ultimate power of being becomes both the condition and the ideal for the existence of finite beings. This is because only under the

²⁰³ Tillich, *Systematic Theology III* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963): 307.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 320.

“grace” of the power of being, can finite beings continue to transcend themselves towards the infinite and thereby fulfill their intrinsic *telos* as dynamic beings. In this sense, Tillich defines the aim of history as, “reunion with the divine ground of being and meaning.”²⁰⁵ Even so, a finite being can never be fully realized as the power of being *per se*. This means that the non-being element in the finite being can never be eliminated. Accordingly, although the union with *creatio ex nihilo* is the condition for the endless self-transcendence of a finite being towards the infinite, we can never find a concrete temporal point in any empirical way at which the infinite can be fully realized as a being. In this sense, the aim of history becomes normative and idealistic. It is an absolute ethical demand upon all finite beings to continue to transcend themselves towards the infinite, while at the same time what is infinite can never be fully fleshed out in history.

For Tillich, the eschaton, historical providence, the kingdom of God, all the traditional Christian ideas, interrelate with one another in this ontological sense. In so far as God as *creatio ex nihilo* creates all the modes of time altogether, the divine creativity is also named, “eternal life.”

This vertical understanding of the end of human history exerts a tremendous influence on Tillich’s understanding of politics in particular and on the human condition in general. First, it undermines any type of utopianism purporting to be a viable political plan for the progress of human society. Tillich says:

For utopianism, taken literally, is idolatrous. It gives the quality of ultimacy to something preliminary. It makes unconditional what is conditioned (a future

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 373.

historical situation) and at the same time disregards the always present existential estrangement and the ambiguities of life and history. This makes the utopian interpretation of history inadequate and dangerous. ...In this way the Kingdom of God fulfills the utopian expectation of a realm of peace and justice while liberating them from their utopian character by the addition “of God,” for with this addition the impossibility of an earthly fulfillment is implicitly acknowledged.²⁰⁶

In my view, a non-dynamic and perfectionist understanding of the ecstatic fulfillment in human spiritual experience is the individual basis for the collective expectation of utopianism in human society. In this way, Tillich’s rejection of historical utopianism based on his understanding of *creatio ex nihilo* also has value in guiding individuals’ spiritual practice. Second, *creatio ex nihilo* is a directing creation that continues to transform the finite world-process towards the infinite. In this way, a human’s *courage to be* becomes a condition for the realization of this ceaseless creative power, and in a certain sense, whether *creatio ex nihilo* as the power to be can be realized in the human world depends upon whether human beings can make themselves open enough to be united with *creatio ex nihilo*. This affirmation of the necessity of human agency in promoting *creatio ex nihilo* in the human world is the way Tillich deals with the traditional issue of the relationship between divine providence and human freedom. This is expressed in his theory of “essentialization”:

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 358-9.

But the term “essentialization” can also mean that the new which has been actualized in time and space adds something to the essential being, uniting it with the positive which is created within existence, thus producing the ultimately new, the “New Being”, not fragmentarily as in temporal life, but wholly as a contribution to the Kingdom of God in its fulfillment. ...Participation in the eternal life depends on a creative synthesis of a being’s essential nature with that has made of it [??] in its temporal existence.²⁰⁷

In this way, “The eternal act of creation is driven by a love which finds fulfillment only through the other one who has the freedom to reject and accept love.”²⁰⁸ In other words, the fulfillment of *creatio ex nihilo* as the ground of being becomes human-dependent. In comparison with the traditional Christian understanding of the same issue which does not affirm that human freedom increases the divine creation, Tillich’s view is a breakthrough insofar as it elevates the status of human beings and maintains the basic humanist commitment which is prevalent in modern history. However, in my view, to affirm that *creatio ex nihilo* in the holistic perspective of the world-process depends in some degree upon human freedom is an overstatement. In line with my Ruist sensitivity, I would argue that the basic ontological features of *creatio ex nihilo*, including the endless transformation of the world-process from non-being to being as Tillich understood it, would not change even if human beings do not fulfill their freedom and destiny to assist in the divine creation. However, whether these ontological features can be realized in the human world in a specific humane way indeed depends upon human freedom. Therefore,

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 401

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 422.

the divine creation can be said to be human-dependent only in the human world and in the humane sense. Without this specific human context, the divine creation just takes place naturally. With neither good nor evil, it just continues to create and transform the world-process from non-being to being. We will return to this point when we finish Chapter Seven and pursue a comparison between Christianity and Ruism.

At last, we get the most crystallized view of Tillich and the gist of his theology: it is an “eschatological panentheism.”²⁰⁹ In relation to this, Tillich also gives proper imagery to time: “I would suggest a curve which comes from above, moves down as well as ahead, reaches the deepest point which is the existential now, and returns in an analogous way to that which it came, going ahead as well as going up...”²¹⁰ “Eschatological” corresponds to the “comes from above” and “returns to that which it came” clauses. It refers to the aim of history, reunion with the divine ground of being and meaning. The “pan-” in panentheism means that divine creation works everywhere and in every moment, even in the darkest moments of anxiety and despair when human beings feel swallowed by the threat of non-being. It corresponds to the clause, “reaches the deepest point which is the existential now” in the above quotation. The “en-” refers to the power of being is manifested in finite beings, yet can’t be contained by them. It continues to break through any finite creative moment and advances the whole cosmic process into infinity. It echoes with the image of “moves ahead” and “going ahead.” Finally, it is “theism” because it affirms *creatio ex nihilo* as the ultimate reality which conditions all the other dimensions of reality without itself being thus conditioned.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 421.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 420.

Obviously, the “theo-” referenced here is dramatically different from the traditional personalistic understanding of God in Christianity. If we can use “theism” to talk about this kind of God, I feel we can also use it to talk about any other non-personalistic understanding of ultimacy in other traditions, although I certainly believe this use may be controversial.

One last word that I would like to say about Tillich’s idea of *creatio ex nihilo* will complement what I have analyzed above concerning the way in which Tillich addresses the issue of theodicy. Different from Augustine, Tillich insists upon a monistic and dynamic understanding of *creatio ex nihilo* as a continuous overcoming process of being over non-being. Also, the differentiation between “*ouk on*” and “*me on*” types of “non-being” enables Tillich to affirm that *creatio ex nihilo* never fails to overcome non-being, while the case for finite beings depends. In this framework, any form of successful overcoming by being of non-being, insofar as it is a manifestation of the divine creative power, is good; however, if human beings, as one of the most important manifesting instances, use this power to negate their own being, and thus misuse the power of being in a paradoxically positive way, from the perspective of divine creation, it is still good. But from the perspective of human beings, it is very bad! The all-pervading divine goodness throughout its entire creation, in this way, is compatible with all possible dependent cases in finite realities regarding whether they can continue to be or not, and in particular, it is compatible with the morally evil capacity of human beings to negate themselves. Here, we find a key with which to resolve the traditional Christian issue of theodicy, and its requirements are that we must give up the conception of God as an all-

caring benevolent person with His omniscient wisdom to issue rewards and punishments, and that we must also understand that whether humans are good or evil depends on how they receive the grace of the power of divine creation and thus whether they behave well by themselves.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Sheng Sheng” (生生, birth birth) as “*Generatio Ex Nihilo*”

from Confucius to Wang Bi

5.1 “Reversion is the Action of *Dao*” - Lao Zi’s Cosmology in the *Dao De Jing*.

I. Lao Zi and Confucius: A Divergence.

In face of the social and political turmoil engendered by the collapse of the emperor’s authority during the late Zhou Dynasty (1046-256 B.C.E.), Lao Zi and Confucius, perhaps the two most influential Chinese thinkers in the world, took different approaches to address this shared social reality. Confucius suggested that the turmoil was due to a lack of civilization in human beings. Therefore, people should cultivate themselves so as to become more virtuous, and thus to try to recover the social and political order which, as maintained in a system of rituals (禮, *Li*), was once prevalent in the early Zhou dynasty. However, for Lao Zi, the tumults were induced by an excess of civilization in human beings. Therefore political leaders ought to restrain from governing. The use of technologies ought to be restricted. And education needs to be held back. In other words, human beings should restrain from employing the means of human civilization in order to revive the most primordial, energetic status of human society where a pristine condition of human existence might still be preserved.

We can clearly see this difference from their divergent social ideals. Lao Zi’s social ideals were as follows:

Let the state be small and the people few. Even if there be techniques replacing tens of hundreds’ of people’s labor, they would not be used. Let the people look

upon death as a grievous thing and renounce traveling afar. Though there be boats and carriages, yet nobody rides in them.

Though there be armors and weapons, yet nobody takes them out. Let people go back to the old days when knots in ropes were still used. People relish their food, like their dresses, find ease in their homes, and are happy with their customs and ways of life. People in neighboring settlements behold one another from afar.

They can hear the barking of dogs and the crowing of cocks from the neighborhood. Yet they age to death without meeting or communicating with each other.²¹¹

Confucius' social ideals were very different:

When the Great Way is followed intentionally, all under Heaven is distributed appropriately. People with virtues and merits are selected for public office, trust is cherished, and courtesy is cultivated. The people not only love their own parents and children, they properly love other people's parents and children as well. The elderly are attended until death; adults are employed; children are raised.

Concerning widowers, widows, orphans, the aged with no children, the disabled, and the ailing: they are all nourished. Males and females are bonded in marriage; their talents and jobs are matched. It is detestable for possessions and resources to

²¹¹ Lao Zi, *Dao De Jing*, Chapter 80, translation is adapted by myself from multiple sources. Its major reference is taken from Richard John Lynn, *The Classic of the Way and Virtue: A New Translation of the Tao-te Ching of Laozi as Interpreted by Wang Bi* (Columbia University Press: 2004). Other versions include the translations of Lin Yu-tang (林语堂), and James Legge, etc. Readers can compare these resources to appreciate alternative translations. Because there are multiple available English translations of Lao Zi's text, I have not include the original Chinese in this dissertation. The reason that I chose the received version of the *Dao De Jing* text as the major original source for this dissertation will be explained in what follows.

be thrown away upon the ground. However, when gathering them, people would not store them solely for selfish use. It is detestable that people refrain from using their strength to fulfill their duties. However, when people do use their strength, it is not solely for personal gain. Therefore, intrigues and deceptions can gain no foothold. There are neither robbers nor thieves; neither is there any mob nor rebellious bandits. The doors of households appear to be closed, but they are never locked. This is a society of great harmony.²¹²

For Lao Zi, the most desirable society is one where people need little sociality, and once left alone, they enjoy themselves by themselves. However, for Confucius, an ideal society is one in which all the achievements of human civilization are shared appropriately on the basis of a well-coordinated social life. In relation to this, the divergence between these two thinkers can be no clearer than when we pay attention to their different attitudes towards “rituals”²¹³ (禮, *Li*).

For Confucius, to enable yourself to behave according to the requirements of ritual propriety is one of the most important ways to nourish the cardinal human virtue,

²¹² “大道之行也，天下為公。選賢與能，講信修睦，故人不獨親其親，不獨子其子，使老有所終，壯有所用，幼有所長，矜寡孤獨廢疾者，皆有所養。男有分，女有歸。貨惡其棄於地也，不必藏於己；力惡其不出於身也，不必為己。是故謀閉而不興，盜竊亂賊而不作，故外戶而不閉，是謂大同。” The Chapter, “The Unfolding of Rites,” 禮運, in the *Book of Rites*; translation is my own. The only available translation of the Book of Rites (禮記) is still James Legge’s which was completed almost two centuries ago: James Legge, trans., “The Li Ki or Collection of Treatises on the Rules of Propriety or Ceremonial Usages,” in *The Sacred Books of the East Vol. 27*, ed. Max Muller (Delhi, India: Motilal Banarsidass, 1968, reprinted). Legge’s translation of this passage is not so accurate from a philosophical point of view of Ruism, and therefore I have translated it myself. Although it is arguable whether these words are from Confucius, it is widely received within the Ru tradition that these words represent the social ideal of Confucius and the early Ru school. The original Chinese is from Zheng Xuan, Kong Yingda, *Li Ji Zheng Yi* (禮記正義, The Right Meaning of The Book of Rites), in *Shi San Jing Zhu Shu* (十三經注疏, Commentaries on the Thirteen Classics), edited by Li Xueqin (Beijing: *Bei Jing Da Xue Chu Ban She*, 1999).

²¹³ In translating li 禮, I have no preference between “rituals” and “rites.”

“Humaneness” (仁, *Ren*)²¹⁴. However, in chapter 38 of the *Dao De Jing*, we find Lao Zi saying that “Ritualization represents the scarcity of the human virtues of ‘loyalty’ and ‘trustworthiness’, and it is actually the supreme reason for social disorder.” I once argued somewhere else that *li* 禮, in the Chinese context, connotes all “civilized symbols” or all “means of civilization.”²¹⁵ The Ru tradition cherishes *li* 禮 as what differentiated human beings from animals, and thus it is the appropriate performance of *li* 禮 that marks off the dignity of human nature. In this sense, Lao Zi’s suspicion towards *li* 禮 speaks to his distinctive Daoist sentiment towards human civilization in general.

In brief, from Lao Zi’s and Confucius’ different social ideals and their related different attitudes towards ritual (*li* 禮), we can safely conclude that Lao Zi is the heroic/proto-Chinese thinker who is short on human civilization/culture, while Confucius is the heroic/proto-Chinese thinker who aspires for a long-lasting human civilization/culture.²¹⁶

II. My approach to interpreting Lao Zi’s cosmology in the *Dao De Jing*

My thesis is that because of this fundamental difference between Lao Zi’s and Confucius’ thought, the traditions which they initiated, Daoism and Ruism, shared different tendencies concerning cosmology. In this section, I will analyze Lao Zi’s cosmology in his *Dao De Jing*, and in the following one, I will analyze the Ru cosmology

²¹⁴ *The Analects* 12.1, Edward Slingerland, trans., *Confucius Analects* (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. 2003).

²¹⁵ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bin-song/a-catechism-of-confuciani_6_b_9178068.html.

²¹⁶ Benjamin I. Schwartz has similar insights about the difference between Daoism and Ruism in his “Transcendence in Ancient China”, *Daedalus*, Vol. 104, No.2: 57-68. 1975. Schwartz characterizes Daoism as, “Thus, as a social philosophy, Daoism represents a classcial ‘primitivist’ critique of all ‘higher civilization’ including the Confucian conception of higher civilization.” (p.66)

in the *Appended Texts of The Classic of Change*.²¹⁷ My focus will be to illustrate the interconnection between the cosmology of these two schools, and their respective anthropology, which mainly includes political theory and ethics.

This means that my approach to interpreting these two cosmologies will not be solely philosophical. Of course, a philosophical analysis focusing on the rigor of conceptualization and the coherence of argumentation is important. However, because of the holistic nature of Chinese thought, it will be more informative if we not only answer whether the presented cosmology is philosophically sound and coherent, but also what its connection to the traditions' other major concerns is.

III. The “Non-being” (無) and “Being” (有) aspects of the *Dao*

The central concept of Lao Zi's cosmology is *Dao* (道). It is *Dao* that generates the entire world and maintains it. The process of cosmic change also perennially returns in a cyclic way. In Lao Zi's words, this process is described as, “reversion is the action of *Dao*” (Chapter 14).

However, Lao Zi's *Dao* has both “non-being” and “being” aspects. Accordingly, how to accurately understand the meaning of these two terms and their relationship to each other becomes a central conundrum in deciphering Lao Zi's thought.

²¹⁷ Echoing what I explained in the “Forward to Chapter Three-to-Six: Methodological Guideline,” I want to restate that for the purpose of this study, the original materials of ancient Chinese philosophy, including the *Dao De Jing* and the *Appended Texts*, used for analysis here are given in their received versions, most of which were compiled in the Han Dynasty (202 B.C.E. to 220 C.E.). There are two major reasons for this bibliographical choice: 1) I don't think the newly excavated versions of either the *Dao De Jing* or the *Appended Texts* have significantly impacted our understanding of the philosophy of these texts which has been sufficiently defined by their received versions. 2) My approach to analyzing the Ru understanding of “creation” hinges upon the received Ruist intellectual history. Therefore, to investigate how these seminal texts were received by the tradition is of crucial importance. However, I definitely belong among those Ruist scholars who are tremendously interested in the newly excavated materials. Therefore, whenever these materials can be used to clarify my argument, I will cite them as well.

This issue immediately emerges when the book of *Dao De Jing* is opened:

The *Dao* that can be told of is not the genuine *Dao*; The Name that can be given is not the genuine Name. Non-being (無) is the name of the beginning of Heaven and Earth; Being (有) is the name of the mother of all things. Therefore, I constantly use the name of non-being in order to see into the subtlety of the *Dao*. I constantly use the name of being in order to see into the manifestations of the *Dao*. These two (non-being and being) share the same origin but have different names. They may both be called the Mystery. Reaching from mystery into deeper mystery is the gate to the secret of all subtleties. (Chapter 1)

The difficulty for us to understand the meaning of “non-being” here is that, in a comparative perspective, when we keep in mind all the rich connotations of “non-being” or “nothingness” in both the Greek-European Christian tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*” and the later development of Chinese intellectual history, we really do not exactly know what the term, 無 (non-being), refers to in this cryptic opening chapter of *Dao De Jing*. “Non-being” may refer to the formlessness of a differentiated whole of being that has not yet garnered any determination, such as in the cases of Spinoza and Hegel.²¹⁸ “Non-being” may mean a cosmic status of pure emptiness lacking in any kind of being but still holding a temporal position at the primeval stage of cosmic evolution. In this sense, “non-being” would be like a great vacuum. Furthermore, “non-being” could also mean

²¹⁸ Spinoza’s and Hegel’s thoughts on creation are outside of the tradition of *creatio ex nihilo*, and therefore they are not included in this comparative study. However, readers are recommended to access their thoughts through scholarly studies such as Richard Mason, *The God of Spinoza: A Philosophical Study* (Cambridge University Press, 1997) and C. Allen Speight, *The Philosophy of Hegel* (McGill-Queen’s University Press: Acumen, 2008), in order to comparatively understand Lao Zi’s cosmology.

something ontological. In Zhu Xi's terms, the pattern-principles (理, *li*) articulating how a set of cosmic realities dynamically and harmoniously fit together share features of "non-being," since they are intellectually abstract and lack the empirical traits displayed by concrete cosmic entities - the vital-energies (氣, *Qi*). In the "*creatio ex nihilo*" tradition, "non-being" can refer to the "unconditionality" of the ultimate ontological creative power that is the generator of beings, rather than any kind of being.

Since there are so many ways to understand the term "non-being" in a metaphysical²¹⁹ context, the relationship between "non-being" and "being" is also baffling. In the *Dao De Jing*'s opening chapter, this relationship can be understood cosmologically. That means "Non-being" and "Being" may alternate with each other and thus are located in different temporal points in the sequence of cosmic changes. However, these alternating cosmic statuses are all manifestations of the singular *Dao*'s creative and regulative power. This might be what the text means by "these two (non-being and being) share the same origin but have different names." Alternatively, the relationship between "non-being" and "being" can also be understood ontologically. That means "non-being" and "being" are two aspects of the same thing, and therefore they always exist and function at the same time. This understanding resonates with the "*creatio ex nihilo*" tradition, which, as in Paul Tillich's case, views the unconditionality of divine creation as

²¹⁹The term "metaphysics," in my interpretation of both Western and Chinese cosmological thought, contains cosmology and ontology. My use of cosmology is close to "cosmogony", a theory or a narrative about how the cosmos originates and evolves. However, because ontological discourse is usually formulated within some sort of cosmology, for my writing which follows, I may use phrases such as "the ontological dimension of one's cosmology" or "ontological cosmology" to highlight the ontological dimension of a cosmology. Ultimately, whether there is an ontological dimension for a cosmology depends upon whether the cosmology addresses "non-temporal" characteristics of things in the cosmos.

just one necessary aspect of divine creativity, and thus is not dialectically counteracting the “being” feature of divine creation. The third possible way to understand the aforementioned relationship may be ontologically less intensive, which means that the “non-being” feature of *Dao* can be understood, like Zhu Xi’s conception of pattern-principles, as what structures and regulates the empirical process of cosmic changes, and thus cannot be so visible or tangible as the concrete cosmic entities which get regulated in this way. Both of these latter two understandings are “ontological” in the sense that the relationship between “non-being” and “being” is synchronic, and potentially non-temporal.

Obviously, solely relying on the first chapter, we will not be able to figure out the answer to all these puzzles. This situation will not be resolved much if we take two further key cosmological chapters in the *Dao De Jing* as references:

“Reversion is the action of *Dao*. Weakness is the function of *Dao*. The myriad things under heaven are generated from being (有), and being is generated from non-being (無).” (Chapter 40)

“Out of *Dao*, One is generated. Out of One, Two is generated. Out of Two, Three is generated. Out of Three, the myriad things are generated. Each of the myriad things carries the *yin* at its back and holds the *yang* in its front. Through the mutual impact of the *yin/yang* vital energies (氣, *Qi*), harmony among the myriad things is generated.” (Chapter 42)

It is clear from these two quotations that there is a sequence of creation between “non-being” and “being”, and there is also a sequence of creativity between “*Dao*” and a

myriad of things, no matter what “one,” “two,” and “three” refer to. However, we are still not clear about whether the creative sequence mentioned here is one of ontological dependence, or one of cosmological succession. If the latter, the relationship between “non-being” and “being” for the *Dao* will be mainly a cosmological one. It will thus be extremely inappropriate to interpret Lao Zi’s cosmology as analogical to the Greek-European Christian tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*.”

Nevertheless, it is also clear from the analysis so far that a key point for us in correctly understanding Lao Zi’s cosmology is “time.” In other words, if we can find enough evidence from other chapters of the *Dao De Jing* to make sure whether the creative sequence mentioned in Chapter 40 and Chapter 42 is one of cosmological succession or one of ontological dependence, our confusion about Lao Zi’s cosmology will be greatly mitigated. In my view, there is extensive textual evidence in the *Dao De Jing* driving us to conclude that a central concern of “cosmological succession,” rather than of “ontological dependence,” is consistent for Lao Zi’s cosmology, and furthermore, this concern can be better understood in the context of his anthropology.

IV, The Undifferentiated Whole of Being before the Creation of Heaven and Earth

The following four quotations are all talking about a stage in *Dao*’s cosmic action which is very similar to “the undifferentiated whole of being” in Hegel’s thought. In reliance on these texts, we can make sure what the “one,” “two,” and “three” stages refer to in Chapter 42.

Dao is hollow, but its uses are inexhaustible. Abyssal, yet it is the forebear of all things. Almost obliterated, yet it seems to still exist. I don’t know whose Child it

is. Instead, it seems to exist even before the birth of the supreme deity (帝, *Di*).

(Chapter 4)

We look, but it cannot be seen. This is called the invisible. We listen, but it cannot be heard. This is called the inaudible. We grasp, but it cannot be touched. This is called the intangible. These three elude our inquiries, and hence, they blend and become one (混而為一). Nor in its upper regions, is there light. Nor in its lower regions, is there darkness. Winding and Twisting, it cannot be named; it reverts again to the realm of no things (無物). This is why it is called the status that has no status, and the image of what is not a thing. This is called the Fleeting and Obscure (恍惚). Meet it and you do not see its face. Follow it and you do not see its back. Grasp the *Dao* of old days so as to guide the beings of today. Know the ancient beginning, and this is called the regulation of *Dao* (道紀). (Chapter 14)

Dao as a thing is fleeting and obscure. Fleeting and Obscure, yet latent in it are images. Obscure and Fleeting, yet latent in it are things. Dark and Dim, yet latent in it are essences of things. These essences are really there. Dark and Dim, yet what is latent in it can be verified. From the days of old till now, its name never disappears, by which I can view the father of all things. How can I know the status of the father of all things? Through this, “the *Dao*.” (Chapter 21)

Before heaven and earth existed, there was something that is a complete blend (混成). Silent, vast, yet it stands alone and undergoes no change. It moves in a circle, yet is inexhaustible. It is worthy to be the mother of all things. I do not

know its name, and address it as *Dao*. If forced to give it a name, I shall call it “Great.” Being great implies extending out, extending out implies far-reaching, and far-reaching implies reversion to the original point. Therefore, *Dao* is great, heaven is great, the earth is great, and human beings are also great. These are the Great Four in the universe, and humans are one of them. Humans take earth as their law, the earth takes heaven as its law, heaven takes *Dao* as its law, and *Dao* takes what comes out spontaneously and naturally (自然²²⁰) as its law. (Chapter 25)

Before my analysis of the subtlety of Lao Zi’s cosmology in these quotations, one of its salient features needs to be highlighted in comparison to the Greek-European Christian tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*.”

In Chapter 4 and Chapter 25, *Dao* is said to “exist even before the birth of the supreme deity” and to take “what comes out spontaneously and naturally as its law.” This shows that Lao Zi’s cosmology is not anthropomorphic. Lao Zi tries to eliminate the influence of the Shang and Zhou dynasties’ worship towards “the supreme deity,” and in this sense the way that he tries to explain how the cosmos is created and evolves shares similar naturalistic and scientific affinity to modern scientific cosmogony such as the Big Bang theory. The central trope for Lao Zi’s cosmology is the spontaneous emergence of all things from an intelligible cosmic process. Actually, after we get to learn the Ru

²²⁰ A more literal translation of 自然 is “what is as it is (然) of its own accord (自).” Please refer to Paul R. Goldin, “The Myth that China has no Creation Myth”, *Monumenta Serica*, Vol. 56 (2008), pp. 1-22 concerning his discussion of the translation of 自然. Obviously, since we understand 自然 as such, the “law” mentioned in the translation doesn’t imply the existence of an “lawgiver.”

cosmology in the *Appended Texts*, we will understand that this central trope is also shared by the Ru tradition.

Understood as such, to argue that Lao Zi's cosmology is mainly a temporal one and thus, it is more about the relationship of temporal succession among cosmic realities, rather than the one of ontological dependence among different ontological ranks of cosmic realities, the key evidence from these quoted texts is that Lao Zi tries to articulate what happens to Dao before the creation of heaven and earth (Chapter 25). He also intends to rely upon his knowledge of this primordial status of *Dao* to guide his contemporary human society (Chapter 14).

Lao Zi's description of this ancient status of *Dao* before the creation of heaven and earth reminds us of Hegel's similar description of the undifferentiated whole of Being before the Being garners any kind of determination: it is invisible, inaudible, and intangible. In one word, it is formless.²²¹ Also, it blends everything together and thus can be seen as an undifferentiated whole (Chapter 14). However, even if there is no determination yet within this primeval status of *Dao*, all images, forms, and essences of things are latent in it, since the entire cosmos will be generated from this primordial whole of being under the function of *Dao*. Most importantly, the power of *Dao* latent in this "everything-blended-together" status will always be there and thus the *Dao*

²²¹ In order to showcase the subtlety of Lao Zi's cosmological insights in a comparative context to Hegel's thought and language, it seems better for us to describe Lao Zi's primordial cosmic status as an "undifferentiated whole of being-as-becoming," since a dynamic and processual emphasis is consistent in Lao Zi's cosmology. However, this does not much influence my argument about the general features of Lao Zi's cosmology, so in the following I will still use the term "undifferentiated whole of being" unless a change of phrase is demanded by the context.

continually functions throughout the entire process of cosmic changes (Chapter 25). In this sense, *Dao* is not only a generator/creator, but also a sustainer.

The use of the term, 物 (thing) is a bit confusing since in Chapters 21 and 25 it is said that the *Dao* is a thing, while in Chapter 14 it is said that when everything blends together, the *Dao* locates itself in the realm of “no things.”²²² However, I interpret the seeming conflict in this way: the undifferentiated whole of being before the creation of heaven and earth can be said to be a thing in the vaguest sense that something is there, and this “something” is the basic, undifferentiated stuff of being. However, compared with all the concrete things after heaven and earth have been generated, this primeval status of cosmic being cannot be said to be a thing since it has not yet garnered any determination.

Understood as such, it is relatively easier for us to parse out the concrete references of “one,” “two,” and “three” mentioned in the cosmological sequence of Chapter 42.

First, the creative sequence mentioned in Chapter 42 is one of cosmological succession, rather than one of ontological dependence. This means that there must be a concrete status of cosmogonical evolution corresponding to “one,” “two,” and “three.”

Second, since the primeval undifferentiated whole of being is described as “blending and becoming one” in Chapter 14, I will interpret “One” in Chapter 42 as referring to this cosmic stage. “Two” can be seen as referring to “*Yin*” and “*Yang*” vital-energies (Chapter 4), or “heaven” and “earth” (Chapter 25) when the primeval whole of

²²² I deliberately render 無物 as “no things” because though this “undifferentiated whole of being” can be counted as one thing in the *Dao De Jing*, it lacks diversity and plurality.

being gets its initial determination under the function of *Dao*. “Three” refers to “heaven,” “earth,” and “human beings,” which are all mentioned as “great” in chapter 25. Finally, the myriad things are further generated through the interaction between heaven, earth and human beings.

In this way, the sequence of the generative succession among cosmic realities according to Lao Zi will be the following:

Dao → One (the undifferentiated whole of being) → Two (Yin/Yang vital-energies; or Heaven and Earth) → Three (Heaven, Earth, and Human Beings) → the myriad things.

Lest that this chart may mislead, we must always keep in mind that *Dao* is not only the generator, but also the sustainer. Therefore, after it generates the One, its creative power continues to function inexhaustibly throughout “Two,” “Three,” and later states of this cosmogony.

Understood as such, a final question must be asked in regard to this cosmological sequence which is that which part of its sequence can be said to be “non-being” and which part is “being”, since in chapter 40 it was said that “the myriad things under Heaven are generated from being (有), and being is generated from non-being (無).” This question is also relevant to our original concern about the relationship between 有 (being) and 無 (non-being) in Lao Zi’s cosmology, and therefore the answer to this question will be a key to our understanding of Lao Zi’s cosmology in general.

V. “Reversion is the Action of *Dao*”: a Cosmological Foundation for Lao Zi’s

Anthropology.

It is relatively easy to read Chapter 40 and Chapter 42 together so as to say “One” is “being”, and *Dao* is “non-being.” In this way, the entire cosmic sequence will look like this:

“Non-being” (*Dao*) → One (the undifferentiated whole of “being”) → Two (*Yin/Yang* vital-energy; Heaven and Earth) → Three (Heaven, Earth, and Human Beings) → the myriad things.

Two things need to be clarified about this revised chart of Lao Zi’s cosmic sequence:

First, the function of *Dao* runs through all its stages. Thus, even if we say *Dao* is non-being, this only means that *Dao*’s function runs through the “non-being” stage of cosmic sequence, and thus, there is indeed a status of “non-being” before the existence of the everything-blended “One.” In this sense, the “non-being” status before “One” will be like a great vacuum (虛, *xu*) located at the beginning of the cosmic sequence, and thus, the status has the potential to generate everything of being under the power of *Dao*.

Second, the positioning of a great vacuum before “One” is not totally necessary for understanding Lao Zi, although all our analysis consistently points in this direction. This is not only because the textual evidence is rare. It is also because the undifferentiated One, compared with Two and all later stages, is already qualified to be described as some kind of “non-being,” since it is undifferentiated and formless. In this way, when Chapter 40 says “The myriad things under heaven are generated from being (有), and being is generated from non-being (無),” it would mean that the myriad things under heaven belong to the cosmic status of “being” which corresponds to the stages of

“Two” and “Three”, while these statuses can be understood to be ultimately generated from the primeval one of the undifferentiated whole of being, that is, the “One”, a sort of “non-being.”

Nevertheless, no matter whether the temporal beginning stage of Lao Zi’s cosmogony is the non-being of great vacuum, or the being of the undifferentiated One, the most important point for Lao Zi is that the stage of “non-being” is not only temporally prior to “being” in this cosmic process, but also the process is cyclic. For Lao Zi, the temporal priority of non-being over being proves that the most powerful manifestation of *Dao*’s creativity is the stage of non-being, rather than being, since the former gives rise to the latter. The cyclic process of cosmic changes proves that the constant creation of a myriad of things is due to a perennial return to the original “non-being” root of *Dao*’s creative power, and thus, any renewal status of human society must also follow the pattern that this eternally cyclic and recursive process indicates. As a result, these two central points, the temporal priority of non-being over being and the cyclic feature of cosmic changes, become a cosmological foundation for Lao Zi’s anthropology, which shows a great suspicion towards the complexity of human civilization as I have examined at the beginning part of 5.1.

The following three quotations, together with chapter 40 which we have quoted above, will be very helpful for us in understanding how Lao Zi conceives of the cyclic feature of *Dao*’s creativity.

“What happens between heaven and earth is like a bellows! Emptying, yet it continually gives a supply. The more it is worked, the more it brings forth.” (Chapter 5)

“Attain the utmost vacuum (虛). Hold firm to the basis of Quietude. The myriad things arise and become together, but I watch how they return. Things, like plants, luxuriantly grow, but they all return to their roots. To return to the root is quietude. And this is returning to one’s destiny (命).”(Chapter 16)

“Reversion is the action of *Dao*. Weakness is the function of *Dao*. The myriad things under heaven are generated from being (有), and being is generated from non-being (無).” (Chapter 40)

Since the entirety of human civilization arises only after the “One” and “Two” stages of Lao Zi’s cosmology, there is no difficulty for us in understanding why Lao Zi’s social ideal as expressed in Chapter 80 tends to go back to the most primordial status of human society when little sociality is encouraged and almost no technology is used. For Lao Zi, this is the closest status of human existence to the most powerful/sublime manifestation of *Dao* in its “non-being” stage of the cosmic process. Correspondingly, we can also understand why Lao Zi entertains a great suspicion towards “ritual-propriety” and other humanistic Ru virtues, since these virtues also come “afterwards.”

In concluding this section on Lao Zi, I understand that one reason leading to Lao Zi’s cosmology and anthropology was the harsh social reality in the late Zhou Dynasty, and therefore, in this sense, Lao Zi indeed intended to end war and to help alleviate human suffering in his time using his unique way of thinking and acting. However, his distrust towards the humanistic Ru virtues, which aim for the continual flourishing of human civilization in a justifiable way, makes me entertain the idea that I formulated at

the beginning of this section 5.1: Lao Zi is a heroic/proto-Chinese thinker who is short on human civilization and culture.

5.2 The Ruist Cosmology in the Appended Texts of the *Classic of Change*

The Appended Texts (繫辭) of the *Classic of Change* (易經) is the most elaborated text of Ru cosmology in Ruism's classical period.²²³ Its role for the Ru metaphysical tradition is so decisive that an extremely rich commentarial tradition of Ru cosmology throughout the entire Ru intellectual history, including Zhou Dunyi's Diagram of Ultimate Polarity, is based upon it.

However, once we open its first chapter, we will immediately feel the difference between this cosmology and its Daoist counterpart which, in Lao Zi's case, I have discussed above:

As heaven is noble and earth is humble, so (the status of) Qian and Kun are determined. As the high and the low places are displayed, so the dignified and the ignoble are positioned. As movement and repose are constant, so the firm and the mild are distinguished. As events are of different kinds, and things are classed in groups, so good and ill auspices are generated. As images are formed in heaven and shapes are formed on earth, so alternation and transformation appear.

Thus, the firm and the mild impact each other, and the eight trigrams interact with one another: as thunder and lightning stimulate, wind and rain fertilize, sun and moon move in their courses, and after cold comes heat. The *Dao* of Qian forms

²²³ This text was perhaps compiled between Mencius (372-289 B.C.E.) and Xunzi (313-238 B.C.E.); even so, the Ru tradition ascribed its authorship to Confucius himself. Although this ascription is continually debated, I tend to believe, relying on all evidences that we can gather today, that even if it was not actually written by Confucius, it is certain that this text was heavily influenced by Confucius' thought.

maleness, and the *Dao* of Kun forms femaleness. Qian conceives the great beginning, and Kun brings things to completion.

Qian can be known because of its easiness, and Kun is powerful because of its simplicity. Because it is easy, it is readily recognized. Because it is simple, it is readily followed. What is readily recognized is accepted, and what is readily followed brings effectivity. What is accepted can endure, and what brings effectivity can grow great. Endurance is the virtue of the worthy, while greatness is the enterprise of the worthy. Being easy and simple, the principles under heaven are grasped. Once the principles are grasped, success ensues.²²⁴

There are several key motifs underlying this opening chapter, all of which will be helpful for us in understanding the nature of Ru cosmology.

First, the text intends to explain how the philosophy implied by the text and symbology of the *Zhou Book of Change* (周易, *Zhou Yi*²²⁵) corresponds to reality. It tries to secure the authenticity of the *Zhou Yi*'s wisdom in regard to its truth value. For example, the first verse reads “As heaven is noble and earth is humble, so (the status of)

²²⁴ “天尊地卑，乾坤定矣。卑高以陳，貴賤位矣。動靜有常，剛柔斷矣。方以類聚，物以群分，吉凶生矣。在天成象，在地成形，變化見矣。是故，剛柔相摩，八卦相盪。鼓之以雷霆，潤之以風雨，日月運行，一寒一暑，乾道成男，坤道成女。乾知大始，坤作成物。乾以易知，坤以簡能。易則易知，簡則易從。易知則有親，易從則有功。有親則可久，有功則可大。可久則賢人之德，可大則賢人之業。易簡，而天下之理得矣；天下之理得，而成位乎其中矣。” Chapter 1, Part I, translation adapted by Bin Song from multiple sources. These sources mainly include Richard John Lynn, *The Classic of Changes: A New Translation of the I Ching as Interpreted by Wang Bi* (Columbia University Press, 2004) and Richard Butt, *The Book of Changes (Zhou Yi)* (Oxon: Routledge Curzon, 2002). The original Chinese text is according to Wang Bi 王弼, Han Kangbo 韓康伯, and Kong Yingda 孔穎達, 《十三經注疏 周易正義》, 北京: 北京大學出版社, 1999.

²²⁵ *Zhou Yi* (The *Zhou Book of Change*) was primarily a book of divination used in the Zhou Dynasty (1046-256 B.C.E.). *Yi Jing* (The *Classic of Change*) adds a series of Ruist commentaries to the *Zhou Yi* by early Ru thinkers, so that it afterwards became one of the most important classics in the Ruist canon.

Qian and Kun are determined.” Qian and Kun are the first two hexagrams of the Zhou Yi’s symbology. Each of them is attached to a text in the Zhou Yi to convey wisdom. Therefore, what this verse tries to tell is that both the symbols of Qian and Kun and their elaborated philosophy correspond to what happens in reality (i.e., to “heaven” and “earth”), and thus they are authentic. All similar verses (which, in my translation, are mainly the verses in the first paragraph) in this opening chapter can be read in this way.

Second, the opening chapter elucidates the basic teaching of Ru cosmology. Compared with Lao Zi’s Daoist cosmology, the most salient feature of the Ru understanding of the cosmos is that this Ru text doesn’t question what happened before the existence of heaven and earth. Instead, it focuses upon the “principle” (理, *Li*) underlying the *de facto* conditions of cosmic realities. Several points can be generalized about this Ru worldview: first, this is a world of order. Heaven and earth have their due positions, just as all the other natural phenomena such as thunder, lightning, wind and wind have their due classes, roles and positions in the constantly changing cosmic process. Second, this is a world of changes and constant creation, and the basic driving force for this constantly creative cosmic process is the interaction between what is firm (剛) and what is mild (柔). In reference to other chapters in the *Appended Texts*, we need to know that these refer to the *yang* and the *yin* forms of vital-energy (氣, *Qi*). In this opening chapter, the interaction of *yin* and *yang* vital-energies is furthermore elaborated as being manifested in the more intricate interactions among “the eight trigrams”, which in the *Zhou Yi* symbology symbolizes the power of eight natural phenomena such as thunder and lightning, wind and rain, etc. As a consequence, every interaction between

yin/yang vital-energy and among the eight trigrams, together with the concrete cosmic realities that these interactions give rise to, constantly run and function in the everlasting periodic course of the four seasons: “after cold comes heat.” The species of human beings is generated from this cosmic process, and because of this cosmic origin, human beings inherit the same two basic cosmic creative powers, the explorative Qian and the receptive Kun, and they will manifest these powers in the human world. Third, this constantly changing and creating world with its due order is intelligible for human beings. When the chapter says: “Qian is known because of its easiness, and Kun is powerful because of its simplicity”, it actually means that because the *Zhou Yi*, as a symbolic system which was invented by humans, has grasped the principles of realities, its system is easy and simple enough for human beings to study and understand such that its referred realities also become understandable. Underlying this confidence upon the authenticity of the book of *Zhou Yi* is clearly a commitment to the intelligibility of the entire created world.

The third major motif in this opening chapter of the *Appended Texts* is that of showing how people should use the book of *Zhou Yi*. In the last paragraph of my translation of this opening chapter, it teaches that through reading and pondering *Zhou Yi*, human beings will know the principle of cosmic changes, and therefore they should cultivate their virtues and expand their human enterprises. A humanistic emphasis concludes this opening chapter.

Among these three key motifs, the second one is the most relevant to the topic of this paper although the motifs each interrelate one with the other. In particular, the salient feature of Ru cosmology is that it doesn't speculate over the temporal beginning of

cosmic realities before the existence of heaven-earth and *yin-yang* vital-energies, puts it in sharp contrast with Lao Zi's cosmology in the *Dao De Jing*. However, in other verses of the Appended Texts, it also teaches that there is something called "Ultimate Polarity" which "creates" or "generates"²²⁶ (生, sheng) heaven/earth and *yin/yang* vital-energies. It seems that the creative sequence that concerns the *Appended Texts* is not the temporal one which is highlighted by the *Dao De Jing*. Therefore, in order to fully explain the nature of Ru cosmology, in the remaining part of this section, I will cite other chapters of the *Appended Texts*, and illustrate its rich and deep connection with Ru anthropology.

I, "Birth Birth is Called the Change" (生生之謂易)

The fact that the *Appended Texts* doesn't speculate over the temporal beginning (or the end) of the cosmos is highlighted the following chapter:

"Hence, what is beyond shape is called the *Dao*, and what is under shape is called a utensil-like thing. Transforming and trimming things is called alternation. Stimulating and implementing things is called going through. Taking and applying them to all people under heaven is called the enterprise."²²⁷

From this chapter it is clear that although the *Appended Texts* doesn't focus much attention on the temporal beginning of the cosmos "before" the existence of heaven and earth, it does care what is "beyond" and "under" shape. In other words, a horizontal and

²²⁶ I have a discussion about rendering 生 as either "create" or "generate" at the end of Chapter Five. Prior to that point, I have no preference between these two words for translation purposes. Also, according to context, I may translate 生 as "create," "generate" or "give birth to." Regardless, 生 means the same thing for Ru cosmology: something determinate spontaneously emerging from something else.

²²⁷ "是故，形而上者謂之道，形而下者謂之器。化而裁之謂之變，推而行之謂之通，舉而錯之天下之民，謂之事業。" Chapter 12, Part I, the *Appended Texts*, Part I.

temporal vision is eclipsed by a vertical and non-temporal one that is vividly portrayed by the spacial prepositions “beyond” and “under.” In regard to the details of the quoted chapter, it defines what is under shape as a utensil-like thing. This is understandable because a thing, like a utensil, always has its form and shape, and in the human world, it is also potentially fit for a particular human use. However, what the “*Dao*” means when it is said as being “beyond” shape is not entirely clear from this chapter. But we do know that the latter part of this chapter urges people to rely upon their knowledge of both the “*Dao*” and the “utensil-like” things to “alternate”, to “go through”, and to “apply” things to the human world in order to expand human enterprise. Again, the humanistic emphasis underpins, and therefore we should also find clues to parse out what the “*Dao*” refers to in other resonating chapters of the *Appended Texts*.

Another chapter I will quote is Chapter 5 in Part I of the *Appended Texts*, and in my view, this is a more careful explanation of the term “*Dao*” mentioned in Chapter 12:

One *Yin* and one *Yang*, this is called *Dao*. What continues the *Dao* is called goodness, and what the *Dao* forms is called nature. Humane (仁, *ren*) people see it and call it ‘being humane,’ while wise people see it and call it ‘being wise.’ Ordinary people use it daily, but don’t know what it is. Hence, the *Dao* of the noble person is exceptional. It shows itself within the virtue of Humaneness, and hides itself within its functions. It brings the myriad things into being and becoming, but it doesn’t share the same worries and anxieties as the Sages.’ It has the sublime virtue and pursues the greatest enterprise.

Being rich and all-encompassing, this is called great enterprise. Being renewed on a daily basis, this is called sublime virtue. Birth Birth, this is called the Change. Forming images, this is called Qian. Imitating laws, this is called Kun. Calculating the numbers up to their ultimate, and knowing accordingly the future, this is called divination. Penetrating into the alternations of things, this is called the management of affairs. What cannot be fathomed by *yin* and *yang* is numinous and wonderful.²²⁸

The first verse in this quote, “one *Yin* and one *Yang* (一陰一陽), is called *Dao*” which resonates with “sun and moon move in their courses and after cold comes heat (一寒一暑)” in Chapter 1. As I discussed above, the basic feature of Ru cosmology indicated in the opening chapter is that, within the *de facto* conditions of cosmic realities which take place spatially between heaven and earth and temporally during the endless course of the four seasons, one of the most generic characteristics of cosmic realities is that they are constantly changing and creating. Furthermore, within these *de facto* conditions of constantly changing and creating cosmic realities, there are layers of “principles” that explain why and how these changes take place: they are the interactions of *yin/yang* vital-energies, and its more intricate manifestations in the interactions among eight natural phenomena. Among these principles, the one of *yin/yang* is obviously the most generic since beyond the terms of *yin/yang* there are no others that can capture the basic

²²⁸ “一陰一陽之謂道，繼之者善也，成之者性也。仁者見之謂之仁，知者見之謂之知。百姓日用而不知，故君子之道鮮矣。顯諸仁，藏諸用，鼓萬物而不與聖人同憂，盛德大業至矣哉。富有之謂大業，日新之謂盛德。生生之謂易，成象之謂乾，效法之為坤，極數知來之謂占，通變之謂事，陰陽不測之謂神。”

determinations of cosmic realities. In this sense, it is reasonable for us to infer that “one *yin* and one *yang* is called *Dao*” actually refers to the most generic principle that underlies the constantly creative cosmic realities: the interaction of *yin/yang* vital-energy is the furthest to which human intelligence can reach in order to describe and explain the determinate changes that the “shaped” cosmic realities undergo. Considering all the conceptual subtleties and intricacies that are developed in the later Ru intellectual history, I tend to agree with Zhu Xi that the “*Dao*” mentioned in the context of the *Appended Texts* refers to “principles” (理, *li*)²²⁹ that describe and explain how cosmic realities constantly change and create.

Apart from this point, there are others in Chapter 5, Part I that will be helpful for us in understanding the nature of Ru cosmology.

First, Ru cosmology pays more attention to the vertical relationships between *Dao* as principles and the *Dao*-governed utensil-like things than to the stages within the horizontal unfolding of cosmic changes. This differentiates it from the *Dao De Jing*'s Daoist cosmology. Another even more important difference arises when we compare the holistic feelings and insights that these two texts express about the constantly changing cosmos. Although Lao Zi's cosmology is also undoubtedly processual, his commitment to the “reversion is the action of *Dao*” makes him consider the movement of the entire universe as constantly returning to its root in “non-being.” As I analyzed above, this cyclic idea about cosmic changes legitimizes Lao Zi's method of human self-cultivation and statecraft centering upon the “attainment of vacuum and quietude” (虛靜) and “non-

²²⁹ I will provide a detailed explanation about how we should translate 理 into English in the section on Zhu Xi in the next chapter.

action” (無為) in the profoundest, cosmological sense. However, in face of the processual cosmos, the Ru text’s reading is that this process is periodic, since its *de facto* conditions from the human perspective take place in the endless course of four seasons. However, the process is not cyclic. It is actually an endless process of advance into novelty. Therefore, instead of thinking “reversion is the action of *Dao*,” the Ru text says, “birth and birth is called the Change,” “Being renewed on a daily basis, this is called sublime virtue” (Chapter 5, Part I), and “The great virtue of heaven and earth is creativity” (天地之大德曰生, Chapter I, part II). Correspondingly, the ideal of human existence conceived by the Ru text is also very different from Lao Zi’s ideal of “attainment of vacuum and quietude” and “non-action.” Since the entire cosmos is constantly creating, in the Ru text’s view, human beings should also become “rich and all-encompassing,” and then “expand” their greatest “human enterprise.” In other words, human society ought to continually flourish in its own all-encompassing and harmonious way. From a comparative perspective, it is hard to assess which one is truer between the different views towards the processual cosmos presented by the *Dao De Jing* and by the *Appended Texts*, since such an assessment in a modern context will heavily rely upon the most updated achievement of scientific cosmology, although I believe both these metaphysical views could be interpreted by their followers in a way which would be compatible with modern science.²³⁰ However, in regard to the efficacy of the cosmological legitimization of humanistic values, in my view, the *Appended Texts*’ does better than the *Dao De Jing*.

²³⁰ I will have a more elaborate view concerning this issue in my analysis of Zheng Xuan’s cosmological thinking in a later section.

This is because, first, whether there really is a temporal beginning of the cosmos or not (which beginning, according to Lao Zi's conception, could be either an undifferentiated whole of being or an absolute vacuum of non-being), the further determination and complexification of the cosmic process fits perfectly with the Ru understanding of the cosmic process as an endless advance into novelty. In this sense, Lao Zi's speculation on the beginning of the cosmos is not quite as informative as the Ru cosmology, and therefore, the Ru cosmology is more inclusive than Lao Zi's. This is so since the former can lead to varying possible conceptions of the beginning of the cosmos without hurting its own key cosmological insight. Second, corresponding to the inclusiveness of the Ru cosmology, the Ru method of statecraft and human self-cultivation also has the potential to be more inclusive. In order for human society to thrive on its own terms and in an harmonious way, "refraining from government" in Lao Zi's "non-action" style will be a viable strategy if some respects of the development of human society overrun their due measure for maintaining an harmonious relationship among fellow humans or with nature. However, this should be taken as one instance of the more inclusive and progressive strategy that human beings ought to cooperate with each other and rely on our unique moral, intelligent, and practical resources for choosing all kinds of means to continually thrive. In the terms of the *Appended Text*, this more inclusive strategy is called "being continually adjusted and adapted according to the changing situations" (唯變所適, Chapter 8, Part II). Again, a deep appreciation for the uniquely human efforts leading to the sustainable prosperity of human civilization underpins the Ruist text.

The second point in Chapter 5, Part I of the *Appended Texts*, which can illustrate the nature of Ru cosmology and anthropology is that, compared to that of Lao Zi, this text has a more sophisticated view towards the relationship between cosmology and anthropology. In Lao Zi's case, the relationship is straightforward because the *Dao*'s action is constantly reverting to the "non-being" root which, due to its temporal priority over all following statuses of cosmic realities, is more powerful than any form of "being." As a consequence, human beings also ought to refrain from governing and so attain the spiritual status of great vacuum and quietude. However, the Ruist conception of the relationship between the cosmic *Dao* and the human world is not so straightforward. On the one hand, the Ru text acknowledges that the "goodness" of human nature, which is summarized by the Ru tradition as the virtue of "Humaneness" (仁, ren), is inherited (繼) from the constant creativity of the cosmic *Dao*. On the other hand, the relationship between the two is not uncomplicated. First, the cosmic *Dao*'s power is so much beyond human power that during the process of constant cosmic creation which virtually benefits all creatures, the *Dao* "doesn't share the same worries and anxieties of the Sages." This means that the *Dao*'s function, compared to human standards, is effortless. It has no contrivance, and no speculation, and is without any human-like plan or purpose. In a word, the cosmic process is a natural one of spontaneous emergence. The inexhaustible fertility of *Dao*'s spontaneous creativity is conceived of by this Ru text as one of the most sublime manifestations of the cosmic *Dao*'s creative power, transcending even that of the Sages, the personality model for the Ru idea of human moral self-cultivation. On the other hand, even if the cosmic *Dao*'s creativity transcends that of human beings, it still

will not come to exist in the human world automatically without further human efforts. In Chapter 8, Part I, the text says: “Sages could see all activities under heaven and after observing how they gather and run forward, the sages perform norms and rituals”; in Chapter 8, Part II, after similar emphasis upon the importance of social norms and rituals, the text also says, “if not through human beings, the *Dao* cannot be carried over automatically (in the human world).” (苟非其人，道不虛行) In other words, although the Sages’ human efforts leading to the continual harmonization and thriving of human society are much less effortless than what the power of the cosmic *Dao* reveals in its creating and sustaining of the entire universe, the sages still need to harmonize human society primarily from a human standpoint and thus manifest the cosmic *Dao* within the human world in a particularly human way. In this sense, what humans do in regard to inheriting and continuing the creativity of the cosmic *Dao* is to add uniquely human values to the non-human natural world and thus, manifest the cosmic creativity of *Dao* in a particularly human, that is humane, way.

Based upon this analysis, I would like to categorize the Ruist conception of the relationship between the cosmic *Dao* and the human world as one of escalated continuum and manifesting unity. “Escalated continuum” means the conditions of the human world are continuous with the non-human natural world, but what human beings try to achieve is to harmonize the need of a thriving human society with its natural environment, and thus to add unique humanistic values to the non-human natural world. Meanwhile, the relationship is also one of “manifesting unity.” This is because the cosmic *Dao*, which functions in both the non-human natural and in the human worlds, must be manifested in

the human world through the aforementioned human efforts; nevertheless, the cosmic *Dao*'s transcending creative power can also be taken to be an ideal that the human efforts continually follow, but can never fully realize. An immediate existential pay-off from this Ru idea of the sophisticated relationship between what is transcendent and what is immanent is that we will understand if human beings do well, this will make the cosmic *Dao* manifested more fully in the human world. If human beings do badly, this will not hurt the sublimity of the transcendent creative power of the cosmic *Dao* in any way since the *Dao* will always be as it is and its creative power will always be so all-encompassing that it does not center upon human interests or yield to human understanding. However, if human beings do badly, this will definitely cause the cosmic *Dao* to be manifested badly in the human world. In comparison to the tradition of *creatio ex nihilo* that our study has tried to grasp in previous chapters, we find that there is less tension concerning the problem of evil in the *Appended Texts*. One reason for this is that the distinctive Ru understanding of the relationship between the non-theistic cosmic Way and the human Way does not make the problem of theodicy as recalcitrant as in the tradition of "*creatio ex nihilo*." We will get back to this point in Chapter 7 of this study, which will constitute our final concluding comparison between the two traditions.

II "Ultimate Polarity Creates Two Modes" (太極生兩儀)

Since we have explained the general nature of Ru cosmology and anthropology, we are now more prepared to analyze one quintessential chapter of Ru cosmology whose influence upon the later Ru intellectual history cannot be overestimated. This is Chapter 11, part I:

Thus, closing a door is called Kun and opening a door is called Qian. Closing and Opening is called alternation. Endless backing and forthing is called penetration.

What can be perceived is called an image. Given shape it is called a utensil.

Putting it into use is called imitation. Using this for all the people's sake whether they go outside or come inside is called what is wonderful (神).

Thus, there is Ultimate Polarity in the Change. Ultimate Polarity creates two modes. Two modes create four images. Four images create eight trigrams. The eight trigrams define good and ill fortune. Good and ill fortune give rise to the great enterprise.

Therefore, the image to imitate is no greater than heaven and earth. No alternation or penetration is greater than four seasons. No bright image in the sky is greater than the sun and moon. No honor or rank is greater than wealth and nobility.

Preparing things for use, making utensils and techniques for the benefit of all under heaven, no one can achieve more about these than sages.²³¹

²³¹ “是故，闔戶謂之坤；闔戶謂之乾；一闔一闢謂之變；往來不窮謂之通；見乃謂之象；形乃謂之器；制而用之，謂之法；利用出入，民咸用之，謂之神。是故，易有太極，是生兩儀，兩儀生四象，四象生八卦，八卦定吉凶，吉凶生大業。是故，法象莫大乎天地，變通莫大乎四時，縣象著明莫大乎日月，崇高莫大乎富貴；備物致用，立成器以為天下利，莫大乎聖人。” From this passage and other passages from the *Appended Texts* quoted above, readers will have a sense of the relationship between the concept of *Tian* (the cosmos, or heaven) and the one of *Taiji* (Ultimate Polarity) in Ruist metaphysics. *Tian* definitely has multiple meanings, some of which have been addressed by us in Chapter One, especially in the section on Tu Wei-ming. However, as the broadest category in an ontological sense, *Tian* refers to an all-encompassing constantly creative cosmic power or field that creates and contains everything in the universe. Within this all-encompassing cosmic field, the *Appended Texts* expounds multiple layers of ontological principles (li) to explain the order and existence of cosmic beings, such as two modes, four images, and eight hexagram, etc. Among all these ontological principles, the one of *Taiji* is the highest, which is thought of by this passage as the singular ontological principle generating everything else in the universe. In this sense, if *Tian* is understood as an all-inclusive container, *Taiji* will be what creates this container; if *Tian* is understood as the all-encompassing creative power, *Taiji* is where this power ultimately derives. Because of the ultimate status of *Taiji*'s creative power in Ruist metaphysics,

The first and the second paragraphs of this chapter in my translation resonate with the Ru cosmological picture which is foreshadowed in the opening and other related chapters, so it will be helpful to recapitulate it here:

The Ru cosmology pays close attention to the *de facto* conditions of cosmic realities which are conceived by humans to be taking place in the spatial realm between heaven and earth and in the temporal framework of the periodic course of the four seasons. One basic characteristic of cosmic realities is that they are constantly changing and creating, i.e., advancing into novelties. Meanwhile, the Ru cosmology tries to pinpoint layers of principles (理) within the cosmic realities for the purpose of 1) describing and explaining such a cosmic process, and 2) grounding humanistic ethical values in their cosmological foundation, and 3) discovering leveraging realities as instruments in order to realize the humanistic values in the human world.

Based upon this general Ru cosmological view, it seems that paragraph 2 of Chapter 11, Part II intends to find a singular principle within a system of cosmic principles so as to fulfill all the aforementioned purposes simultaneously. In this sense, the distinctive Ru effort for grounding humanistic moral values upon their cosmological foundation hits its apex in this paragraph.

In order to understand this cryptic passage, the first thing for us to notice is that the “change” mentioned here, as in other similar cases in the *Appended Texts*, refers both to the book of *Zhou Yi* as a symbolic system and to the cosmic realities that this system

all our discussions and comparisons in the later parts of the dissertation will mostly focus upon the concept of *Taiji*.

intends to symbolize. Therefore I used a capital C to highlight its two-fold meaning. Zhu Xi once illustrated the symbology that this passage tries to convey in the following chart, and I believe Zhu Xi's intention, backed up by a long commentarial tradition of Ru metaphysics, is true to the one in the original text:

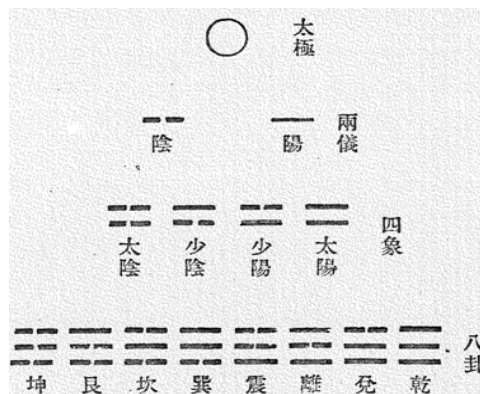


Figure 1, Trigrams are formed from the Ultimate Polarity and *yin/yang yao*²³².

²³² A detailed explanation can be found in Zhu Xi, *Introduction to the Study of the Classic of Change (I-Huseh Ch'i-meng)*, trans. by Joseph A. Adler, (Provo, Utah: Global Scholarly Publications, 2002): 16-17. In reliance upon this visual figure of Ultimate Polarity, it is also fit to discuss my translation of *Taiji* 太極 as “Ultimate Polarity.” My reader, Prof. Stephen Angle, inspired by another scholar John Makeham, challenged my translation using the reason that “Polarity” implies duality. Because it implies duality and *Taiji* is beyond duality as it is thought of by major Ru thinkers as what is generating yin and yang vital energies, “Polarity” is not a fit translation. However, in response, my reasons for the translation are as following: (1) In physics, the polarity of a field can mean that all the objects in the field share a vector feature that they are all directed towards some central referential spot. For example, in a system of polar coordinate, each object will be measured according to its distance and direction away from a singular origin. In this discussion, the primary meaning of “Polarity” is the shared vector feature of an indefinite amount of objects in a field which are all directed towards where the field centers upon. Obviously, each of this sort of system has one “pole” as the central origin, and thus, the concept of “Polarity” doesn’t primarily imply “duality.” (2) The Chinese 極 originally mean the ridgepole of a house that all other parts of the house rely upon. This original meaning corresponds very well to the English implication of “Polarity” discussed in (1) because if the house be seen as a field, all parts of this field will bear force of the ridgepole so that a 極 of a house indicates the feature of polarity of the house. (3) Since “polarity,” both in English and Chinese, can indicate the feature of a field that an indefinite amount of objects in the field are all conditioned by a central referential spot, it can be very fit to translate 太極. 太極, according to my analysis in the following chapters and as it is shown by Figure 1, is the singular ultimate creative act that everything else in the universe derives from and relies upon. It therefore indicates the “Ultimate Polarity” of the entire universe. (4) An extra benefit of translating 太極 as “Ultimate Polarity” is that 無極 will be rendered

From this chart we can see that the mentioned creative sequence among Ultimate Polarity, two modes, four images and eight trigrams, from the perspective of *Zhou Yi*'s symbology, describes how the figures of the eight trigrams are generated from the *yao* (爻) of *yin* and *yang* which are represented respectively by a broken and a solid line. As a consequence, we also know that the relationships among these four layers of *Zhou Yi*'s symbolism is primarily mathematical: the addition of the same geometrical figure (the broken or solid line) upon another in an alternative way generates another new geometrical figure. In other words, although the actual drawing of these symbols needs time, their relationship is logical, and thus is non-temporal.

Understood as such, it will be intriguing for us to ponder what these symbols refer to ontologically. "Eight Trigrams" refer to thunder, lightning, wind, rain, sun, moon, etc. These are the eight basic natural phenomena that are partially mentioned in the opening chapter and will be fully illustrated in another commentary "说卦" (*Discourse on Trigrams*) of *Yijing* which was probably composed in the same time period as the *Appended Texts*. According to contexts in the *Appended Texts*, "Four Images" is more than probably a reference to "four seasons", while "two modes" refer to heaven and earth,

accordingly as the "Non Polar" feature of "Ultimate Polarity," that is, 無極 is not different from 太極 and it just indicates the feature of ontological unconditionality of 太極 as the ultimate creative power. However, if we translate 太極 as "great ultimate" or "supreme ultimate," we will have to translate 無極 accordingly as "non ultimate". Because "non ultimate" may have a misleading connotation that the ultimate creative power of 太極 is not real, it would be suggestible that we would not use "non ultimate" in translation, and thus, not use "supreme ultimate" or "great ultimate" as a consequence.

or *Yin/Yang* vital-energies. Actually, because heaven and earth can be seen as one manifestation of the *Yin/Yang* vital-energies, it will be safer for us to generalize that “two modes” refers to *yin/yang* vital energies.

Moreover, one extremely important question will be to understand what kind of “creative relationship” obtains among these cosmic realities designated as *yin/yang* vital-energies, four seasons, and eight natural phenomena. Is it a relationship of cosmological succession as is emphasized in the *Dao De Jing* text? No. That is because, first, cosmological succession doesn’t belong among the most important issues in the Ru cosmology in general. Second, the relationships among these four layers of cosmic realities are synchronic. This is very clear since cosmic realities are conceived by this Ru text as always taking place between heaven and earth and in the course of four seasons. This means that the relationship between “two modes” and “four images” is vertical, rather than horizontal. The third crucial reason for us to conclude is that the creative sequence mentioned here is not one of cosmological succession and that, as I explained earlier, the corresponding symbolical reference of the creative sequence is mathematical, logical and thus, non-temporal. This makes us more certain that the ontological reference of this creative sequence also enjoys a similar relationship.

Based upon these considerations, I conclude that the creative sequence among the principles of cosmic realities mentioned in this passage is one of ontological dependence, rather than cosmological succession. This conclusion will immediately place the Ru cosmology in its correctly similar terms with the ontological Greek-European Christian tradition that derives from Plato’s effort to seek an overall explanation of the existence

and order of the world by investigating the logical structure of human “words,” and is typically represented by the Neo-Platonic idea of “chain of being.” Therefore, the conclusion will lay a strong foothold with which we can compare the Ru cosmological tradition with that of “*creatio ex nihilo*.” A further point we need to emphasize is that the relationship of ontological dependence prevalent in these four layers of principles for cosmic realities expands our understanding of the cryptic phrase, “Birth Birth” mentioned in Chapter Five. Now, we know that when cosmic changes are described as a process of “Birth Birth” in Ru cosmology, this phrase contains both its cosmological and ontological references: cosmologically, the cosmos is a horizontal process of endless advance into novelty; ontologically, all cosmic realities depend upon the creative power of cosmic principles such that the process of cosmic creation can also be thought of in a vertical way.

Nevertheless, in order to more adequately unpack the implied Ru cosmology here, the remaining crucial question remains, what is “Ultimate Polarity”? What does “Ultimate Polarity” mean in an ontological sense? Unfortunately, we get few clues to these questions in the text. The phrase, “Ultimate Polarity,” is only mentioned once, and there is no further explanation of the possible ontological reference for this phrase, either. But based upon our analysis, we can be sure of at least two points about “Ultimate Polarity.”

First, it cannot be the “formless thing” which blends everything together before the existence of heaven and earth, as it was described in the *Dao De Jing* (有物混成，先天地生). This is because, according to my above analysis, the relationship between

“Ultimate Polarity” and the “two modes” (heaven/earth and *yin/yang* vital-energies) is not temporal. This non-temporal relationship entails that even after *yin/yang* vital-energies are created, the creative power of Ultimate Polarity is still manifested within the *yin/yang* vital-energies. However, if “Ultimate Polarity” is construed as a “formless thing,” it will be very hard to affirm that this formless thing still functions after *yin/yang* vital-energies are formed and pervade the entire universe. More importantly, to construe “Ultimate Polarity” as “formless” is of no value for the Ru anthropology, since Ru anthropology does not endorse an unconditional practice of Lao Zi’s renunciatory style of “non-action.”

Second, although we don’t know from the text what “ultimate reality” refers to ontologically, we know that this phrase represents the distinctive Ru endeavor to find a singular principle on the basis of the *de facto* conditions of the constantly changing cosmic realities in order to explain both the origin and the order of these realities. We also know that the relationship between “Ultimate Polarity” and cosmic realities is one of ontological dependence, rather than cosmological succession. In this sense, although we do not yet know whether the Ru metaphysical tradition initiated by this seminal Ru cosmological text shares similar insights to its “*creatio ex nihilo*” counterpart in the Greek-European Christian tradition, we do have reason to expect that the Ru tradition can at least furnish some ontological considerations which are comparable to the Western ones. One very important example I will use here to illustrate this point is from chapter 12, part I, and I think this chapter addresses the issue of the asymmetrical relationship

between ultimate reality and derived realities that has been solidly addressed in the tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*”:

The Master said: Writing does not fully convey speech. Speech does not fully convey meaning. Can we then not fully know the sages’ meaning? The Master said: the Sages established images to convey all meanings; set up hexagrams to convey truth and point out falsity; added texts to explain speeches; alternated and penetrated into things in order to bring benefits; drummed and danced to convey what is numinous and wonderful.

Qian and Kun, do they not constitute the core for the Change! When Qian and Kun form ranks, the Change stand in their midst, but if Qian and Kun were abolished, there would be no way that the Change could manifest itself. And if the Change could not manifest itself, this would mean that Qian and Kun might almost be at the point of extinction!²³³

The first paragraph of this chapter in my translation talks about an epistemological issue about how to convey truth and meaning. Meanwhile, the second paragraph is extremely interesting because this paragraph, based upon the ontological priority of “Ultimate Polarity” over “two modes,” actually indicates another important relationship between the two: epistemologically, the “two modes”, here Qian and Kun, is

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“子曰：‘書不盡言，言不盡意。然則聖人之意，其不可見乎。’子曰：‘聖人立象以盡意，設卦以盡情偽，繫辭以盡其言，變而通之以盡利，鼓之舞之以盡神。’乾坤其易之緼邪？乾坤成列，而易立乎其中矣。乾坤毀，則无以見易，易不可見，則乾坤或幾乎息矣。”

actually prior to “Ultimate Polarity,” which is the highest principle in the “Change.” In other words, the relationship between “Ultimate Polarity” and “two modes” is doubly asymmetrical: on the one hand, “Ultimate Polarity” is ontologically prior to “two modes” and all other derived cosmic realities, but on the other hand, it is only through “two modes” and other determinations of derived cosmic realities that we can know anything about “Ultimate Polarity.”

This understanding makes it more certain that my translation of the Chinese character 神 (shen) in this Ru text as “what is numinous and wonderful” is legitimate.

In Chapter 5, Part I, the text says that “what cannot be fathomed by *yin* and *yang* is 神”, and in other places, it frequently describes the inexhaustible and all-encompassing creative power of the cosmic *Dao* as 神 (chapter 9; chapter 11, part I; chapter 5, part II). Based upon the above analysis of the relationship among different principles, which are all termed as “*Dao*” by the Ru text since they are in a certain sense “beyond shape,” I claim that the reason that the power of “Ultimate Polarity” can be described as 神 is that its inexhaustible creative power is prior to, and thus ultimately transcending, what the basic human concepts, *yin* and *yang*, can reveal about the constantly creating cosmic process. Because of the unfathomability and fertility of Ultimate Polarity as the highest Ru principle of cosmic creativity, I have translated 神 as “what is numinous and wonderful.”

III. A Possible Reading of “*Creatio ex nihilo*” Into “Ultimate Polarity.”

Based upon my above analysis, it is legitimate for us to hypothesize that, given further reflection, “Ultimate Polarity” can be construed as a Ru version of “*creatio ex*

nihilo” based on the texts of later commentators. We will find that this was indeed the case in Wang Bi’s and Hang Kingbo’s commentaries.

However, is there any sign that the character, 無 (non-being), used in this Ru text can convey a vague sense of “ontological unconditionality” corresponding to what “*ex nihilo*” refers to in the Greek-Christian tradition?

In Chapter 4, Part I, the text teaches:

“What The *Book of Change* teaches comprehends all of heaven and earth’s transformations, and it never errs. It fulfills the intricate courses of the myriad things, without overlooking any of them. It fathoms the *Dao* of day and night with penetrative understanding. Therefore, what is numinous and wonderful is without locality (無方), and the Change has no shaped bodies to cling to (無體).”²³⁴

Here, the character 無 refers to the metaphysical, non-shaped, feature of the cosmic *Dao* that the *Book of Change* tries to grasp. In this context, the character can be seen as connoting the abstract, yet all-inclusive effectivity of cosmic principles in contrast to concrete shaped cosmic realities that these principles are intended to regulate.

In addition, Chapter 10, Part I teaches:

“The *Book of Change* has neither thought (無思) nor contrived action (無為). It is tranquil and motionless. However, once it is affected, it penetrates into all causes under

²³⁴ “範圍天地之化而不過，曲成萬物而不遺，通乎晝夜之道而知，故神无方而易无體。”

heaven. If the *Book of Change* doesn't derive from what is utmost numinous and wonderful under heaven, what else can achieve this?"²³⁵

In this passage, the 無 feature of the *Book of Change* means that since having grasped the most important principles of cosmic realities through the greatest human intelligent and practical efforts, the author of the Book as a human being may achieve a spiritual status enabling himself or herself to align perfectly with what happens in the cosmos, and thus, he or she can always respond appropriately to cosmic realities such that no contrived or inauthentic "thought" or "action" intervenes. In this sense, the character 無 here refers to the spiritual adeptness of a Ru virtuoso who can spontaneously respond to cosmic realities in an appropriate way.

From these two representative chapters in the *Appended Texts* where 無 is mentioned, we find that first, their use is very different from Lao Zi's, and second, which is more important, neither of these uses connotes a meaning similar to the "ontological unconditionality" in the Greek-European Christian sense of creation "*ex nihilo*."

Clearly enough, if the creativity of "Ultimate Polarity" could be construed as any sort of "*creatio ex nihilo*", the Ru tradition needed further reflection and more powerful conceptual tools. In the following sections of Chapter Five, I will try to show how this process transpired through interpreting related cosmological texts such as *Huai Nanzi*, *The Weft Book of the Change* (緯書), Zheng Xuan's commentary upon *The Weft Book of*

²³⁵ “易无思也，无為也，寂然不動，感而遂通天下之故。非天下之至神，其孰能與於此。”

the Change, up through Wang Bi's and Han Kangbo's commentaries on the *Dao De Jing* and the *Yijing*.

5.3 Converging Ruism into Daoism: Cosmology from *Zhuang Zi* to *Huai Nanzi*

In the above analysis of Lao Zi's cosmology, I generalized its cosmological sequence in chart like this:

“Non-being” (*Dao*) → One (the undifferentiated whole of “being”) → Two (*Yin/Yang* vital-energies; Heaven and Earth) → Three (Heaven, Earth, and Human Beings) → the myriad things.

But now we also specify that “non-being” in this chart means a great vacuum which holds its space and time while lacking the material stuff to fill in. Therefore, we can adjust the chart of the sequence this way:

Dao → “Non-being” (great vacuum) → One (the undifferentiated whole of being) → Two (*Yin/Yang* vital-energy; Heaven and Earth) → Three (Heaven, Earth, and Human Beings) → the myriad things.

According to Lao Zi's view, although the function of *Dao* runs through each stage in this sequence, its primeval existence in the “non-being” and the “undifferentiated whole” stages is thought to be more powerful and thus, authentic. More importantly, this more powerful and authentic function of the cosmic *Dao* constantly returns to itself in a cyclic way. For Lao Zi, this proves that the correct way of self-cultivation and statecraft in the human world is to retreat, to refrain, and thus, also to return.

In a comparative way, I will illustrate the Ru cosmology in the *Appended Texts* of the *Classic of Change* which centers on the relationship of ontological dependence

among ranks of cosmic realities as follows. Because of its mainly vertical orientation, the chart must be re-designed as follows:

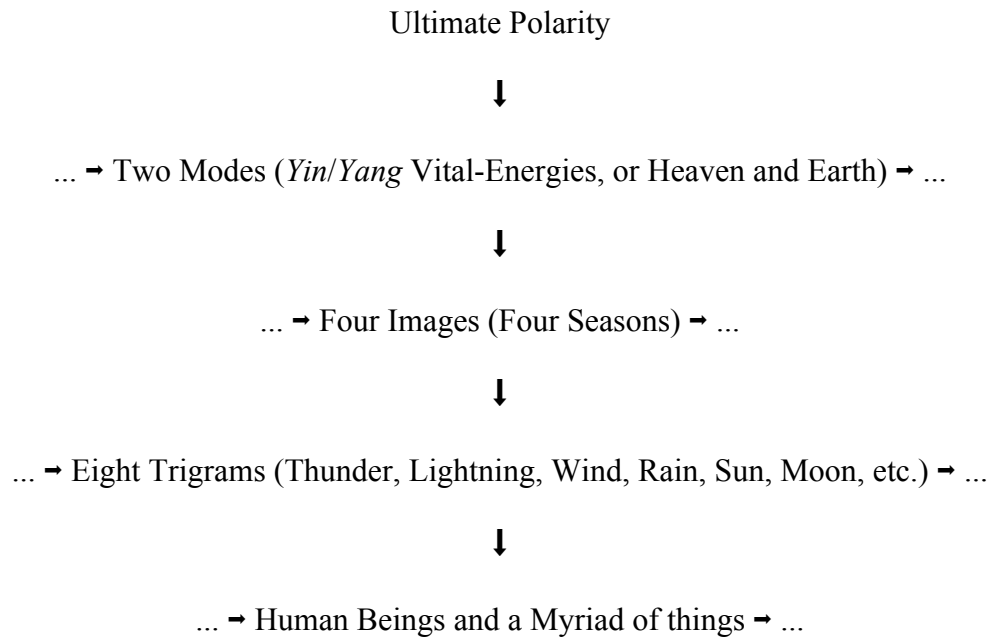


Figure 2: The Ruist ontological cosmology in the *Appended Text* of *Yijing*.

In this Ru cosmological chart, anything below “Ultimate Polarity” runs in an endless and periodic course, like the four seasons. The Ru cosmology calls the upper four layers of cosmic realities “principles” (理) or “*Dao*”, which is considered to be what brings order and existence to concrete cosmic realities such as human beings among a myriad of things. In comparison to Lao Zi’s cosmology, Ruist cosmology doesn’t speculate on the temporal beginning of the cosmos. It does not see the function of the cosmic *Dao* as being constantly recursive either. Instead, the endless advance of cosmic realities into novelty is its most generic feature, and Ruism’s major concern is to propel the continual flourishing of human society on its own terms and in a harmonious way

with the environing cosmos on the basis of human knowledge of the aforementioned principles.

Clearly enough, if being treated as a holistic system containing its cosmological and anthropological constituents, the Daoist *Dao De Jing* has a very divergent orientation from the Ruist *Appended Texts* of the *Classic of Change*. However, perhaps because the non-temporal and ontological feature of Ru cosmology in the *Appended Texts* is more abstract, and thus needs a more sophisticated mode of philosophical thinking to be unpacked, in my view this Ru cosmology had not yet been fully understood until Wang Bi (226-249 C.E.) and Han Kangbo (332-380 C.E.) who used their distinctive term, “non-being” (無), to interpret Ultimate Polarity after the Han Dynasty. This meant that mainstream ancient Chinese cosmology after the *Appended Texts* and until Wang Bi was actually Daoist, although the influence of the *Classic of Change* and its Ruist commentary coexisted. Hence, what happened to Chinese cosmology in this mainly Daoist period was that cosmologists tried to merge the Ru discourse on “Ultimate Polarity” into Lao Zi’s cosmology, and as a result, a variety of hybrid cosmologies were on offer. This entails that “Ultimate Polarity” could either be squared with one stage of the aforementioned Lao Zi’s cosmological sequence, or it could be interpreted according to the terms from Lao Zi’s text. In the following, I will use three texts as examples to explain this situation: *Zhuan Zi*, the *Lu Annals of Spring and Autumn* (also called the *Annals of Lu Buwei*), and *Huai Nanzi*. Among these three texts, the cosmology in *Huai Nanzi* was the latest, and accordingly was the most sophisticated. In my view, the cosmology of *Huai Nanzi* represents perfectly the aforementioned feature of mainstream

Chinese cosmology in the concerned period. Among these three texts, *Huai Nanzi*'s cosmology also had the greatest influence on Chinese cosmology's later development and led to the groundbreaking ontological thought of Wang Bi and Han Kangbo. Therefore, in the remaining part of this section 5:3, I will briefly examine the cosmologies of the first two of these texts, and will then focus upon *Huai Nanzi* to explain the transition from Chinese cosmological thinking to its next stage.

I. *Zhuan Zi* and the *Lu Annals of Spring and Autumn*

Ultimate Polarity, in the *Appended Texts*, is the ultimate ontological ground for all creatures which, in the Ru commentator's (this very probably refers to Confucius himself) view, are and come together in a *de facto* way in the spatial realm defined by heaven and earth and in the temporal sphere defined by an endless periodic course of the four seasons. Because this cosmological view doesn't concern itself with the temporal beginning of the cosmos, for people who cannot easily square this idea with an ontological mindset, "Ultimate Polarity" can be understood as a cap name which encapsulates all realities between heaven and earth. From the *Dao De Jing*'s perspective, this also means that "Ultimate Polarity" cannot exist prior to the existence of heaven and earth, and therefore it can only be located in a later stage of Lao Zi's aforementioned cosmological sequence.

This possible interpretation of Ultimate Polarity is represented in the text of *Zhuan Zi*:

This is the *Dao*: it is true and reliable, but it does no contrived action and has no shape. Its manifestations may be handed down, but its essence cannot be received.

Its manifestations may be apprehended, but its essence cannot be seen. It has its root and ground of existence in itself. Before there were heaven and earth, from of old, there It was, securely existing. From It came the mysterious existences of ghosts, from It came the mysterious existence of the supreme deity. It produced heaven; It produced earth. It was beyond (or before)²³⁶ the Ultimate Polarity, and yet cannot be considered high; It was below the six directions of all space, and yet cannot be considered deep. It was produced before heaven and earth, and yet cannot be considered to have existed long; It was older than the highest antiquity, and yet cannot be considered old.²³⁷

In this quotation, “heaven and earth”, just as in the case of the *Dao De Jing*, is to be thought of as being produced in a temporally later stage by the generative power of the cosmic *Dao*. Further, “Ultimate Polarity” is mentioned, together with the “six directions of all space.” and it is also thought of as being under the productive power of the cosmic *Dao*. Clearly enough, “Ultimate Polarity” is being treated as a cap name to encapsulate all formed realities between heaven and earth, and all together, these formed realities are thought of as being produced by the cosmic *Dao*. In this way, *Zhuan Zi*’s cosmological sequence, if it were to be fit into the original *Dao De Jing*’s sequence, would be portrayed as follows:

²³⁶ In the received version of *Zhuang Zi*, the character here is “before” (先), meaning “temporarily prior”; however, several contemporary commentators argue that the word here should mean “spatially beyond.” In my view, these different interpretations do not matter much to *Zhuang Zi*’s understanding of “Ultimate Polarity” according to my analysis which follows.

²³⁷ “夫道，有情有信，無為無形；可傳而不可受，可得而不可見；自本自根，未有天地，自古以固存；神鬼神帝，生天生地；在太極之先而不為高，在六極之下而不為深；先天地生而不為久，長於上古而不為老。” The Chapter of “Great Master” (大宗師) in the *Zhuang Zi*; translation is from James Legge, "The Writings of Chuang Tzu," 1891, which can be found at <http://ctext.org/zhuangzi>, retrieved on Feb. 11st, 2018; I have made minor changes on my own.

Dao → Non-Being (great vacuum) → One (the undifferentiated whole of being-as-becoming) → Ultimate Polarity which encapsulates the Two (*Yin/Yang* vital-energies; Heaven and Earth) → Three (Heaven, Earth, and Human Beings) → the myriad things.²³⁸

Besides the *Zhuang Zi*, an alternative way to interpret Ultimate Polarity in the *Dao De Jing*'s terms is represented by another text compiled in the late Warring-States period (475-221 B.C.E.) : the *Lu Annals of Spring and Autumn*.

There are two passages from the chapter of “Great Music” (大樂) in this text describing the “Ultimate One” (太一):

The origin of music lies in the distant past: it is born of measurement and founded by the Ultimate One. The Ultimate One brought forth the Two Modes; the Two Modes brought forth *Yin* and *Yang*. *Yin* and *Yang* metamorphize and transform,

²³⁸ Other verses in the *Zhuang Zi* that support this charted cosmological sequence include:

“At the great beginning, there is non-being. There is no name for this non-being. Then, the One arises, and there is no shape within the One.” (泰初有无, 无有无名。一之所起, 有一而未形) The following of this quote says: “物得以生谓之德; 未形者有分, 且然无间 谓之命; 留动而生物, 物成生理谓之形; 形体保神, 各有仪则谓之性。” (《天地》)

“At the beginning, there is no life. Not only is there no life, there is no shape, either. Not only is there no shape, there is no vital-energy, either. Mixed within what is obscure and fleeting, vital-energy is generated. After vital-energy changes, shape is generated. After shape changes, life is generated.” (然察其始而本无生; 非徒无生也, 而本无形; 非徒无形也, 而本无气。杂乎芒芴之间, 变而有气, 气变而有形, 形变而有生。) (《至樂》)

“The supreme door is non-being. Myriad things are generated from being, and being can't be generated from being anymore; it must be generated from non-being” (天门者, 无有也。万物出乎无有, 有不能以有为有, 必出乎无有。)(《庚桑楚》)

Here, *Dao De Jing*'s stage of the undifferentiated whole could be possibly interpreted using the term “primordial vital-energy” (元氣), which is a heavily used term in later Chinese cosmologies. Also, how the stage “One” in the *Dao De Jing* generates the later stages is conceived in a more sophisticated way. Nevertheless, it is obvious that the cosmology presented by *Zhuang Zi* follows the cosmology in the *Dao De Jing* in its basic form.

the one rising, the other falling, and then, they join together in a perfect pattern. Spinning and pulsing, if dispersed, they rejoin, and if joined, they disperse again. This is called the “Invariable Principle of *Tian* (天, Heaven).” Heaven and Earth turn like the wheel of a carriage. Reaching the end, they begin again; reaching their limit, they revert again, everything fitting the overall scheme. Sun, moon, planets, and constellations: some move fast, others slow, all in the completion of their movements. The four seasons alternately arise. Some hot, others cold; in some, the days are short; in others, long; sometimes they are soft, the other times hard. The myriad things that emerged were created by the Ultimate One and transformed by *Yin* and *Yang*.

Great Music brings delight, enjoyment, and pleasure to ruler and subjects, father and son, and old and young alike. Delight and enjoyment are born of equilibrium, and equilibrium is born of *Dao*. It is the nature of the *Dao* that when we look for it, it is invisible, and when we listen for it, it is inaudible, for it cannot be given form. Whoever is aware of the visible in the invisible, the audible in the inaudible, and the form of the formless almost knows it. The *Dao* is the supreme instance of the seminal essence, for it cannot be given shape or name. Forced to give it a name, I would call it “Ultimate One.”²³⁹

²³⁹“音樂之所由來者遠矣，生於度量，本於太一。太一出兩儀，兩儀出陰陽。陰陽變化，一上一下，合而成章。渾渾沌沌，離則復合，合則復離，是謂天常。天地車輪，終則復始，極則復反，莫不咸當。日月星辰，或疾或徐，日月不同，以盡其行。四時代興，或暑或寒，或短或長。或柔或剛。萬物所出，造於太一，化於陰陽。” and “大樂，君臣父子長少之所歡欣而說也。歡欣生於平，平生於道。道也者，視之不見，聽之不聞，不可為狀。有知不見之見、不聞之聞，無狀之狀者，則幾於知之矣。道也者，至精也，不可為形，不可為名，彊為之謂之太一。” Translation is from John

This text is clearly influenced by both the *Dao De Jing* and the *Appended Texts*.

Although it doesn't use the term "Ultimate Polarity," the way it describes "Ultimate One" as what generates "two modes" reminds us of the verses about "Ultimate Polarity" in the *Appended Texts*. In addition, the words it uses to describe the "Ultimate One" are also very similar to the ones used by Lao Zi to describe the second stage of *Dao De Jing*'s cosmogony: Ultimate One is formless and shapeless (混混沌沌); even though it is invisible, inaudible, and without any status, there is still something there which contains its "essence" (精). Clearly, this way of interpreting Ultimate Polarity positions it one stage earlier than *Zhuan Zi*'s case. Therefore, the cosmogony in the *Lu Annals of Spring and Autumn*, if we still use the *Dao De Jing*'s sequence as our basic format, can be portrayed this way:

Dao → One or Ultimate Polarity as renamed by "Ultimate One" (the undifferentiated whole of being-as-becoming) → Two (*Yin/Yang* vital-energies; Heaven and Earth) → Three (Heaven, Earth and Human Beings) → the myriad things.

Because Ultimate Polarity is seen in this text as the formless whole of being-as-becoming before this whole receives any further determination, the *Lu Annals of Spring and Autumn* can be seen as a precursor to interpreting Ultimate Polarity in terms of "primordial vital-energy" (元氣), which will be richly explored in the cosmologies dating from the Han Dynasty.

Knoblock and Jeffrey Riegel, trans., *The Annals of Lu Buwei* (Stanford University Press, 2001): 136-138; minor changes have been made. .

Unfortunately, after illustrating how these two texts understood “Ultimate Polarity,” I have to conclude that neither of them complies with this term’s basic semantic orientation in the Ruist *Appended Texts*. First, although the Ru text doesn’t speculate about the beginning of the cosmos before the existence of heaven and earth, the ontological priority of Ultimate Polarity over all derived realities determines that it can be squared with any sort of speculation about the cosmos’s temporal beginning. In this sense, it is unfair for us to accept that the *Zhuan Zi* takes “Ultimate Polarity” as just a cap name for all formed realities between heaven and earth, and to specify further that there are cosmological stages that are temporally prior to Ultimate Polarity. On the other hand, I have intimated earlier that the concept of the formless “primordial vital-energy” (元氣) was not entirely useful for Ru cosmology. This is because firstly, the speculation over primordial vital-energy tends to put it temporally prior to the existence of *yin/yang* vital-energies, heaven and earth, which, according to my above analysis, does not fit the ontological emphasis in the Ru text. Secondly, the Ru cosmology needs to articulate the orders, forms and regulative principles of cosmic realities, so that they can be used to legitimize Ruism’s anthropology which is heavy on humanistic moral values. In this sense, this idea of a formless whole of vital-energy which is temporally located before the existence of heaven and earth, can neither be taken as an ontologically prior sort of reality which is shared by all derived realities, nor does it have its moral pay-offs which can be made use of by Ruist ethics. Therefore, although the texts of the *Zhuang Zi* and the *Lu Annals of Spring and Autumn* try to combine the Ru cosmological elements, mainly the

concept of Ultimate Polarity, into the *Dao De Jing*'s Daoist cosmology, the result is actually to entirely lose the distinctive ontological feature of "Ultimate Polarity."

II The *Huai Nanzi*

A second text that I will use to explain the development of ancient Chinese cosmology later than the *Appended Texts* but before Wang Bi and Han Kangbo is the *Huai Nanzi*. The *Huai Nanzi* was compiled early in the Han Dynasty. I include this text in our discussion because the cosmology of the *Huai Nanzi*'s is a more systematic illustration of the theoretical tendency that is shown by middle and late Warring States texts such as *Zhuang Zi* and the *Lu Annals* of Spring and Autumn. The *Huai Nanzi* explains the cosmological sequence implied by the text of the *Dao De Jing* in a more elaborate way, while it simultaneously intends to square the Ru cosmological idea of "Ultimate Polarity" with this overall Daoist picture. In this sense, it can be seen as one of the most mature versions of ancient Chinese cosmology which contains both Daoist and Ruist elements, but which has not yet reached the "ontological" turning-point the way some post-*Huai Nanzi* texts will illustrate.

The *Huai Nanzi*'s cosmology is best illustrated in these two paragraphs:

When Heaven and Earth were yet unformed, all was ascending and flying, diving and delving. Thus it is called the Grand Inception (太昭, scholars also argue that it should be 太始). *Dao* produced Nebulous Vacuum (虛廓). The Nebulous Vacuum produced space-time (宇宙); space-time produced vital-energy (氣, *Qi*). A boundary divided the Vital-energy. That which was pure and bright spread out to form Heaven; that which was heavy and turbid congealed to form Earth. It

is easy for that which is pure and subtle to converge but difficult for the heavy and turbid to congeal. Therefore, Heaven was completed first; Earth was fixed afterward. The conjoined essences of Heaven and Earth produced *yin* and *yang*. The supersessive essences of *yin* and *yang* caused the four seasons. The scattered essences of the four seasons created the myriad things.²⁴⁰

Of old, in the time before there was Heaven and Earth: there were only images without shape. All was obscure and dark, vague and unclear, shapeless and formless, and no one knows its gateway. There were two spirits, born in murkiness, one that establishes Heaven and the other that constructed Earth. So vast! No one knows where their ultimate end (終極) is. So broad, No one knows where they finally stop. Therefore, they differentiated into the *yin* and *yang* and separated into the eight cardinal directions. The firm and the mild formed each other; the myriad things thereupon took shape. The turbid vital-energy became creatures; the refined vital-energy became humans.²⁴¹

Here, the stage before the existence of heaven and earth is named, “Great Inception” (太昭), and it includes three minor stages: Nebulous Vacuum, Space-time, and the

²⁴⁰“天墜未形，馮馮翼翼，洞洞瀾瀾，故曰太昭。道始生虛廓，虛廓生宇宙，宇宙生氣。氣有涯垠，清陽者薄靡而為天，重濁者凝滯而為地。清妙之合專易，重濁之凝竭難，故天先成而地後定。天地之襲精為陰陽，陰陽之專精為四時，四時之散精為萬物。”《淮南子 天文訓》。Translation is adapted from multiple sources, including Evan Morgan, *Tao, the Great Luminant: Essays from Huai Nan Tzu* (New York: Paragon Book Reprint Corp, 1969) and John Major, et al., *The Essential Huainanzi* (Columbia University Press, 2012). The original Chinese is from He, Ning 何寧, *淮南子集釋*, 北京: 中華書局, 1998 年.

²⁴¹“古未有天地之時，惟像無形，窈窈冥冥，芒芟漠閔，瀕蒙鴻洞，莫知其門。有二神混生，經天營地，孔乎莫知其所終極，滔乎莫知其所止息，於是乃別為陰陽，離為八極，剛柔相成，萬物乃形，煩氣為蟲，精氣為人。”《淮南子 精神訓》

Primordial Vital-Energy. Compared with Lao Zi's ambiguous argument in Chapter 40 and 42 of the *Dao De Jing*, the *Huai Nanzi* makes its cosmological sequence more explicit and organized. Still, let's use a chart to illustrate the *Huai Nanzi*'s sequence:

Dao → Great Inception (Nebulous Vacuum → Space-Time → Primordial Vital-Energy) → Heaven/Earth and *Yin/Yang* vital-energies → Four Seasons → Human Beings and the Myriad of Things.

So our next question is, What is the position of "Ultimate Polarity" in this cosmological sequence? In another chapter, the *Huai Nanzi* says:

All resemble their forms and evoke responses according to their class. The burning mirror takes fire from the sun; the square receptacle takes dew from the moon. Of all the things between Heaven and Earth, even a skilled astrologer cannot master all their techniques. Even a hand that can hold minutely tiny and indistinct things cannot grasp a beam of light. However, from what is within the palm of one's hand, one can trace (correlative) categories to beyond Ultimate Polarity (太極). Thus, the reason that one can set up (these implements) and

produce water and fire is because of the mutually responsive movement of the same *yin* or *yang* vital-energy (陰陽同氣相動).²⁴²

The gist of this chapter is an explanation of a law of mutual resonance among all things in the world, and this law is “the mutually responsive movement of the same *yin* or *yang* vital-energy.” In this way, when the text says that this law can even extend to the realm of reality that is “beyond Ultimate Polarity (太極之上),” the language used immediately reminds us of similar words in the *Zhuang Zi*: “It (*Dao*) was beyond (or before) the Ultimate Polarity, and yet could not be considered high; It was below the six directions of all space, and yet could not be considered deep.” (quoted above). In other words, “Ultimate Polarity” is taken to be the cap name which encapsulates all formed realities between Heaven and Earth, and according to the *Huai Nanzi*, the law of mutual resonance can be applied to anything in the realm of “Ultimate Polarity.”

Taking this into consideration, we can illustrate the *Huai Nanzi* cosmological sequence as follows:

²⁴² “各象其形類，所以感之。夫陽燧取火于日，方諸取露於月，天地之間，巧曆不能舉其數，手微忽怳，不能覽其光。然以掌握之中，引類於太極之上，而水火可立致者，陰陽同氣相動也。”《淮南子 覽冥篇》

Dao → Great Inception (Nebulous Vacuum → Space-Time → Primordial Vital-Energy) → Ultimate Polarity, which encapsulates Heaven/Earth and *Yin/Yang* vital-energies → Four Seasons → Human Beings and the Myriad of Things.

Quite obviously, this sequence is not very much different from *Zhuang Zi*'s.

Another proof which we can extract from the *Huai Nanzi*'s text to confirm this *Zhuang Zi*-like understanding of “Ultimate Polarity” concerns the “non-polar” feature of “Nebulous Vacuum”:

Contrast these with the Perfected: they eat exactly what suits their bellies, they wear precisely what fits their forms. They roam by relaxing their bodies. They act by matching their genuine responses to the situation. Having left the empire, they do not covet it; if entrusted with the myriad things, they do not profit from it.

They rest in the space of great vacuum, roam in the field of non-polarity, ascend Tai Huang, and ride Tai Yi (both are constellations). They play with Heaven and Earth in the palms of their hands...²⁴³

Here, the “space of great vacuum,” which implies the “nebulous vacuum” and “space-time” stages in the *Huai Nanzi* cosmology, is further characterized as “non-polar,” and it is to be thought of as prior to the existence of “Heaven and Earth.” Quite obviously, in the perspective of the *Huai Nanzi*, the “nebulous vacuum” can be seen as “non-polar” because it is formless. Comparatively, all formed realities that exist between

²⁴³ “若夫至人，量腹而食，度形而衣，容身而遊，適情而行，餘天下而不貪，委萬物而不利，處大廓之宇，遊無極之野，登太皇，馮太一，玩天地於掌握之中。”《淮南子 精神訓》

heaven and earth can be named in an encapsulating way as “Ultimate Polarity.” This is because they are all “formed.” Therefore, “non-polarity” and “Ultimate Polarity” correspond to stages of the *Huai Nanzi*’s cosmogony, which is essentially a *Dao De Jing* Daoist one. The stages within this cosmogony are differentiated from each other depending on whether the undifferentiated whole of being-as-becoming has already garnered any of its determinations or not. Interestingly enough, in this chapter of the *Huai Nanzi*, this cosmological rhetoric about “non-polarity” and “Ultimate Polarity” is used to argue for the superiority of pro-Daoist views of human self-cultivation and statecraft over the Ruist one, and this way of argumentation also resonates with the use of “non-being” and “being” in the *Dao De Jing*’s case.

III Temporary Conclusion

A temporary conclusion we can reach in regard to the further development of ancient Chinese cosmology after the *Appended Texts* of the *Classic of Change* is that, all these texts, the *Zhuang Zi*, the *Lu Annals of Spring and Autumn*, and the *Huai Nanzi*, are trying to incorporate the Ruist idea of “Ultimate Polarity” into the Daoist cosmology of the *Dao De Jing*. They either think Ultimate Polarity is the cap name representing all formed realities between Heaven and Earth, or they interpret it as the formless whole of primordial vital-energy. Unfortunately, according to my analysis, none of the interpretations of these texts has done justice to the distinctively ontological feature of the Ru idea of “Ultimate Polarity,” and therefore, during this incorporating process, this feature has almost become lost.

5.4 The Transition From Zheng Xuan's Commentary of *Qian Zao Du* to Wang Bi and Han Kangbo

After *Huai Nanzi*, another important text for us to understand how the ancient Chinese cosmological tradition gradually tilted from the *Dao De Jing*'s emphasis on cosmological succession towards the *Appended Texts*' emphasis on ontological dependence is the *Qian Zao Du* (乾鑿度, An Investigation into the Hexagram of Qian). In my view, it was Zheng Xuan (鄭玄, 127-200 C.E.)'s commentary on this text and the *Appended Texts* that cleaved the way for Wang Bi, who anchored the interpretation of the *Appended Texts*' Ruist cosmology in an ontological orientation²⁴⁴. In this section, I will first analyze the feature of *Qian Zao Du*'s cosmology, and then illustrate how Zheng Xuan commented on the text, and finally, I will show the transitional role of Zheng Xuan in preparing our understanding for Wang Bi.

I *Qian Zao Du*'s Cosmology

Qian Zao Du is one of the so-called “weft books” (緯書) which were probably compiled in the late period of later Han Dynasty (25-220 C.E.). As many other related “weft books”, *Qian Zao Du* belongs to a particular type of commentarial text on the *Classics of Change*. In general, this kind of commentary relies on the symbology, including the use of numbers and images, of the *Classics of Change* in order to formulate an all-encompassing “correlative cosmology,”²⁴⁵ which was mainly used for explanation and divination. Because of correlative cosmology's magical nature, “weft books” were,

²⁴⁴ My reading of Zheng Xuan greatly benefits from Cheng Qiang 程强's unpublished dissertation (2012). Though having different philosophical understanding of Zheng Xuan's thought in its varying points, I stand in line with Dr. Cheng's insight that Zheng Xuan's thought presaged Wang Bi's ontological works.

²⁴⁵ This term became well-known after A.C. Graham's sinological works.

most of the time, not accepted as mainstream Ruist teachings by Ru literati after the Han Dynasty. However, because “weft books” addressed many astronomical, geological, and scientific issues, they became an important resource for contemporary scholars to investigate similar topics in ancient Chinese thought. For our purpose, the cosmological model proposed by *Qian Zao Du* will be the most interesting and useful.

Because *Qian Zao Du* is a text straightforwardly based upon the *Yijing*'s symbology, it will be no surprise for us to see direct quotes from the *Appended Texts* in the *Qian Zao Du*'s text:

Confucius said the Change begins from Ultimate Polarity. Ultimate Polarity is divided into two, and so heaven and earth are generated. Heaven and earth have their due measure in spring, autumn, winter and summer, so the four seasons are generated. Every season has its division of *yin* and *yang*, the firm and the mild, so eight trigrams are generated. After eight trigrams are in line, the images of thunder, wind, water, fire, mountain and marshlands are established. Now, the Way of heaven and earth is set. The vital-energies in eight trigrams are completed, and then. ... a myriad of things are generated according to their classes.²⁴⁶

We observe that this paragraph is a careful paraphrase of Chapter 11, Part I in the *Appended Texts*. In particular, its ontological references of important terms such as

²⁴⁶ “孔子曰易始於太極，太極分而為二，故生天地，天地有春秋冬夏之節故生四時；四時各有陰陽剛柔之分，故生八卦。八卦成列，天地之道，立雷風水火山澤之象定矣，... 八卦之氣終則...萬物各以其類成矣。” No English translation is available. Translation is my own. The original version of the text is from “文淵閣本欽定四庫全書會要 經部 易緯 乾坤鑿度卷”，which can be found at <https://ctext.org/library.pl?if=gb&res=82579>, retrieved on May 9th, 2018.

“two,” “four,” and “eight trigrams,” resonate with what I have concluded above as the basis of an intra-textual analysis of the *Appended Texts*. However, the different cosmological orientation of *Qian Zao Du* shows itself immediately when the text asks about the temporal origin of Qian and Kun, which is not a question which concerns the *Appended Texts*. *Qian Zao Du* asks the question this way:

“Of old, the sages followed *yin* and *yang*, investigated ebb and flow, and established Qian and Kun in order to regulate Heaven and Earth. Because the shaped realities are generated from the shapeless, where do Qian and Kun come from?”

And *Qian Zao Du*'s answer is this:

Therefore, there are (stages of) Great Change (太易), Great Initial (太初), Great Inception (太始), and Great Plainness (太素). In the stage of Great Change, no vital-energy is seen. In the stage of Great Initial, vital-energy begins. In the stage of Great Inception, shape (形) begins. In the stage of Great Plainness, matter (质) begins.

Vital-energy, shape and matter are there, but are yet to be separated. Therefore, it is called the formless and shapeless (渾淪, *hunlun*). The term *hunlun* means that the myriad things are blended together and thus are not yet to be distinguished. Look, but it is invisible; listen, but it is inaudible; search, but it is intangible. It is therefore called ‘the Change’ (易). In the Change, there is neither shape nor boundary.

One is the beginning of the formation of shapes. What is light and clear ascends to become heaven; what is turbid and heavy descends to become earth. Things have their beginning, maturation, and death, so three strokes form the trigram of Qian. Qian and Kun are always formed in tandem, and *yin* and *yang* are needed to generate things; therefore, the doubling of the three strokes (trigrams) generates six strokes, and they are all the hexagrams.²⁴⁷

Please pay attention to how interesting this quoted text is in relation to other previous quotations: *Qian Zao Du* says: “Confucius said the Change begins from Ultimate Polarity, Ultimate Polarity is divided into two, and so heaven and earth are generated.” We discovered that this resonates with Chapter 11, Part I of the *Appended Texts*. However, in the *Appended Texts*, when it says there are Ultimate Polarity and other things in the Change, this means that there are layers of principles that can explain the existence and order of the *de facto* changing cosmic realities. The relationships among these different layers are vertical, rather than horizontal. Nevertheless, we now understand that, on the contrary, *Qian Zao Du*’s interpretation of the related chapter in the *Appended Texts*’ is facing in an entirely different direction. For *Qian Zao Du*, “There is Ultimate Polarity in the Change” (易有太極) means that there is a cosmological stage before the existence of heaven and earth, and this stage can be named either “易” (Change), “太極” (Ultimate Polarity) or “One”, which are further divided into three

²⁴⁷ “昔者聖人因陰陽，定消息，立乾坤，以統天地也。夫有形生於無形，乾坤安從生。故曰有太易，有太初，有太始，有太素也。太易者未見氣也，太初者氣之始也，太始者形之始也，太素者質之始也，烝形質具而未離，故曰渾淪。渾淪者言萬物相渾成而未相離，視之不見聽之不聞循之不得故曰易也易無形畔.....一者形變之始清輕者上為天，濁重者下為地，物有始有壯有究故三畫而成幹，生物有陰陽因而重之故六畫而成卦。”

stages: Great Initial, Great Inception, and Great Plainness. The addition of these three minor stages is equal to the first stage of “Change”, “Ultimate Polarity” or “One”, which is furthermore named as the stage which is “formless and shapeless” (渾淪, *hunlun*).

Before this stage of *hunlun*, Change, or Ultimate Polarity, there is another more original stage named “the Great Change,” which does not yet have any actual stuff to fill it in, and thus can be imagined to be a gigantic vacuum located at the beginning of the cosmos.

Still, let’s use a chart to illustrate this cosmological sequence:

Great Change → Change, or Ultimate Polarity, or *Hunlun*, or One: (Great Initial → Great Inception → Great Plainness) → Heaven and Earth, *Yin/Yang* Vital-Energies → Four Seasons → Eight Trigrams → Human Beings and the Myriad things.

Compared with the following sequence, illuminated in the *Lu Annals of Spring and Autumn*:

“*Dao* → One/Ultimate Polarity (the undifferentiated whole of being-as-becoming) → Two (*Yin/Yang* vital-energies; Heaven and Earth) → Three (Heaven, Earth, and Human Beings) → the myriad things”

The similarity with *Qian Zao Du* is that it equally interprets Ultimate Polarity as the primordial vital-energy that exists before Heaven and Earth but has not yet obtained any determination.

Compared with the following sequence illustrated by *Huai Nanzi*:

“*Dao* → Great Inception (Nebulous Vacuum → Space-Time → Primordial Vital-Energy) → Ultimate Polarity, which encapsulates Heaven/Earth and *Yin/Yang* vital energy → Four Seasons → Human Beings and the Myriad of Things,”

the difference from *Qian Zao Du* is that it doesn't place “Ultimate Polarity” after the stage of primordial vital-energy. However, *Qian Zao Du*'s ideas of “Great Change” and *hunlun* are clearly inspired by the *Huai Nanzi* in this way: 1) it puts the *Huai Nanzi*'s “Nebulous Vacuum” and “Space-Time” together in the first cosmic stage, renames it as “the Great Change” in order to indicate its temporal priority to the stage of “Change,” and then interprets it as a stage where no basic cosmic stuff (vital-energy) is yet produced. In other words, “the Great Change” is also a great vacuum. 2) The *Qian Zao Du*'s idea of “primordial vital-energy” is more detailed than the *Huai Nanzi*'s explanation because it contains three minor stages. The idea that vital-energy, its shape, and its material have not yet been fully differentiated from one another not only explains very well why this stage can be called *Hunlun* (渾沌, the formless and shapeless). The *Qian Zao Du*'s attention to both the “shape” and “material” aspects of vital-energy also makes the idea of basic cosmic stuff more textured.

Based upon these comparisons, and also because the compilation of the *Qian Zao Du* was temporarily near in time to the *Huai Nanzi*, we find that although the *Qian Zao Du* is a commentarial text upon the Ruist *Appended Texts*, its cosmology is still basically a Daoist one which emphasizes the sequence of cosmological succession among cosmic realities.

II. Zheng Xuan's Commentary on the *Qian Zao Du* and his understanding of Ultimate Polarity

Zheng Xuan was perhaps the most important commentator for the Ru tradition in Han Dynasty. Because the Han Dynasty is the formative period for the Ru textual tradition, many of Zheng Xuan's commentaries on the Ru texts have foundational value for the tradition's later growth. This can be surely said about his commentary on the *Classic of Change*.

In my view, one of the greatest values of Zheng Xuan's commentary on the *Classic of Change* is that he began to pull back the Chinese cosmological tradition from Lao Zi's emphasis upon cosmological succession to the ontological dependence of the *Appended Texts*, and so pave the way for Wang Bi's more elaborate exposition of Ru ontology. However, we will see in the following discussion that Zheng Xuan's understanding of "Ultimate Polarity" wasn't fully exempt from the overall influence of the Daoist tradition before him, and in this way, we can see Zheng Xuan as a transitional figure between the generally Daoist cosmological tradition and Wang Bi's and Han Kangbo's Ru ontology.

One sign of the transitional feature of Zheng Xuan's thought is his understanding of Ultimate Polarity, which is still very Daoist. In commenting on the verse, "There is Ultimate Polarity in the Change" in Chapter 11, Part I of the *Appended Texts*, Zheng Xuan says: "Ultimate Polarity means the vital-energy that is pure, harmonious, and yet to

be divided.”²⁴⁸ Similarly, in commenting on the verse, “Confucius said the Change begins from Ultimate Polarity” in the *Qian Zao Du*, Zheng Xuan says: “Ultimate Polarity refers to the time when images of vital-energy have not yet been divided, and this is the beginning point when heaven and earth are derived.”²⁴⁹ Therefore, Zheng Xuan is still interpreting Ultimate Polarity, in a way similar to the text of *Lu Annals of Spring Autumn* and the *Qian Zao Du*, as the undifferentiated primordial vital-energy, which, according to my analysis of the *Appended Texts*, is not quite the right fit for the Ru tradition.

However, when he comments on the several minor stages listed by the *Qian Zao Du*, some distinctive features emerge which show that his thought is beginning to tilt towards the ontological Ru tradition for understanding the *Appended Texts*’ cosmology.

In commenting on the verse “In the stage of the Great Change, no vital-energy is seen,” Zheng Xuan says: “This is named ‘Great Change’ because there is nothing, and only total quiescence remains.” (以其寂然无物故名之曰太易)

In commenting on the verse, “In the stage of Great Initial, this is the beginning of vital-energy”, Zheng Xuan says: “‘Great Initial’ is where the primordial vital-energy derives. Since nothing exists and only total quiescence remains in the Great Change, how can it generate this Great Initial? The Great Initial actually generates itself all of a sudden.” (元气之所本始，太易既自寂然无物矣，焉能生此太初哉？则太初者，亦忽然而自生)

²⁴⁸ Zheng Xuan, *Commentary on the Appended Texts*. This text is quoted from Lin Zhong Jun 林忠軍, *An Exposition on Zheng’s Learning of Zhou Yi* 周易鄭氏學闡微 (上海，上海古籍出版社 2005), 392. No English translation is available. The translation is my own.

²⁴⁹ “气象未分之时天地之所始也。” The version of Zheng Xun’s commentary on the *Qian Zao Du* is the same as the latter’s, and the translation is my own.

In commenting on the verse, “it is called the formless and shapeless (渾淪, *hunlun*),” Zheng Xuan says: “Although there are these three beginning stages, they are not yet distinguished from one another. This what Lao Zi means by, ‘Before heaven and earth existed, there was something that is a complete blend.’” (虽舍此三始而犹未有分判, 老子曰, 有物浑成先天地生)

In commenting on the following verse, “Look, but it is invisible; listen, but it is inaudible; search, but it is intangible. It is therefore called ‘the Change’ (易). In the Change, there is neither shape nor boundary,” Zheng Xuan says. “This means, during the time of the shapeless Great Change, the universe is like being contained in a great vacuum. It is silent and vast, and thus cannot be visible, audible or tangible. This is what the *Appended Texts* means by, ‘The Change has no shaped bodies to cling to.’” (此明太易无形之时, 虚豁寂寞不可以视听寻, 系辞曰易无体此之谓也。)

Since Zheng Xuan understands the stage of *Hunlun* mentioned in the *Qian Zao Du* according to Lao Zi’s “something that is a complete blend,” we know that Zheng Xuan is still speculating on the temporal beginning of the cosmos before the existence of Heaven and Earth. This locates him in the overall Daoist cosmological tradition which preceded him. However, when he comments on the relationship between the several stages before the existence of Heaven and Earth mentioned in the *Qian Zao Du*, we find some very interesting points.

First, he thinks that the stage of Great Change, which is understood as a great vacuum existing before any cosmic stuff is filled in, has no role whatsoever in generating

the stage of Great Initial where the primordial vital-energy was derived. He says in the above second quotation that, “Since nothing exists and only total quiescence remains in the Great Change, how can it generate this Great Initial? The Great Initial actually generates itself all of a sudden (忽然而自生).” It means that no matter whether there is a prior stage or not, the stage of Great Initial, which was the stage which refers to the *de facto* existence of vital-energy as the basic cosmic stuff from which all the myriad things are formed, can “generate itself.”

Second, if Great Change has no role whatsoever in generating its later cosmic stages, do we still need this idea? Zheng Xuan’s answer was yes. Nevertheless, the most interesting point for us is that the “Great Change” was no longer understood by Zheng Xuan to be a great vacuum existing before the stage of *hunlun*. Instead, in the previous quotation, Zheng Xuan interpreted “Great Vacuum” to be a feature within the stage of *hunlun*, and this feature can help to explain the shapeless and formless nature of the primordial vital-energy. Because Zheng Xuan cited the verse in the *Appended Texts*, “Change has no shaped bodies to cling to,” in order to illustrate the relationship between “the Great Change” and *hunlun*, we can conclude that the relationship between “non-being” (無) and “being” (有) in Zheng Xuan’s mind began not to be understood, in accordance with the *Dao De Jing*’s view, as two separate cosmic stages. Instead, they have become two different features which are referring to the same cosmic stage *hunlun*, and in this way, their relationship becomes distinctively ontological in a Ruist way of thinking.

We can further confirm Zheng Xuan's Ruist ontological understanding of the relationship between "Non-being" and "Being" with another commentary on the verse, "The Change has no shaped bodies to cling to," in the *Appended Texts*.

In commenting on this verse, Zheng Xuan says:

Dao has no locality, while *yin/yang* vital-energy have their localities. *Dao* has no shaped body, yet *yin/yang* vital-energy have their bodies. Because it has no locality, the *Dao* generates things and can be counted as what is wonderful.

Because it has no body, it can use numbers to make changes. What has locality is fixed in an upper or lower place, what has a shaped body is greater or smaller, and these are just things. However, what is called *Dao* doesn't stay away from things.

This is because there is no thing which is not a manifestation of *Dao*. Therefore, for *Dao*, it is not *yin/yang*, while it is not distant from *yin/yang* either. The *Dao* is where the myriad things are generated due to the constant succession of *yin* and *yang* vital energy. To imitate heaven but not earth, to imitate *yin* but not *yang*, this is not the way that the myriad things will follow.²⁵⁰

In this quotation, the relationship between *Dao*, which has no shaped bodies to cling to, and concrete things is understood in a strictly ontological way: first, cosmic changes are made through the succession of *yin* and *yang* vital-energy, and this is a manifestation of *Dao*'s generative power. However, *Dao*'s generative power transcends any *de facto* concrete cosmic changes and thus, can be characterized as a sort of "non-

²⁵⁰ “道，无方也，阴阳则有方矣。道，无体也，阴阳则有体矣。无方故妙物而为神，无体故用数而为易，有方则上下位矣，有体则大小形焉，是物而已。彼师天而无地，师阴而无阳者，皆万物所不由也。” Lin Zhong Jun, *An Exposition*: 400.

being”, since ontologically, it exists *a priori* rather than *a posteriori*. In this way, Zheng Xuan’s understanding of *Dao* follows the Ruist *Appended Texts*’ tradition: it is the cosmic principle that brings both order and existence to the *de facto* existing cosmic realities, and its relationship with cosmic realities is logical, ontological, and thus, vertical, rather than temporal, cosmological, and thus, horizontal.

Since this is the case, the last question for us to ask in order to understand Zheng Xuan’s thought is, why did he come up these changing ideas? What moved him from Lao Zi’s cosmology towards the Ruist ontology? The key sentence quoted above for marking off Zheng Xuan’s transition seems to be this one: “Since nothing exists and only total quiescence remains in the Great Change, how can it generate this Great Initial? The Great Initial actually generates itself all of a sudden.” In other words, Zheng Xuan finds it hard to explain how cosmic stuff could come out from a great vacuum where no stuff had yet been found to exist. Nevertheless, in my view, underlying this argument is a fundamental rethinking of Lao Zi’s cosmology under the influence of the Yijing’s ontology.

As I analyzed above, Lao Zi’s cosmological sequence in the *Dao De Jing* can be charted as the following:

Dao → “Non-being” (great vacuum) → One (the undifferentiated whole of being-as-becoming, “a thing that is a complete blend”) → Two (*Yin/Yang* vital-energies; Heaven and Earth) → Three (Heaven, Earth, and Human Beings) → the myriad things.

We also argued earlier that although this sequence begins from a stage of “non-being,” where nothing can be found, the function of *Dao* runs through all stages, and thus is consistent and persistent. In other words, it is “*Dao*,” rather than the stage of “Non-Being” *per se*, which creates all the cosmic stages. In this way, to posit a stage of pure nothing as the first cosmic stage really does not explain much about the inexhaustible generative power of the *Dao*. This is because no matter whether there is a temporal beginning or not, the *Dao* is always generating.

However, we do know why Lao Zi needs the stage of “Non-Being” and the stage of the formless One. That is because of his commitment to the cosmic principle, “reversion is the action of *Dao*,” and his corresponding idea that the cosmic process is cyclic and thus constantly returns to its “non-being” root in order to move forward again. For Lao Zi, this is the firmest cosmological foundation for his anthropological argument, which backs up the method of human self-cultivation, “attaining the uttermost vacuum and holding firm to quietude,” and the related statecraft for minimalist governance.

However, from the Ruist view illustrated in the *Appended Texts*, there are multiple reasons to reject some of the aforementioned key ideas in the *Dao De Jing*.

First, to posit a beginning cosmic stage of purely nothing doesn’t amount to much when explaining the eternally generative power of *Dao*. In this way, as I said above, even when seen from the perspective of Lao Zi, no matter whether there is a beginning or not, the *de facto* existing cosmic realities are always dependent upon the power of *Dao*. In other words, any philosophical discourse of the creative power of ultimate reality will finally center upon the idea of “ontological dependence,” rather than “cosmological

succession.” This is because the conceptual power of the former idea contains a variety of possibilities for the latter, and in this sense, it conditions the latter, and thus, is more ultimate. This has already been proved by the intellectual history of “*creatio ex nihilo*,” and we can also find evidence in the Chinese Ruist and Daoist traditions to confirm this point as well. Among this evidence, we have to say that Zheng Xuan’s suspension of the generative power of the stage of “Great Change” is a very impressive case.

Second, to posit a beginning cosmic stage of purely nothing, and to presume an accordingly cyclic, cosmic view that “reversion is the action of *Dao*,” is a cosmological dogma as long as these propositions intend to capture the principle of cosmic changes and transcend what the empirical study of the cosmos can tell us. In this regard, we find that even modern science is still striving to investigate, based upon empirical evidences, whether there was any cosmic status before the Big Bang. Therefore, rather than speculating in a philosophical way about the beginning cosmic status the way Lao Zi did, it will be more rationally reliable to probe the principles within cosmic realities based upon their *de facto* existing conditions, just as the *Appended Texts* did. In this way, I think the ontological orientation of the *Appended Texts* has greater potential for formulating a philosophical cosmology that is compatible with anything that scientific cosmology could tell us. This more inclusive capacity of the ontological tradition has already been argued by multiple philosophers in the “*creatio ex nihilo*” tradition. In a certain sense, it has also been proved by the development of western theology, since some contemporary Christian theologians, such as Paul Tillich, made their effort to sustain that the idea of “*creatio ex nihilo*” the philosophical anchor rendering Christian

symbols meaningful and effective in the contemporary context. In this way, we can expect the ontological tradition implied by the Ruist *Appended Texts* to be equally inclusive.

Third, as I examined earlier, the idea of a cosmic beginning of pure nothing and its related one of formless vital-energy do not have much value for Ruist anthropology. This is another reason why these ideas can be rejected from a Ru perspective.

Based upon these three major considerations, I think it makes sense for Zheng Xuan to make the aforementioned transition. However, this doesn't mean that Zheng Xuan would actually have argued as such since the textual evidences we can find from his works are limited. I would have formulated the three aforementioned considerations in defense of my own hypotheses if I had been in Zheng Xuan's situation, which is located between a position highly influenced by both the overall Daoist cosmological tradition before Zheng Xuan and the Ruist ontological spirit spearheaded in the *Appended Texts*. In this regard, I will leave it to the reader to decide whether my hypothesis would make great sense regarding the question of how the aforementioned transition could have come about in Zheng Xuan's thought, and especially how the transition will be fully elaborated by Wang Bi and Han Kangbo whose contributions I will examine next.

My last comment about Zheng Xuan's thought is that we can now anticipate the way this transition can be advanced in his followers' thought.

First, from a Ruist perspective, the concept of primordial vital-energy (*Qi*) according to Lao Zi's orientation must be jettisoned. This is mainly because the relationship between "primordial *Qi*" and the *yin/yang* divided *Qi* can only be temporal.

If *Qi* had already been divided into its *yin/yang* determinations, we would no longer find the primordial *Qi* in the later divided stages. Therefore, the ontological awareness of the relationship between “Ultimate Polarity” and the “two modes” mentioned in the *Appended Texts* would not allow the use of “primordial *Qi*” as a way of interpreting Ultimate Polarity, and of *yin/yang Qi* as a way of interpreting “Two modes,” since their relationships are supposed to be ontologically dependent, rather than cosmologically successive.

Second, correspondingly, the relationship between “non-being” and “being” will also be thought of in an ontological way. In other words, they will more than likely be treated as two features of the same existing cosmic realities, and thus the temporal priority of “non-being” over “being” will be greatly downplayed.

And we find this to be exactly the case in Wang Bi’s and Han Kangbo’s thought, and in this sense, my hypothetical considerations about the reasons leading to the transition of Zheng Xuan’s thought can be verified.

5.5 The Ruist Idea of “*Generatio Ex Nihilo*” in Wang Bi and Han Kangbo

From the *Zhuan Zi* until the *Qian Zao Du*, the general feature of ancient Chinese cosmology before and during Han Dynasty is by and large Daoist, which tried to combine Ruist elements in the *Appended Texts* into Lao Zi’s cosmology in the *Dao De Jing*. Then, Zheng Xuan, a key transitional figure in the Ru tradition, began to prioritize the ontological emphasis in the *Appended Texts* over the cosmological thinking in the Daoist tradition. In my view, it was Wang Bi and his follower Han Kangbo who finally pulled the interpretation of the *Appended Texts* onto the *Texts*’ original ontological track.

Because Wang Bi's thought was also well-known from his commentary on the *Dao De Jing*, we can generalize his cosmological thinking as a combination of Daoism into an overall Ruist teaching which was mainly inspired by Wang Bi's commentary on the *Classic of Change*. As a result, it will be legitimate for us to reach a comparative conclusion in which we find a distinctive Ru version of "*creatio ex nihilo*" in the thought of Wang Bi and Han Kangbo.

I. Wang Bi's Commentary on the *Dao De Jing*.

One distinctive feature of Wang Bi's commentary on the *Dao De Jing* is that wherever his intention is to articulate the sequence of cosmological succession as expressed by *Dao De Jing*'s verses, he comments on those verses according to the idea of ontological dependence. Therefore, Wang Bi's commentary can be seen as a major ontological turning-point in the exegetical history of the *Dao De Jing*.

For example, in commenting on Chapter 42 of the *Dao De Jing*, "Out of *Dao*, one is generated. Out of One, two is generated. Out of Two, three is generated. Out of Three, the myriad things are generated. Each of the myriad things carries the *yin* at its back, holds the *yang* at its front. Through the mutual impact of the *yin/yang* vital-energy, harmony among the myriad things is generated." Wang Bi says:

What the myriad things go back to is the One. How can we attain the Oneness? Through 'non-being.' Because from 'non-being' we can attain the One, the One can be called 'non-being.' Since there is something that is called the One, can it still be called 'non-being'? Therefore, the One can also be called 'being.' Since there are 'non-being' and 'being,' isn't this already the Two? Since there is

already the One and the Two, then comes up the Three. During the process from non-being to being, these are the numbers that can be used up. Anything beyond this is not consequential to *Dao*. Therefore, I know the origin for the generation of the myriad of things.²⁵¹

Here, clearly different from his predecessors most of whom understood the “one,” “two,” and “three” in the *Dao De Jing* to be referring to various cosmogonical stages, Wang Bi thought these different numbers were just describing disparate features of the same thing: the being of the myriad things as a whole. From the perspective that the being of the myriad things comes from a singular origin, that origin can be called the “One.” Beyond this origin, there is nothing that can be said about human knowledge of the myriad things. In other words, the origin of the myriad things generates these things in an unconditional way. From this perspective, the One can be said to be “non-being.” However, it is the One that generates the myriad things, and from this positive perspective of the One’s creativity, the One is also thought of as of “being.” Finally, the One generates the myriad things, and therefore, apart from the intrinsic features of the One that shares both “non-being” and “being,” another number, the Three, is needed to account for the results of the One’s creative power, i.e., the myriad things in the cosmos. Clearly, when commenting on this quintessential cosmological verse in the *Dao De Jing*, what Wang Bi has in mind

²⁵¹ “萬物萬形，其歸一也，何由致一，由於無也。由無乃一，一可謂無，已謂之一，豈得無言乎。有言有一，非二如何，有一有二，遂生乎三，從無之有，數盡乎斯，過此以往，非道之流，故萬物之生，吾知其主。” The most available translation of Wang Bi’s commentary on the *Dao De Jing* is Richard John Lynn, *The Classic of the Way and Virtue: A New Translation of the Tao-te Ching of Laozi as Interpreted by Wang Bi* (Columbia University Press: 2004). However, because I don’t think this translation does enough justice to Wang Bi’s ontological mode of thinking, Mr. Lynn’s translations of most of the quoted verses from Wang Bi’s commentary have been significantly adjusted by myself. The Chinese version of Wang Bi’s commentary on the *Dao De Jing* is from Lou, Yulie, 樓宇烈 ed., *An Exposition on the Commentary of Laozi’s Dao De Jing* 老子道德經註校釋 (中華書局, 2008): 100.

is the ontological dependence of the myriad things upon the *Dao*, rather than any emphasis upon the idea of cosmological succession between cosmogonical stages.

Another example we can use to confirm this essentially ontological interpretative strategy of Wang Bi is when he commented on Chapter 47 of the *Dao De Jing*: “The myriad things under Heaven are generated from being (有), and being is generated from non-being (无).” Wang Bi says:

“The myriad things under Heaven are generated during the process of ‘being.’ However, the beginning of ‘being’ is rooted in ‘non-being.’ This is because if we want to embrace ‘being’ as a whole, we must return to ‘non-being.’”²⁵²

The first verse of this commentary means that whether there is a temporal beginning to the entire universe or not, any explanation for why a concrete thing must emerge always resorts to the description of a process of cosmological succession that is prior to the emergence of that thing. Because this process leads to the emergence of concrete things, the process can be thought of as one of “being.” However, considering the process of “being” as a whole, it is ontologically grounded upon an ultimate creative power, the *Dao*, whose creativity is unconditional. In this sense, the process of being as a whole is rooted in non-being.

Clearly enough, Wang Bi’s interpretation of the *Dao De Jing* is heavily influenced by the ontological logic implied by the idea of “Ultimate Polarity” in the Ruist *Appended Texts*. We can verify that this is the case since he equates Lao Zi’s *Dao* with

²⁵² “天下之物皆以有為生，有之所始，以無為本，將欲全有，必反於無也。” Lou, Yulie, *An Exposition*: 123.

the Ruist “Ultimate Polarity,” and this equation was actually unprecedented for the cosmological texts and thinkers prior to Wang Bi.

In commenting on Chapter 6 of the *Dao De Jing*: “The spirit of the valley does not die. I call it ‘Mysterious Female.’ The door of the Mysterious Female is called the root of Heaven and Earth. Intangible it is, but still exists. Its function is inexhaustible.” Wang Bi says:

“The Door is where the work of the Mysterious Female comes from. As the foundation of the Mysterious Female, it shares one body with Ultimate Polarity, and therefore it is called the Root of Heaven and Earth.”²⁵³

The *Dao De Jing* used the metaphor of “the spirit of the valley” and “the door of the mysterious Female” to describe the ultimate creative power of *Dao*. For the *Dao De Jing*, the generative power of *Dao* is manifested in several cosmogonical stages starting from some sort of non-being and then leading to the emergence of a myriad of things. Because of this foundational cosmogonical emphasis, the ancient Chinese cosmological tradition after Lao Zi, whenever it intended to combine the Ruist idea of Ultimate Polarity into Lao Zi’s cosmology, either treated “Ultimate Polarity” as the stage of *hunlun*, the undifferentiated whole of being-as-becoming, or as a cap name encapsulating the existence of the myriad of things between Heaven and Earth. In other words, this tradition rendered “Ultimate Polarity” as one of the cosmogonical stages that manifest the creative power of *Dao*, but never made them equal. This point can be equally applied to Zheng Xuan, who continued to interpret “Ultimate Polarity” as *hunlun*, and thus we

²⁵³“門，玄牝之所由也，本其所由，與（太）極同體（樓宇烈根据列子篇更改），故謂之天地之根也。” Lou, *An Exposition*, 30.

concluded that Zheng Xuan's thought was a transitional one for the hermeneutical tradition of Ultimate Polarity prior to Wang Bi. However, here, Wang Bi straightforwardly equates *Dao De Jing's Dao*, the ultimate creative power which generates everything in the cosmos, as "Ultimate Polarity." In this sense, we will have no hesitation in concluding that one uniform strategy for Wang Bi to interpret the *Dao De Jing* would be in accordance with the Ruist ontological terms which are featured by the emphasis on "ontological dependence" in the *Appended Texts*.

Understood as such, it will be very interesting for us to look into how Wang Bi interprets the stage of undifferentiated whole of being-as-becoming in Lao Zi's cosmogony. In commenting on Chapter 21 of the *Dao De Jing*, which says, "*Dao*, as a thing, is fleeting and obscure. Fleeting and Obscure, yet latent in it are images. Obscure and Fleeting, yet latent in it are things," Wang Bi says:

"The *Dao* has no shape, is fleeting and obscure. This means the *Dao* doesn't cling (to anything). (The *Dao*) starts to generate things in a way of no-shape. It doesn't cling to any created things. However, it is in reliance upon the *Dao* that the myriad things are generated and completed. We don't know exactly the process (by which the things are generated), and therefore, we say 'Fleeting and Obscure, yet latent in it are images.'"²⁵⁴

Before we try to unpack Wang Bi's commentary, we need to know that when Lao Zi describes a cosmogonical stage that is fleeting and obscure, he means it literally. At this stage, the undifferentiated whole of being-as-becoming, which was later interpreted to be the stage of primordial *Qi* or *hunlun*, had not yet garnered any determination.

²⁵⁴ "恍惚無形，不繫之歎。以無形始物，不繫成物，萬物以始以成，而不知其所以然，故曰 '恍兮惚兮，其中有象' 也。" Lou, *An Exposition*: 50.

Therefore, from Lao Zi's perspective, it is almost meaningless to emphasize that the creative power of *Dao* is not clinging to any created things at this stage since things have not yet been generated. However, for Wang Bi, that the *Dao* "doesn't cling to created things" is a general statement, which means that even after things are generated, the *Dao*'s creative power is not limited by having done so, and thus, it "doesn't cling to created things." Clearly enough, in relation to Wang Bi's equating of *Dao* with Ultimate Polarity, the unlimited creative power of the *Dao*, for Wang Bi, actually refers to the ontological dependence of created things upon it, and only in this sense, can we understand Wang Bi's subsequent statement in this commentary that the "Fleeting and Obscure" aspects of the *Dao* means that how the *Dao* created the myriad things remains unknown. Why? That is because although *Dao* ontologically conditions all created things since it is *Dao* which generates them, we can only know the *Dao* through these created things. In this sense, how the *Dao* creates the myriad things in the ultimate ontological sense can never be known by human beings since everything human beings can know about this process derives from created things, and hence, the knowledge itself can only address the created, rather than the creating process. This speaks to the essential feature of the idea, "the unconditional ontological creative power": its two-fold asymmetry. In other words, *Dao* is prior to things ontologically, but things are prior to *Dao* epistemologically. In my view, this is exactly what Wang Bi means when he says "it is in reliance upon the *Dao* that the myriad of things are generated and completed," and meanwhile, "We don't know exactly the process (by which the things are generated)."

We will confirm this interpretation of Wang Bi's thought later when we analyze his idea of "Ultimate Polarity" in his commentary on the *Classic of Change*.

Understood as such, in regard to Lao Zi's idea of the undifferentiated whole of being-as-becoming as one cosmogonical stage, which was later interpreted as primordial *Qi* or *hunlun*, the saliency of Wang Bi's interpretation of this idea is that he succeeds in making this idea totally irrelevant to the idea of "Ultimate Polarity." For Wang Bi, *Dao* is equal to Ultimate Polarity, and it ontologically conditions all derived cosmic realities, while epistemologically, it is only through those derived cosmic realities that we can know anything about the *Dao* or Ultimate Polarity. The "fleeting and obscure" feature of *Dao* in Lao Zi's terms is therefore used by Wang Bi to describe the implied two-fold asymmetrical feature of *Dao*'s creative power, and as a consequence, the idea of the undifferentiated whole of being-as-becoming becomes worthless in Wang Bi's understanding of Ultimate Polarity. According to the above analysis, I have to conclude that Wang Bi's interpretation is more true to the original Ruist semantics concerning the idea of "Ultimate Polarity" in the *Appended Texts* than any of the earlier commentators.

II, Further Confirmation: Wang Bi's critique of the *Dao De Jing*

Rendering each key cosmogonical verse in the *Dao De Jing* in an ontological mode is a hermeneutical change which cannot be underestimated. Nevertheless, according to my earlier analysis of the *Dao De Jing*, it is not intrinsically impossible to understand the *Dao De Jing*'s sophisticated metaphysical terms such as "non-being" (無) and "being" (有) in an ontological way. In my view, it is because of the intimate relationship between Lao Zi's cosmology and his Daoist method of renunciatory human

self-cultivation and minimalist statecraft, that he presented a cosmology which gravitated toward speculation over the cosmos' temporal beginning. However, given this holistic nature of Lao Zi's thought, it is even more surprising for us to see how Wang Bi interprets the text in a dramatically twisted way which is decisively influenced by his Ruist sensitivity which had been nurtured in the hermeneutical tradition of the *Appended Texts*. This requires us to entertain some hypothetical ideas about the thought process that Wang Bi must have gone through: 1) He must have been aware to a certain degree of the difference between his interpretation of the *Dao De Jing* and the original cosmological emphasis of the *Dao De Jing*. 2) His anthropology must have been somewhat congenial to Ruism in order for us to confirm that his hermeneutical method for interpreting the *Dao De Jing* doesn't solely derive from mere philosophical speculations. In the remaining parts of this section, I will provide two other quotations in order to confirm that Wang Bi's thoughts were indeed shot through with Ruist insights.

The first quotation concerns Wang Bi's criticism of Lao Zi:

“The sage could feel and probe ‘non-being’ (體無). However, ‘non-being’ *per se* cannot be explained except with sayings about ‘being.’ Lao Zi was actually a person who endorsed ‘being’; nevertheless, he always talked of ‘non-being’. This is a deficiency in his thought.”²⁵⁵

When we analyzed Zheng Xuan's transitional understanding of Ultimate Polarity, we pointed out that Zheng Xuan's abolition of the role of “great vacuum” in generating

²⁵⁵ “聖人體無，無又不可以訓，故不說也。老子是有者也，故恆言無，所不足。”何劭《王弼傳》，in 彭林 黃朴民主編 Peng Lin, Huang Pumin, Ed., 《中國思想史參考資料集 先秦至魏晉南北朝卷》(清華大學出版社，2005年): 234. Translation is my own.

its later cosmogonical stages had debunked one potential inconsistency of Lao Zi's thought: since *Dao* is treated as the ultimate generator of all kinds of beings, why do we need to postulate a temporal beginning of "non-being" (understood as a great vacuum), or an undifferentiated whole of being (understood as primordial *Qi*), in order to account for the ultimate origin of the entire universe? From a cosmological point of view, no matter whether there is a temporal beginning of the cosmos or not, human beings will always try to locate a cosmic status prior to things as an *explanandum* which will explain their existence. This "scientific" vision implies that things in the cosmos spontaneously emerge from a natural cosmic process, as Zheng Xuan's words, "generate itself all of a sudden," indicate. However, from an ontological perspective and using the terms of ancient Chinese metaphysics, these spontaneously emerging cosmic realities depend upon the ultimate creative power of *Dao*. In a word, horizontally, it is not utterly necessary to postulate a particular status for cosmic beginning in order to explain what happens in a *de facto* way here and now. Ultimately, this is an empirical issue. However, vertically, there must indeed be an ultimate creative power that all things under Heaven ontologically depend upon.

Understood in this way, Wang Bi's criticism of Lao Zi makes great sense. Even according to Lao Zi, *Dao*'s creativity is always there, which means that it is always the ground of "being," so why do we need to postulate "non-being" as its temporal beginning point? According to Wang Bi, from a purely ontological perspective, this postulate is unnecessary.

Secondly, we need another quotation from Wang Bi to explain his hermeneutical strategy for explaining that the *Dao De Jing*'s cosmology in a Ruist sense resonates with his Ruist understanding of the human condition. In the following quotation, Wang Bi supports the Ruist thesis, "Sages have emotions" (聖人有情), in order to counter another Daoist thesis, "Sages have no emotions" (聖人無情):

That sages are more excellent than ordinary human beings is because of their wondrous awareness, but that sages are the same as ordinary human beings is because of their five emotions. Their wondrous awareness is more excellent, so they can feel the interaction and harmony of vital-energy so as to be aware of non-being. Their five emotions are the same, so they cannot respond to things without sadness and joy. However, the truth about the emotions of sages is that they respond to things but would not be wearied by things.²⁵⁶

Wang Bi's insistence that sages have emotions derives from his reading of the *Appended Texts*, such as Chapter 5, Part I, where the Text describes that sages must be anxious and concerned about what happens in a moment of crisis in human society. However, the view that Wang Bi tries to challenge, "Sages have no emotions", was held by thinkers such as He Yan (何晏 around 195-249 C.E.), who was inspired by the *Dao De Jing*'s teachings, such as Chapters 49, 57 and 64, which argue that sages should have neither desires nor even human-like thoughts. During this debate, Wang Bi clearly took his stand

²⁵⁶ “以为圣人茂于人者神明也，同于人者五情也。神明茂，故能体冲和以通无，五情同，故不能无哀乐以应物。然则，圣人之情，应物而无累于物者也。” The text is from 《三國志 鐘會傳》注引何劭《王弼傳》，which is quoted by Wang Xiaoyi, “王弼‘太极’说片论”，《孔子研究》，1988年第2期，第68-73页。There is no available English translation for this text, so I have translated it myself.

on the Ruist side because he understood that not every human emotion is intrinsically bad. Human emotions, as exemplified by the Sages, can respond appropriately to external things without being restrained by them, and in this sense, they are a perfect sign of order and harmony among human beings and the outside world. However, for the *Dao De Jing*, since its social ideal is one of following the life style of a primeval human society in which human sociality is barely required, its view towards human emotions is also understandably more restrained than the Ruist one. From a metaphysical perspective, we have to emphasize that Wang Bi's more positive view towards human emotions is grounded in his view of "Ultimate Polarity." Since the relationship between Ultimate Polarity and the myriad things under Heaven is vertical, this means that every aspect of cosmic realities, including human emotions, are a manifestation of Ultimate Polarity's creative power, and therefore they are not intrinsically bad. In contrast, according to the *Dao De Jing*, if the *Dao* is considered at its most powerful in the cosmogonical stage of non-being when it is understood to be a great vacuum, then the complexity of human emotions, like everything else that emerges later in the process of cosmological evolution, is necessarily downplayed and thus needs to be restrained in terms of human self-cultivation.

Understood in this way, I have to explain to my readers that these two quotations from Wang Bi are meant to confirm his general hermeneutical strategy for interpreting the *Dao De Jing*, rather than to draw a clear boundary between Ruism and Daoism and accordingly to argue that Wang Bi is a 100% Ru thinker who has nothing to do with Daoism. First, I don't think it can be possible for us to draw any such clear boundary,

especially for the period of the Han Dynasty when the textual basis for both traditions was being formed in an intricately intertwined way. Second, understanding either tradition without the other is more than likely to lead to a misunderstanding, since as the two most powerful schools of ancient Chinese thought during the classical period, Daoist and Ruist thinkers are the creative interlocutors whose continuous questioning of each other and defense of themselves is crucial for the development of the Chinese intellectual tradition. As a result, we should understand that my seemingly dualistic way of parsing the difference between the *Dao De Jing* and the *Appended Texts*, together with my reading of Wang Bi's interpretation of these texts, is more heuristic than prescriptive.

III Wang Bi's Idea of Ultimate Polarity in his Commentary of the *Yijing*

Since we have already confirmed the overall Ruist character of Wang Bi's thought, we will understand that his way of interpreting the "being generates from non-being" verse from the *Dao De Jing*, is actually heavily influenced by his understanding of the "Ultimate Polarity creates two modes" verse in the *Appended Texts*. Such a wonderful cross-reading of these very different texts leads, in my view, to a groundbreaking achievement for ancient Chinese cosmology. That is, Wang Bi renders a new meaning, "ontological unconditionality," to the Chinese character "無", and uses it to interpret key verses in the *Appended Texts*. Hence, Wang Bi makes it possible to spell out the implicit ontological meaning of the *Appended Texts* which had not yet been articulated either by the *Texts* itself or by commentators of this text prior to Wang Bi.

We can see that this is the case from the more explicit explanation of Ultimate Polarity provided by Wang Bi when he commented on the *Appended Texts*, separately

from the *Dao De Jing*. In commenting on Chapter 9, Part I of the *Appended Texts* when the *Texts* intends to explain the operational process of using yarrow sticks for divination, Wang Bi says:

The number that is used to deduce all changes between Heaven and Earth is 50. We use 49, and leave 1 for non-use. Although we don't use it, its use is penetrative. Although we don't enumerate it, all numbers are completed by it. This is what the Ultimate Polarity in the *Change* refers to. 49 is the utmost among numbers. 'Non-being' cannot be non-illuminated, and its illumination relies upon being. Therefore, it is because we extend the being of things to their utmost that we can understand where they originated.²⁵⁷

Here, "Ultimate Polarity" is understood as the origin of things, which is the utmost that we can extend the being of things. Clearly, Wang Bi's conception of Ultimate Polarity resonates with his commentary on Chapter 47 of the *Dao De Jing*: Ultimate Polarity is the originator of being. From the perspective beyond which nothing exists and nothing can be said, Ultimate Polarity can be characterized as "non-being," but from the perspective that all beings derive from Ultimate Polarity's creative power, it is the originator of being rather than non-being. Being and Non-being are just different aspects

²⁵⁷ “演天地之數，所賴者五十也。其用四十有九，則其一不用也。不用而用以之通，非數而數以之成，斯易之太極也。四十有九，數之極也。夫無不可以無明，必因於有，故常於有物之極，而必明其所由之宗也。”The original text is quoted by Han Kangbo in his commentary to the Appended Texts. See Wang Bi 王弼, Han Kangbo 韩康伯, and Kong Yingda 孔颖达, 《十三经注疏 周易正义》.北京：北京大学出版社, 1999. The translation is from Richard John Lynn, *The Classic of Changes: A New Translation of the I Ching as Interpreted by Wang Bi* (Columbia University Press, 2004) : 311. I made minor changes.

of the same ultimate cosmic reality: Ultimate Polarity and both of its aspects can be known from its creative outcomes in the myriad things under Heaven.

In commenting on the verse, “One *yin* and one *yang* is called *Dao*” in the *Appended Texts*, Wang Bi says:

“One *yin* and one *yang*” means (*Dao*) can be called *yin*, or can be called *yang*, but it has no fixed name. If a thing is *yin*, it cannot be *yang*; if a thing is mild, it cannot be firm. Only when something is neither *yin* nor *yang*, can it be the origin of *yin* and *yang*; only when something is neither firm nor mild, can it be the master of firmness and mildness. Therefore, only when something has neither boundaries nor shaped bodies, and is neither *yin* nor *yang*, can it then be called *Dao*, and therefore it can be called what is numinous and wonderful.²⁵⁸

Here, *Dao* is implicitly equated with Ultimate Polarity by Wang Bi, and his interpretation of the relationship between *yin/yang* and *Dao* follows his understanding of the relationship between *yin/yang* and Ultimate Polarity. According to the idea of “ontological dependence” that is applicable to the relationship between Ultimate Polarity and *yin/yang* vital-energies in the *Appended Texts*, it is Ultimate Polarity that creates *yin/yang*, and consequently, the creative power of *yin/yang* vital-energies depends ontologically upon the creative power of Ultimate Polarity and thus it cannot exhaust Ultimate Polarity’s creativity. Because *yin/yang* vital-energies is the most basic pair of

²⁵⁸ “一阴一阳者，或谓之阴，或谓之阳，不可定名也。夫为阴则不能为阳，为柔则不能为刚。唯不阴不阳，然后为阴阳之宗；不柔不刚，然后为刚柔之主。故无方无体，非阴非阳，始得谓之道，始得谓之神。”This text is quoted by Yang Shixun 杨士勋 in 《谷梁傳注疏》，which is furthermore discussed in Yang Jiansheng 杨鉴生，“王弼注《易》若干佚文考论—兼论王弼注《系辞》问题”，《中国文化论坛》，2010年第4期，第62-66页。No current English translation is available, so I have translated the text myself.

categories in ancient Chinese cosmology and is used to account for any possible determination of cosmic realities, that *yin/yang* vital-energies cannot exhaust the creative power of Ultimate Polarity means that there is some dimension within Ultimate Polarity that is utterly beyond human understanding. In other words, the creativity of Ultimate Polarity *per se* is indeterminate. In this sense, its creativity can be described as what is numinous. However, the cosmos continues to evolve. It advances into novelty without cease, as the *Yijing* text describes. As a consequence, it will be equally understandable for human beings to feel that the utterly inscrutable, indeterminate creative power of Ultimate Polarity is also inexhaustibly fertile. That is the major reason that Wang Bi can describe the ultimate creative power of Ultimate Polarity, the *Dao*, as being without boundary or shaped bodies, and also that it is numinous and wonderful.

Clearly, without an idea of the “ontological unconditionality” of Ultimate Polarity’s creative power, Wang Bi would not have been able to reach these insights.

IV Han Kangbo’s commentary on the *Appended Texts*.

Perhaps because of his early death, Wang Bi did not leave a completed commentary on the *Appended Texts*. It was his follower, Han Kangbo (332-380 C.E.), during the period of the Eastern Jin who composed a complete commentary on the *Appended Texts*. Later, Han Kangbo’s commentary was combined with Wang Bi’s commentary on the *Yijing*’s other texts, and they were compiled into the *Justified Meaning of Zhou Yi* (周易正義) by Kong Yingda during the Tang Dynasty (618-907 C.E.). This book afterwards became a textbook for the Chinese civil service examination. Therefore, based upon the huge influence of these commentaries upon the Ru tradition, it

will be critically important for us to read Han Kongbo's commentary on the *Appended Texts* in tandem with Wang Bi's thought in order to appreciate the metaphysical groundbreaking point which Wang Bi was making.

Han Kongbo's commentary on key verses in the *Appended Texts* followed nearly every point that had been concluded by Wang Bi, but he also elaborated on them in a more articulate way.

In commenting on the term "Ultimate Polarity" in the *Appended Texts*, Han Kangbo says:

"Being necessarily has its origin in non-being (無). Thus, Ultimate Polarity generates the two modes. Ultimate Polarity is the term for that for which no term is possible. As we cannot lay hold of it and name it, we think of it in terms of the ultimate point to which we can extend being and regard this as equivalent to the Ultimate Polarity."²⁵⁹

In other words, "non-being" means the ontological unconditionality of Ultimate Polarity's creative power, which is the generator of all beings under Heaven.

In commenting on "One *yin* and one *yang* is *Dao*", Han Kangbo says:

"Although *yin* and *yang* are different, 'non-being' as the One treats them equally. When *Dao* is in *yin*, *Dao* is not *yin*; however, it is *Dao* that generates *yin*. When *Dao* is in

²⁵⁹ "太极者，无称之称，不可得而名，取有之所极，况之太极者也。" Lynn, *The Classic of Change*, 294; minor changes have been made. The original text is in Wang Bi 王弼, Han Kangbo 韩康伯, and Kong Yingda 孔颖达, 《十三经注疏 周易正义》.北京：北京大学出版社, 1999.

yang, *Dao* is not *yang*; however, it is *Dao* that generates *yang*, and therefore we say ‘one *yin* and one *yang*.’²⁶⁰

In other words, the ultimate creative power of Ultimate Polarity, also the *Dao*, is thought to be manifested in, while simultaneously transcending, *yin/yang* cosmic realities that are the outcome of Ultimate Polarity’s creativity.

In commenting on the verse, “What cannot be plumbed by *yin* and *yang* is called what is numinous and wonderful,” Han Kong Bo says:

Actually, how could there ever be an agency that causes the movement of the two modes *Yin* and *Yang* or the activity of the myriad things to happen as they do!

Absolutely everything just undergoes transformation in the great void (*daxu*, 大虛), and all of a sudden comes into existence spontaneously. It is not things themselves that bring about their own existence; principle here operates because of the response of the mysterious (*xuan*, 玄). There is no master that transforms them; fate here operates because of the workings of the dark (*ming*, 冥). Thus, we do not understand why all this is so, so we characterize it as the numinous! It is for this reason that, in order to clarify the two modes of *Yin* and *Yang*, we take the Ultimate Polarity (*taiji*, 太極) as its initiator (始), and in addressing change and

²⁶⁰ “故穷变以尽神，因神以明道，阴阳虽殊，无一以待之。在阴为无阴，阴以之生；在阳为无阳，阳以之成，故曰：一阴一阳。”Ibid., 252.

transformation, we find that an equivalent term for them is best found in the term numinous and wonderful (*shen*, 神).²⁶¹

In other words, horizontally, things in the cosmos emerge into their existence spontaneously, and in this sense, no divine agency is needed as explanation. By contrast, vertically, things' existences are not created by themselves. There is some ultimate "mysterious" and "dark" principle, which is surely Ultimate Polarity, bringing the myriad things into being. Nevertheless, because anything we know about this mysterious principle must derive from the *de facto* existences of things, we cannot see through the process which would explain how the ultimate principle creates the myriad things. The epistemological priority of things in the cosmos, in terms of our knowledge of the ultimate principle, renders the process of their ontological creation by Ultimate Polarity utterly unknowable. Therefore, on the one hand, we can be certain that Ultimate Polarity is the initiator, but on the other hand, terms other than "what is numinous and wonderful" will not be sufficient to describe the abysmal depth and inexhaustible fertility of Ultimate Polarity as the "initiator of being." Because of this dense, ontological understanding of Ultimate Polarity's creativity, it is certain that the term "great void" (太虚), mentioned by Han Kangbo in this passage means the "unconditionality" of that creativity, rather than "great vacuum." as in Lao Zi's case.

V. A Brief Comparison with the Greek-European Christian Tradition of

"Creatio ex nihilo."

²⁶¹ “原夫两仪之运，万物之动，岂有使之然哉？莫不独化于大虚。歎尔而自造矣。造之非我，理自玄应；化之无主，数自冥运，故不知所以然而况之神。是以明两仪以太极为始，言变化而称极乎神也。” Ibid., 253.

Inspired by the thoughts of Wang Bi and Han Kangbo, we can revise the chart describing Ru cosmology which was once implied in the *Appended Texts*:

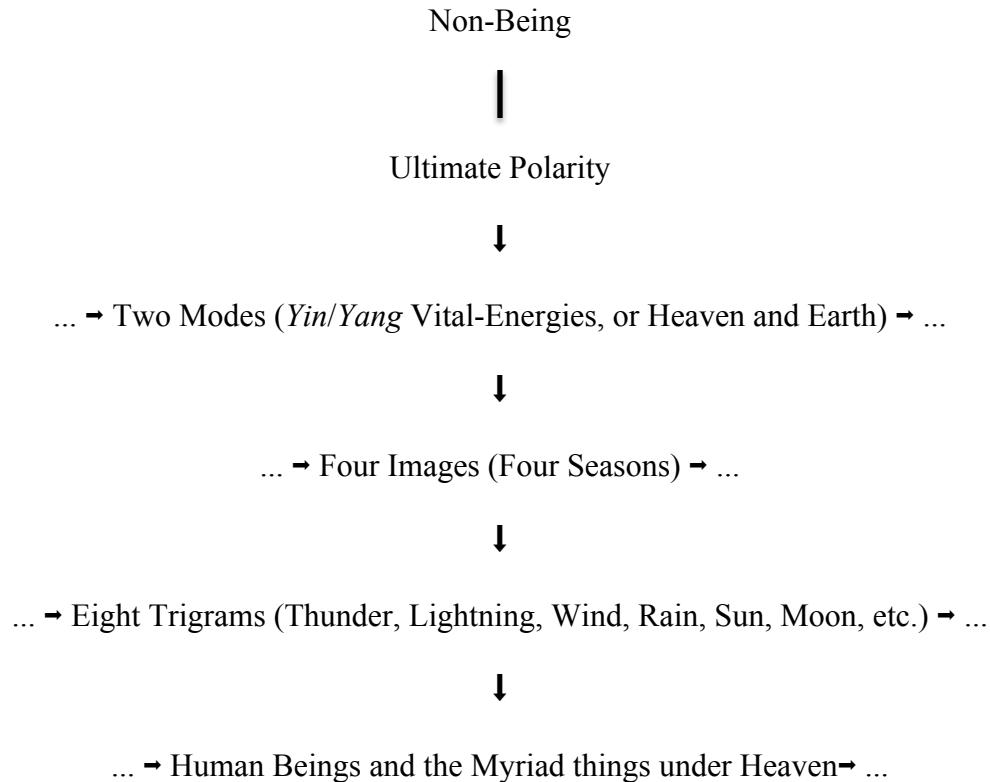


Figure 3: The Ru philosophical cosmology in the *Appended Texts* as Interpreted by Wang Bi and Han Kangbo.

A caveat needs to be made here that although “non-being” stands at the first rank in the chart, it is not independent from “Ultimate Polarity.” Instead, it suggests that the ontological creative power of Ultimate Polarity is unconditional, and in this way, that “non-being” is just one crucial aspect of Ultimate Polarity’s creativity. Therefore, a vertical line, rather than an arrow, between Non-Being and Ultimate Polarity, to indicate their bond.

Given this revision, it will be appropriate for us to affirm that up until Wang Bi and Han Kangbo, the Chinese Ru tradition of cosmology had conceived of an idea about the ontological creativity of ultimate reality, which is quite comparable to the idea of “*creatio ex nihilo*” in the Greek-European Christian tradition. Therefore, it will also be appropriate for us to do a brief comparison between these two traditions. The final comparison will come later after I have parsed out the development of the idea of “Ultimate Polarity” in Song and Ming Ruism, and therefore, what I will say in the following should be taken to be an heuristic tool for us to delve into the metaphysical works of the Song and Ming Ruist masters.

Similarities between the Ru tradition and the Greek-European Christian tradition concerning the idea of creation can be listed as follows:

- (1) The drive for the Ru tradition’s ontological thinking leading to the emergence of a similar idea of “*creation ex nihilo*” was the *Yijing*’s symbology. As illustrated by the above chart, the *Appended Texts* tries to parse out the ontological relationships among different ranks of cosmic realities on the basis of the logical and non-temporal relationship among *Yijing*’s symbols. This is very similar to the basic drive for the entire Greek-European Christian tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*.” For after Plato finds it unsatisfactory for natural philosophers to explain cosmic events using a concept of causality premised upon the relationship of “cosmological succession,” he decides to turn to “words,” and then tries to dig out the ontological relationships among ranks of cosmic realities in order to yield an account for the overall order and existence of the entire universe. In other words,

the logical and non-temporal relationship among symbols is an inspirational fountain for ontology, and this can be said for both the Greek-European Christian tradition and the Ru tradition.

- (2) Both the Ru tradition of Ultimate Polarity and the Greek-European Christian tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*” achieve the idea of the “ontological dependence” of all derived cosmic realities on the “unconditional” creative power of ultimate reality. This is so even though these two traditions offer two different names referring to ultimate reality, the one says “God” and “*Creatio ex nihilo*,” while the other says “Ultimate Polarity” or “*Dao*” and “Sheng Sheng” (生生, birth birth). Because of this shared ontological idea, if God is defined as “transcendent,” in accordance with the idea of “ontological unconditionality,” it will be equally legitimate to define Ultimate Polarity’s creativity as “transcendent.”
- (3) Both the Ru tradition of Ultimate Polarity and the Greek-European Christian tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*” show their inclusiveness towards a variety of cosmogonical views about possible temporal beginnings of the cosmos. It is enunciated by Thomas Aquinas that “*creatio ni exhilo*” holds its ontological value whether there is a beginning of the cosmos or not. Equally, the Ru cosmological tradition concerns itself with an investigation of the ontological principles which bring order and existence to cosmic realities on the basis of the *de facto* conditions of cosmic realities. In this sense, Lao Zi’s cosmogonical speculation about the beginning of the cosmos, insofar as this is a possible “beginning” narrative about the existence of cosmos, can be included in this Ru discourse. The

best evidence for the inclusiveness of Ru metaphysics among all the texts and thinkers that I have analyzed is Zheng Xuan's re-interpretation of the idea of "Great Change" (which is similar to Lao Zi's idea of the "great vacuum") in the *Qian Zao Du*. For Zheng Xuan, the stage of "Great Change" has no generative power, but in order to explain how things emerge in the horizontal cosmic process, we merely need to conceptualize that they "generated themselves all of a sudden," and then turn our minds vertically onto the ontological principles that regulate cosmic changes in a *de facto* way. In the contemporary context, we can also legitimately confirm that the Ru idea of "Ultimate Polarity" and the Greek-European Christian one of "*creatio ex nihilo*" are among the most resilient metaphysical/religious ideas to encapsulate possible advances of modern science without delimiting spiritual potent of these ideas.

- (4) Both traditions show a clear awareness of the "ontological priority" of ultimate realities and the "epistemological priority" of derived realities. This two-fold asymmetrical condition for the relationship between ultimate reality and derived realities was once nicely captured by Schleiermacher as "coincidence of opposite," and this phrase will be equally applicable to both traditions. Because this shared understanding of "coincidence of opposite," we see a mystical commitment to the inexhaustible and ultimately unknowable creativity of Ultimate Polarity in the Chinese Ru tradition which is similar to the Greek-Christian one. In this way, reading "*creatio ex nihilo*" into the Ruist idea of

“Ultimate Polarity” will broaden our vision into aspects of the Ru tradition that have not yet been fully addressed by contemporary scholars.

Even so, there are important differences between these two traditions:

- (1) The most impressive difference may be that it seems that the Ru tradition of Ultimate Polarity is never theistic. Under the inspiration of Plato’s idea in the *Timaeus*, although Christian theologians insist that the Platonic idea of matter does not fit the unconditional creative power of God, the process by which God creates the world is typically conceived of by these theologians as a powerful agency putting “form” into a formless pre-existing “matter.” This idea can be seen in Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, as well as in modern thinkers such as Leibniz. Therefore, for the Greek-European Christian tradition, whether the world of “forms,” which speaks to the intelligibility of the created world, exists prior to or posterior to the *de facto* existence of created cosmic realities becomes a major issue. If the choice is for “prior,” then divine creativity does not sound as unconditional as the idea “*creatio ex nihilo*” suggests. However, in the Chinese Ru tradition, Ultimate Polarity is an ultimate creative act without an actor or creator standing behind the scenes. The changing process of cosmic realities is accordingly typically conceived of as one of spontaneous emergence where no divine plan, purpose or *telos* can be detected. In this way, probing the “principles” of cosmic realities, such as the *yin/yang* aspects of cosmic changes, becomes a purely empirical commitment: Ru thinkers summarize the most generic features of cosmic realities based upon the *de facto* conditions of cosmic realities, and in

this sense, the intelligibility of the entire world does not exist prior to the world, but instead arrives afterwards. In short, I conclude that this non-theistic idea of Ultimate Polarity will make the Ru cosmological tradition quite comparable to the de-anthropomorphic minor-tradition within the major theistic Greek-European Christian tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*,” as defined by prominent thinkers such as Plotinus, René Descartes, Schleiermacher and Paul Tillich, who conceived of God as the “generator of being,” or the “ground of being,” rather than as a most powerful being. If we do need a contrasting phrase to highlight the non-theistic feature of Ultimate Polarity in the Ru tradition, I would prefer to use “*generatio ex nihilo*,” to describe Ultimate Polarity’s creative act, rather than “*creatio ex nihilo*.” This is because as a result of the mainstream theistic idea of divine creation in the Greek-European Christian tradition, the term “creation” usually implies a creator who stands behind the scenes, while the alternative term “generation” seems to have no such a semantic baggage. Nevertheless, the use of this term, “*generatio ex nihilo*,” is for me only for heuristic purposes, since in the minor tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*,” which I traced above, “creation” is still vaguely used, and it doesn’t imply a theistic idea of an all-mighty God standing behind the scenes.²⁶² Understood as such, another comparative conclusion I intend to explore, is that, if we construe the “transcendence” of ultimate reality as the

²⁶² As a result of this discussion, the term 生生, in its ontological use which portrays the way Ultimate Polarity creates all ranks of derived realities, can be translated as “creating creation” or “generating generation.” However, my standard translation of 生生 is “birth birth.” The major reason for taking this as the standard is that it maintains the syntax of the original Chinese phrase in a way which corresponds to English usage. Regardless, the terms, “creation,” “generation,” and “birth,” in the context of Chinese cosmology, all mean the same thing: something determinate spontaneously emerges from something else, and this process can be understood either cosmologically or ontologically.

“ontological unconditionality” of ultimate reality’s creative power according to the idea of “ontological dependence” shared by both the Ru tradition and the Greek-European Christian tradition, the Ruist non-theistic idea of Ultimate Polarity is accordingly more transcendent than the mainstream theistic idea of God in the Greek-European Christian tradition.

- (2) In relation to the first point, “form” and “matter” are used in the Greek-European Christian tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*” as a basic pair of categories to explain the most generic features of cosmic realities. In other words, the “*creatio ex nihilo*” tradition doesn’t only intend to account for where the world comes from, it also tries to explain its order. In this way, “form,” “matter,” and other related ontological concepts can be seen as belonging to the second tier of ontological categories in the “*creatio ex nihilo*” tradition which are ultimately taken to be a manifestation of God’s creative power, but are used particularly for explaining the order, rather than the existence of the world. From a comparative perspective, the *Appended Texts* uses many categories to describe the generic features of cosmic realities, such as 變 (Changes), 化 (Transformation), 位 (Position), 道 (Way), 器 (Utensil), 理 (Principle), 氣 (Vital-energy), etc. In its commentarial tradition, we also found that “形” (shape) and “質” (matter) were taken to be a basic pair of categories to explain the formation of things in the framework of pervasive cosmic vital-energies. However, the task of thematizing the most generic features of cosmic realities in an overall processual cosmological worldview, and thence to formulate a more systematic metaphysical system, had not yet been prioritized by

Ru thinkers in the commentarial tradition of the *Appended Texts* up until Wang Bi and Han Kangbo. Ru thinkers in this period cared more about the ontological relationship among ranks of cosmic realities than formulating a metaphysical system which would account for the order of the world in a comprehensive way. With historical hindsight, we find that it is in Song and Ming Ruism, especially in Zhu Xi's cosmology, that the Ru tradition comes up with a re-interpreted basic pair of categories, 理 (pattern-principle) and 氣 (vital energy), whose meanings and roles are comparable to the Greek-Christian ones of "form" and "matter." It is also with Zhu Xi that we find a more systematic expression of Ru metaphysics on the basis of Zhu Xi's insights about the Ru cosmological tradition as defined by the *Appended Texts* and its commentaries.

This second comparative point about the difference between the Ru tradition of Ultimate Polarity and the Greek-European Christian tradition of "*creatio ex nihilo*" will drive us to the analysis of the Ru idea of "creation" in its Song and Ming Ruist expressions.

CHAPTER SIX

“*Generatio Ex Nihilo*” in Continuum

6.1 Zhou Dunyi’s Understanding of “Ultimate Polarity”

There are three major works of Zhou Dunyi (1017-1073 C.E.) that are considered by later Song and Ming Ruist philosophers as of uttermost importance for the Ru tradition: the *Diagram of Ultimate Polarity* (太極圖), the *Explanation of the Diagram of Ultimate Polarity* (太極圖說), and the *Book of Penetration* (通書). It would not be too much of an exaggeration to say that Zhou Dunyi’s *Diagram of Ultimate Polarity* and its related texts played a similar role in the ethical-metaphysical tradition of Song and Ming Ruism as the one that Plato’s *Timaeus* once played in the Greek-European Christian tradition of *creatio ex nihilo*. However, this does not mean that scholars, including those Song and Ming Ruists and contemporary new Ruists, have reached a consensus in their interpretation of these seminal texts.

One major reason leading to diverse interpretations is that Zhou Dunyi’s text is so terse. The text does not elaborate much, especially in regard to several key concepts that the entire cosmogonical thought of Zhou Dunyi pivots upon, such as “Ultimate Polarity” (太極) and “Non Polarity” (無極). Unsurprisingly, these terms are also the foci of later scholarly controversies. Nevertheless, I do not think the controversy has no hope of being settled.

First, Zhou Dunyi’s thought does not come from nowhere. As the precursor of the medieval revival of Ruist thought, Zhou Dunyi’s philosophy stands firmly within the

commentarial tradition of the *Appended Texts of the Classic of Change* which had been formed during the Han and Tang dynasties. Following this cardinal text of Ru cosmology and ethics, its commentarial tradition tries to ground Ru morality within the most generic features of the cosmos so that a comprehensive view of “ethical metaphysics” is presented. Therefore, in order to understand Zhou Dunyi, especially his idea of “Ultimate Polarity,” we first need to analyze this commentarial tradition, and then, we need to investigate the part or school of this tradition in which Zhou Dunyi’s thought most probably ought to be located. This will help us to understand Zhou Dunyi’s thought *per se*.

Second, Zhou Dunyi’s terse words in the *Explanation of the Diagram of Ultimate Polarity* are further interpreted by using his own words in his *Book of Penetration*. Therefore, through an intra-textual analysis, we can philosophically understand Zhou Dunyi’s thought about Ultimate Polarity in a more coherent way.

Of course, I do not dare to say that we can be certain of Zhou Dunyi’s exact thoughts about Ultimate Polarity by relying on these two historical contextual and philosophical intra-textual hermeneutical approaches. However, this does indeed afford us a more promising understanding of Zhou Dunyi, which will provide an anchor for us to examine the interpretations of later Ru philosopher’s. Therefore, in the following parts of this section, I will try to use these two approaches to present my own understanding of Zhou Dunyi’s idea of Ultimate Polarity.

I. Two Schools of the Interpretation of Ultimate Polarity in the Commentarial Tradition of the *Yijing*

As shown by our analysis in Chapter Five, from the Han Dynasty, when the text of the *Yijing* was compiled and its commentarial tradition initiated, up until Tang Dynasty, there were two major schools of interpretation for the Ru cosmology's pivotal sentence in the *Appended Texts*: "Ultimate Polarity creates two modes" (太極生兩儀). Because the "two modes" are almost unanimously understood by the commentarial philosophers to symbolize the *Yin* and *Yang* vital-energies, the controversy focuses on how to understand "Ultimate Polarity."

One school, mainly represented by Wang Bi and Han Kangbo, used the idea of "non-being," construed as "ontological unconditionality," to interpret Ultimate Polarity, while the other said that "Ultimate Polarity" is the primordial vital-energy that has not yet obtained any determination. Having read through Chapter Five, readers will already know some of the basic arguments bolstering these two school's disparate interpretations.

For the first school, it is fair to say that Wang and Han's understanding of Ultimate Polarity is comparable to the idea "*creatio ex nihilo*" in the Greek-European Christian tradition. Here, "non-being" is not separated from "Ultimate Polarity" as the utmost point to which "being" can be extended. Instead, it is only a feature of "Ultimate Polarity," which merely refers to the fact that nothing can be said beyond this ultimate point. In other words, "non-being" is not a positive opposite power countering "being." It just portrays how unconditional the creative power of "Ultimate Polarity" can be. By a similar token, using Neo-platonic or Paul Tillich's words, because Ultimate Polarity is where all beings arise from and "non-being", construed as described above, has no counter power to it, we can confidently say that Ultimate Polarity is not a being, but the

ground of being, or the generator of being. What is most impressive about Wang Bi's thought is that he also hints at the double asymmetrical features of "*creatio ex nihilo*": Ultimate Polarity is ontologically speaking first such that all cosmic realities are conditioned by it. However, epistemologically, cosmic realities are first since only through them can we know anything about Ultimate Polarity. Using Wang Bi's words, the epistemological asymmetry of Ultimate Polarity's creativity is formulated this way: "non-being cannot be non-illuminated, and therefore, we know what is non-being through being."²⁶³

The second school did not use "non-being," the ontological unconditionality of an ultimate creative act, with which to construe "Ultimate Polarity." Instead, these commentators think that Ultimate Polarity refers to the primordial vital-energy that 1) exists as the primal stage of cosmic evolution, and 2) has not yet obtained any determination other than it is primordial vital-energy. Very obviously, part of the ancient Chinese cosmological tradition subsequent to the *Appended Texts* but before Wang Bi and Han Kangbo, which I explained in Chapter Five, belongs to this school. Through my earlier analysis, we also know that the *Dao De Jing*'s Daoist cosmology had a decisive influence upon this hermeneutical approach concerning Ultimate Polarity. In the Tang Dynasty, the understanding of Ultimate Polarity as primordial *Qi* is also well recorded in Kong Yingda's (574-648 C.E.) "*Ratified Commentary of Zhou Yi* 周易正義," which work can be seen as the major achievement of the prior commentarial tradition of the *Yijing* in a nutshell:

²⁶³ Wang Bi's thought is quoted in Chapter Five.

“Ultimate Polarity refers to the primordial vital-energy which was a formless whole before the division between heaven and earth. It is also called the ‘ultimate initiation,’ or ‘ultimate oneness.’ Therefore, Lao Zi says: ‘*Dao* creates One,’ and this One is Ultimate Polarity. As a result, after the one formless whole is divided, then heaven and earth are created. Therefore, ‘ultimate ultimate creates two modes’ actually refers to Lao Zi’s idea that ‘One creates Two.’”²⁶⁴

In this school, Ultimate Polarity is thought of as the one-formless-whole of primordial vital-energy, and thus, “Ultimate Polarity creates two modes” in the *Yijing* is understood as the self-determination of this formless whole into two basic forms of cosmic reality: *Yang* vital-energy (symbolized by “Heaven”) and *Yin* vital-energy (symbolized by “Earth”).

From a comparative perspective within the Chinese tradition, we find that, according to a strictly ontological standard, the cosmology of Wang Bi and Han Kangbo’s starts from non-being, *viz.*, the unconditionality, of the creative power of Ultimate Polarity as the generator of being, while the cosmology of the second school starts from the being of Ultimate Polarity as the formless whole of primordial vital-energy. From a comparative perspective with the Greek-European Christian tradition, we find that the second school is comparable to Spinoza’s and Hegel’s understandings of

²⁶⁴ “正義曰：太極謂天地未分之前，元氣混而為一，即是太初、太一也。故《老子》云：‘道生一’。即此太極是也。又謂混元既分，即有天地，故曰‘太極生兩儀’，即《老子》云：‘一生二’也。”

Translation adapted from Lynn, *Classic of Change*, 340. The original text is from Wang Bi 王弼, Han Kangbo 韓康伯, and Kong Yingda 孔穎達, 《十三經注疏 周易正義》.北京：北京大學出版社, 1999.

divine creation. The being of the world as a whole is taken for granted by this congenial cohort; in consequence, these metaphysicians' primary energies are invested in explaining the process for the self-determination of the world as a granted whole of being in order to yield accounts for what is a thing in concrete.

It is quite interesting to see that when Kong Yingda compiled his own commentary of the *Appended Texts* during the Tang Dynasty, relying on these two schools as predecessors, he tried to synthesize them, and to find ways in which to incorporate the idea of “non-being” 無 within the primordial-vital-energy school. He did this by using the term, “great vacuum” (大虛), to describe the formless whole of primordial vital-energy:

“One *yin* and one *yang* is called *Dao*” (the text is from the *Yijing*). One is non-being. Because the status of no *yin* and no *yang* can be called *Dao*, therefore One can also be called non-being. Non-being is a vacuum of nothing, and a vacuum of nothing is the great vacuum. It has not yet been differentiated, and thus only the One remains. In this way, the One can also be thought of as nothing. In the sphere of beings, things have forms and shapes in contrast with one another, and thus there will be two, three, etc., and in this way, One doesn't exist anymore.²⁶⁵

Therefore, in Kong Yingda's syncretical commentary, the “one formless whole of primordial vital-energy,” which is referred to by the second school's idea of Ultimate Polarity, can also be thought of as something sharing the feature of non-being. The “non-

²⁶⁵ “一謂無也，無陰無陽，乃謂之道。一得為無者，無是虛無，虛無是大虛，不可分別，唯一而已，故以一為無也。若其有境，則彼此相形，有二有三不得為一。” Ibid., 302.

being” of primordial vital-energy consists in exactly what the original Han commentarial tradition’s term, 混 or 渾 (formless, amorphous, or chaotic), intends to convey: that the primordial vital-energy has no form. As something both without form and with being, the whole of primordial vital-energy can be identified further as a great vacuum²⁶⁶.

Nevertheless, we find that Kong Yingda’s way of synthesizing the aforementioned two schools of thought had already changed the meaning of “non-being” from what Wang Bi intended. For Wang Bi and Han Kangbo, the “non-being” of Ultimate Polarity meant the unconditionality of its creative power. In this sense, any kind of being, no matter whether it was formless or not, was created by Ultimate Polarity. It is a fact that Wang Bi and Han Kangbo did not affirm that there was any intermediary stage, *viz.*, the formless whole of primordial vital-energy, between the unconditional generative power of Ultimate Polarity and the *Yang* and *Yin* vital-energy. According to my analysis in Chapter Five, this is because the purported intermediary idea is both ontologically unfit and anthropologically incongruent with Wang Bi’s Ru ethical-metaphysical ideas inspired by the *Appended Texts*. However, even if there could be such an intermediary stage, according to the logic of Wang Bi and Han Kangbo’s cosmology, this stage would still have been located at a lower ontological rank than Ultimate Polarity, and thus would actually have been created by it. In this sense, Kong Yingda’s seemingly synthetic commentary did not yet succeed in making clear the difference between “non-being” (無), *viz.*, the unconditionality of Wang and Han’s idea of Ultimate Polarity as the generator of being, and “nothingness”

²⁶⁶ Curious readers may already find that the way Kong Yingda used the term “non-being” to describe the formless whole of primordial vital-energy is similar to that of Zheng Xuan.

(無), viz., the formlessness of the other school's idea of Ultimate Polarity as the being of primordial vital-energy.

II. Which school does Zhou Dunyi belong to?

Since this was the legacy from Han through Tang under whose influence Zhou Dunyi's thought was being formed, one crucial question for us to ask in order to understand Zhou's thought is, Which school does he belong to?

Although many scholars after Zhou claim that Zhou belongs to the second school which construes Ultimate Polarity as the primordial vital-energy, I don't think it is correct. There are major reasons leading me to reach this conclusion:

(1) One of the most important interpreters of Zhou Dunyi's thought, Zhu Xi, did not think Zhou belongs to the second school.

(2) Zhou's own texts as a whole back up a coherent understanding of Ultimate Polarity according to Wang Bi's and Han Kangbo's thought.

(3) There are intrinsic difficulties in interpreting Ultimate Polarity as primordial vital-energy. These problems make it more difficult to understand Zhou Dunyi's thought coherently as long as we think he belongs to the second school.

(4) Apart from purely cosmological purposes, construing the "non-being" of Ultimate Polarity as the "unconditionality" of the ultimacy's creative power, rather than construing the "formlessness" of Ultimate Polarity as the amorphous primordial cosmic stuff, is more compliant with Zhou Dunyi's Ruist intention of trying to ground ethics within its cosmological foundation.

Of course, this doesn't mean that construing Zhou Dunyi according to the second school's thought is totally impossible. As I mentioned above, Zhou Dunyi's existing works are scarce, and his words in these works are terse so that no determinate interpretative conclusion can easily be reached. However, based upon the aforementioned four reasons, I do believe that my judgment about which school Zhou Dunyi's thought belongs to is correct. In the following section, I will try to argue why this is the case.

III. My analysis of Zhou Dunyi's Idea of Ultimate Polarity

The most important texts for my analysis of Zhou Dunyi's thought are from his *Explanation of the Ultimate Polarity Diagram* (EUPD) and the *Book of Penetration* (BP):

Nonpolar and yet Ultimate Polarity! The Ultimate Polarity in activity creates *yang*; yet at the limit of activity it is still. In stillness it creates *yin*; yet at the limit of stillness it is active again. Activity and stillness alternate; each is the basis for the other. In distinguishing *yin* and *yang*, the Two Modes are thereby established.

The alternation and combination of *yang* and *yin* create water, fire, wood, metal, and earth. With these five [phases of] *Qi* harmoniously arranged, the Four seasons proceed through them. The Five Phases are what *yin* and *yang* unite; *yin* and *yang* are what Ultimate Polarity unites; the Ultimate Polarity is fundamentally Nonpolar. [Yet] in the creation of the Five Phases, each one has its nature.

The reality of Nonpolarity and the essence of the Two Modes and Five Phases mysteriously combine and coalesce. "The Way of Qian becomes the male; the Way of Kun becomes the female"; the two *Qi* affect each other, transforming and

creating the myriad things. The myriad things generate and regenerate, alternating and transforming without limit.²⁶⁷

That which has no stillness in activity and no activity in stillness is a thing. That which has no activity in activity, and no stillness in stillness, is what is numinous. It is not the case that the numinous, having no activity in activity and having no stillness in stillness, can neither activate nor become still. Things, then, are not penetrating. The numinous renders the generative process of things subtle.

The *yin* of water is based in *yang*; the *yang* of fire is based in *yin*. The Five Phases are *yin* and *yang*. *Yin* and *yang* are the Ultimate Polarity. The Four Seasons revolve; the myriad things end and begin [again]. The process mingles and opens up. How limitless it is!²⁶⁸

In order to correctly understand these two quotations, three things need to be kept in mind:

First, the three passages in the first quotation are Zhou's interpretation of the words of the *Appended Texts*: "Ultimate Polarity creates two modes, two modes create four images, and four images created eight hexagrams." Correspondingly, these three

²⁶⁷ “無極而太極。太極動而生陽，動極而靜，靜而生陰。靜極復動。一動一靜，互為其根；分陰分陽，兩儀立焉。陽變陰合，而生水、火、木、金、土。五氣順布，四時行焉。五行一陰陽也，陰陽一太極也，太極本無極也。五行之生也，各一其性。無極之真，二五之精，妙合而凝。乾道成男，坤道成女，二氣交感，化生萬物。萬物生生，而變化無窮焉。” EUPD, translation adapted from Joseph Alan Adler, *Reconstructing the Confucian Dao: Zhu Xi's appropriation of Zhou Dunyi* (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 2014): 22.

²⁶⁸ “動而無靜，靜而無動，物也。動而無動，靜而無靜，神也。動而無動，靜而無靜，非不動不靜也。物則不通，神妙萬物。水陰根陽，火陽根陰。五行陰陽，陰陽太極。四時運行，萬物終始。混兮闢兮！其無窮兮！” BP; translation is from *ibid.*, 16; minor changes have been made.

stages of cosmic creation, grounded in Ultimate Polarity, are illustrated in the various layers of Zhou's *Diagram of Ultimate Polarity*.²⁶⁹

Second, Zhou uses his own words to explain further what the “active” and “still” aspects of Ultimate Polarity mean when it is said to create *yin Qi* and *yang Qi*. This is what the second quotation is all about.

Third, the reality of “time” only emerges after “five phases” and “four seasons” are created. Once created, the entire cosmic process of change is typically depicted as “limitless,” without beginning or ending. In this sense, Zhou Dunyi's thought on Ultimate Polarity's cosmic creation nicely maps out what the Greek-European Christian metaphysical tradition of “chain of being,” starting with Plotinus' neo-Platonism, tries to convey. In the *Appended Texts'* terms, this type of thought tries to ponder the *Dao* of “what is beyond shape” (形而上).

Understood as such, let's try to interpret Zhou Dunyi's thought using the two aforementioned approaches: the one of Wang Bi and Han Kangbo, and the other which interprets Ultimate Polarity as primordial *Qi*.

The first approach will yield a quite coherent and straightforward reading of Zhou.

“Non-polarity” is not a separate entity from “Ultimate Polarity,” it is just one feature of “Ultimate Polarity,” which as the generator of being has nothing to be predicated other than that it is the generator of the entire world. In this sense, first, “non-polarity” doesn't mean that it is an opposing positive power, that of non-being, which counters the action of Ultimate Polarity. Instead, in the EUPD quotation, non-polarity is

²⁶⁹ Readers can find online versions of the Diagram such as in <http://www2.kenyon.edu/Depts/Religion/Fac/Adler/Writings/Chou.htm>. Retrieved in May, 2018.

also thought of as having “reality,” which means that it is one feature of ultimate reality that it is the generator of being. As analyzed above in Wang Bi and Han Kangbo’s case, the non-polar feature of Ultimate Polarity connotes the unconditionality of its ultimate creative power, beyond which nothing can be said. Second, the “activity” or “stillness” of Ultimate Polarity to produce *yin* and *yang* is a way for human beings to analogically understand what happens to this ultimate creative power. The reason that we can only analogically understand it is that what we know about “activity” or “stillness” in general derives from the *de facto* existence of created things. This knowledge cannot reach the causal relationship through which Ultimate Polarity makes anything movable or still. In this sense, when Ultimate Polarity activates things, we do not know whether it is also activated by itself. By the same token, when Ultimate Polarity makes things still, we also don’t know whether it is still by itself. Nevertheless, because the outcome of the Ultimate Polarity’s creative act brings activity and stillness of things into being, it cannot be said that Ultimate Polarity neither moves nor un-moves. In other words, Ultimate Polarity neither moves nor un-moves, and it is neither still nor non-still. This is because Ultimate Polarity is located at the highest ontological rank, and therefore anything about the lower ranks can in a certain degree be depicted and simultaneously cannot be fully depicted. That is the main reason that the creation of *yin* and *yang* by Ultimate Polarity (as quoted above) is portrayed by Zhou Dunyi as follows: “That which has no activity in activity, and no stillness in stillness, is what is numinous. It is not the case that the numinous, having no activity in activity and having no stillness in stillness, can neither activate nor become still. Things, then, are not penetrating. The numinous renders the generative

process of things subtle.” In other word, the ultimate creative power of Ultimate Polarity is singular, and non-dual, and does not yield to any dualistic depiction by human language.

Besides, this way of understanding the “non-polar” feature of Ultimate Polarity as a dimension of ultimate reality fits nicely with Zhou Dunyi’s metaphysical ethics. In the latter part of EUPD, and also in other parts of BP, Zhou Dunyi talks about how humans are created during the same process of cosmic creation by Ultimate Polarity, and thus they are endowed with an idiosyncratic nature. As a result, all Ru ethical virtues have a firm cosmological root: the virtues of Centrality (中), Uprightness (正), Humanness (仁) and Righteousness (義), are the way in which the *yin/yang* vital-energies and five phrases are harmonized in the human world. Because these virtues are thought of by Zhou as moral criteria and are thus what human nature is all about, Zhou calls them “Human Polarity” (人極). In this sense, the non-polar feature of Ultimate Polarity connotes its unconditional creativity, and by the same token, the cherished Ru virtues, i.e., the human polarity, are grounded in the most generic features of Ultimate Polarity’s creation. Ethical realism runs consistently through Zhou Dunyi’s system.

Alternatively, let’s try to use the second traditional approach to interpret Zhou Dunyi, and compare which approach is better. In my view, we will encounter great difficulties in trying to interpret Zhou Dunyi in this way. Some of these difficulties belong to the second approach itself, and others are due to incongruence between this hermeneutical approach and Zhou Dunyi’s own texts. More importantly, grounding the

realistic Ruist ethics within something which is depicted as “non-being,” as defined by this second school, does not make much sense.

Using the second approach, Ultimate Polarity must be interpreted as primordial *Qi*, and its non-polar feature will refer to the formlessness of this primordial *Qi* as a single undivided whole. In what follows, I will try to illustrate the difficulties and argue my recommendation that we should abandon the approach.

First, there is no mention at all of primordial *Qi* in any of Zhou’s texts.

Second, the idea of Primordial *Qi* as it was understood according to Lao Zi’s cosmogony, i.e., a chaotic, formless whole of being-as-becoming which has not yet received any determination and exists temporally before *Yin* and *Yang* vital-energies, Heaven and Earth, must be eliminated from Zhou Dunyi’s diagram in the very beginning. This is because Zhou Dunyi’s diagram conveys an ontological tendency similar to the neo-Platonic “chain of being,” and therefore relationships among the ranks of cosmic realities are considered to be non-temporal, and all the features of the higher cosmic realities are accordingly shared by the lower ones. However, Primordial *Qi*, understood according to Lao Zi’s notion, cannot exist any longer within *yin* and *yang* vital-energies after it has been divided and formalized. The fact that Wang Bi and Han Kangbo totally abandoned this type of “Primordial *Qi*” idea in their thinking about Ultimate Polarity proves that it will not be an ideal candidate for ontological thinking.

Nevertheless, for ancient Chinese cosmologists who are sympathetic to the aforementioned second school’s idea that “Ultimate Polarity” means “Primordial *Qi*”, “Primordial *Qi*” can be understood in another sense. It can be understood as “*Qi* in

general.”²⁷⁰ The major difference between “Primordial *Qi*” in its Lao Zi conception and “*Qi* in general” is that “*Qi* in general” can, to a certain degree, fit into an ontological “chain of being” mode of thinking. This is mainly because the feature of “*Qi* in general” can be shared by the two different *Qi*, *Yin* and *Yang*. Therefore, it is legitimate for us to hypothesize that maybe Ultimate Polarity, when it is understood as “Primordial *Qi*” and defined as “*Qi* in general,” is a legitimate option for us to use in understanding Zhou Dunyi’s thought. Therefore, the following analysis will be based upon this alternative understanding of “Ultimate Polarity” as “Primordial *Qi*” and defined as “*Qi* in general.”

Third, if Ultimate Polarity is the formless whole of primordial *Qi* understood as *Qi* in general, how we interpret the second aforementioned quotation about the activity and stillness of Ultimate Polarity becomes an extremely problematic issue. According to that quotation, the creative power of what is numinous cannot be fully understood by human knowledge since it is based upon “things,” and these things are visible, tangible, and thus, beings with forms. Therefore, if we follow this thread of thinking, one natural inference would be that Ultimate Polarity is the formless whole of undivided *Qi* in

²⁷⁰ In my view, Dong Zhongshu (董仲舒, 179-104 B.C.E.), Zhang Zai (張載, 1022-1077 C.E.) and Luo Qinshun (羅欽順, 1465-1547 C.E.) are exemplars of this kind of understanding of “Primordial *Qi*.” For them, “Primordial *Qi*” (元氣) actually means “*Qi* in general.” According to their conception, *Qi* in general always runs and functions between Heaven and Earth, and its characteristics are shared by *yin/yang* vital-energies, which are the only concrete form of vital-energy which we can find in a *de facto* way. Since my main purpose in Chapter five is to highlight the thought process within those ancient Chinese cosmologies which lead to Wang Bi and Hang Kangbo’s ontology, I have analyzed this understanding of “Primordial *Qi*” with a meaning of “*Qi* in general” very little. However, I believe readers have already found there to be an impressive difference between the Daoist understanding of “Primordial *Qi*” and its Ruist counterpart: “Primordial *Qi*” in Lao Zi’s version tends to be projected as temporally located at an earlier cosmological stage, while its Ruist conception of “*Qi* in general” tends to be ontologically located at a higher rank of cosmic realities. In this sense, whether to begin with the Ruist “chain of being” conception of an ontological cosmology with “*Qi* in general” or “Generatio ex nihilo” can be seen as a watershed which differentiates schools within the Ruist tradition. Luo Qinshun’s thought will be analyzed in the fourth section of this chapter.

general, and that after the function of what is numinous, it is distinguished into two basic forms, *yin* and *yang Qi*. This implies that the being and the essence of *yin/yang Qi* are explained by different principles. For, their being is derived from the being of *Qi* in general which is always there. And their essence is derived from what is numinous which brings basic determinations of *Qi* into being. In this way, what is numinous doesn't explain the origin of the being of *Qi* in general, and ultimately, it turns out to be a separate principle from *Qi* in general since their explanatory powers are different.²⁷¹ Clearly enough, the monistic commitment to Ultimate Polarity as the singular principle explaining both the being and order of the entire created world in Zhou Dunyi's Diagram doesn't favor this dualistic interpretation.

However, there are two possible ways to resolve this challenge to the dualistic understanding of Ultimate Polarity. First, we can say that what is used for explaining what a thing is, the numinous, is a power which *Qi* in general has by itself. In other words, *Qi* in general is not only always there, but also has the power of self-determination by bringing the two basic forms of *Qi* into itself. Nevertheless, this will bring further problems: 1) it still leaves the question of the origin of *Qi* in general unanswered. 2) A primordial formless whole of being now has a positive power within itself to determine itself further. This feature of *Qi* in general cannot make it entirely "formless," since it contains a basic differentiation of "principle of being" and "principle of essence" within

²⁷¹ Chen Lai, one of the most acknowledged contemporary Chinese scholars of Ruist intellectual history, is the representative of this approach. See Chen Lai 陈来, *宋明理学* (上海: 华东师范大学出版社, 2004): 10-20.

itself. 3) As mentioned above, in this approach, “non-polarity” must be understood as the “formless” feature of *Qi* in general. In this way, it cannot be said that “non-polarity” is qualified to be one sort of reality, as Zhou hints in his IDUP, since it is liberally “formless,” i.e., it is without a solid mode of being. Neither is it fit for grounding the Ru ethical realism.

Another way to resolve the dualistic challenge engendered by the traditional second interpretative approach to explaining Ultimate Polarity is to say that what is numinous is actually not only what explains what a thing is, but also is what explains where its being is from. In other words, what is numinous creates both the being of *Qi* in general and brings its basic determination to it. In Zhou’s text, it happens that the term “non-polarity” appears prior to “Ultimate Polarity.” Therefore, according to this understanding, what is numinous is non-polarity, and it both produces Ultimate Polarity as *Qi* in general and also brings basic determinations - *yin/yang*- into Ultimate Polarity. In other words, the highest principle, according to this way of thinking, will be “non-polarity”, rather than “Ultimate Polarity.”²⁷²

Again, difficulties emerge from this approach. First, the entire Book of Penetration has no mention of “non-polarity.” If “non-polarity” is the highest principle of Zhou Dunyi’s thought, it becomes inexplicable that the term “non-polarity” is not mentioned at all in his other most important text which supposedly explains IDUP. Second, if “non-polarity” is taken to be the highest principle which produces both *Qi* in general (Ultimate Polarity) and its determination, then what produces *yin* and *yang* vital-

²⁷² Some contemporary Chinese scholars hold to this approach, such as Shu Jincheng 舒金城, 周敦颐的思想体系与“无极”“太极”之辨, 《孔子研究》, 1999 年第 3 期.

energies cannot be “Ultimate Polarity,” and must be “non-polarity.” This is directly contrary to what the two aforementioned quotes said about the “activity” and “stillness” of Ultimate Polarity producing *yin* and *yang* vital-energies. Actually, if we think “non-polarity” both produces the being of the entire world, and also contains the principle explaining what a thing is in relation to other things, its role will be exactly the same as “Ultimate Polarity” which was construed in Wang Bi and Han Kangbo’s way. As I mentioned above, it is possible for us to posit an intermediary stage, named “primordial *Qi*” defined as “*Qi* in general”, between the ultimate ontological creative power (no matter whether we call it “non-polarity” or “Ultimate Polarity”) and *yin/yang* vital-energies (in accordance with Wang’s and Han’s understanding of Ru metaphysics). However, if we use “non-polarity” to name this ultimate ontological creative power, first, according to Wang and Han, we will need another name to refer to its “unconditional” feature. This will make the cosmological terms unnecessarily redundant. Second, for interpreting Zhou’s thought, as I mentioned above, this will make the verses about the creation of *Yin* and *Yang* by Ultimate Polarity inscrutable. Besides, to call an ultimate principle of reality “non-polarity,” rather than “Ultimate Polarity,” will make the Ru ethical realism sound bizarre, anyway.

In a word, there are numerous difficulties which are incurred by the hermeneutical strategy of interpreting Zhou Dunyi’s idea of Ultimate Polarity as “Primordial *Qi*,” whether in Lao Zi’s cosmological sense or in the ontological sense of “*Qi* in general,” and these difficulties are not easily resolved. Alternatively, to locate Zhou Dunyi’s thought in the camp of Wang Bi and Han Kangbo, and accordingly to understand Zhou

Dunyi's idea of "Ultimate Polarity" as an unconditional ontological creative act which gives rise to both the being and the order of *yin/yang* vital-energies, is a straightforward reading of Zhou Dunyi's thought which is coherent and easy. Based upon this analysis, I conclude that Zhou Dunyi stands in the tradition of Wang Bi and Han Kangbo, and thus that his thought concerning ethical metaphysics is comparable to that of the Greek-European Christian tradition of "*creatio ex nihilo*," with a heuristic caveat that Zhou Dunyi belongs to the distinctive Ruist tradition which conceptualizes Ultimate Polarity's creativity as "*generatio ex nihilo*."

6.2 Zhu Xi's Understanding of Ultimate Polarity and the Relationship between *Li* (理, Pattern-principle) and *Qi* (氣, Vital-energy)

In my view, Zhu Xi is the best metaphysician for the entire Ru tradition (at second thought, he may be secondary only to Confucius if Confucius is really the author of the *Appended Texts*). His role in the Ru tradition is similar to Thomas Aquinas' role in Christianity. Using his incredible analytical skills, Zhu Xi created a Ru metaphysical system whose conceptual breath, depth and dexterity is far beyond most other Ru thinkers.

In order to understand Zhu Xi's view of "Ultimate Polarity" and its related idea of "Birth Birth" (生生) in the *Yijing*, the first thing we need to keep in mind is that Zhu Xi's way of thinking in regard to the creativity of Ultimate Polarity is purely "ontological." In other words, Zhu Xi's concern in his discussion of Ultimate Polarity is not about how the cosmos evolved in a temporally linear way. Instead, what he concentrates is on the order

of “ontological dependence,” or in Aristotelian terms, the “priority of nature,” among ranks of cosmic realities.

In explaining the temporal perspective of cosmic evolution, Zhu Xi follows his teacher Cheng Yi (1033-1107 C.E.) and the mainstream Ruist commentarial tradition of the *Appended Texts*. He endorses the idea that from a temporal perspective, cosmic changes have neither beginning nor end:

“If (cosmic changes) are pushed to their uttermost front, no beginning can be seen. If they are pulled to their uttermost back, no end can be perceived. Therefore, Master Cheng said: ‘There is no limit to the alternation of movement and stillness. There is no beginning for the one of *Yin* and *Yang*.’”²⁷³

However, even if everything in the universe is constantly changing, there is an order of *li* (理, pattern-principle) among them which enables Zhu Xi to distinguish the “priority of nature” among different ontological ranks of cosmic realities. Therefore, he interprets the seminal sentences, “Ultimate Polarity creates two modes,” in the *Appended Texts* in an ontological way:

For the teaching, “there is Ultimate Polarity in the Change, and then it creates two modes,” in the *Yijing*, the priority here is being considered from the perspective of solid pattern-principle (實理). If the coming-into-being of Ultimate Polarity and two modes (*Yin* and *Yang* vital-energy) is being discussed, these two come into

²⁷³ “推之於前而不見其始之合，引之於後而不見其終之離。故程子曰：動靜無端，陰陽無始，非知道者，孰能識之！” Zhu Xi, “太極圖說解,” in Adler, *Constructing*, 60. Minor changes to the translation have been made.

being at the same time, and Ultimate Polarity is within *Yin* and *Yang*. However, if the sequence of dependence is being addressed, we must acknowledge that the solid pattern-principle comes first, and then *Yin* and *Yang* come second. Their (*Yin* and *Yang*'s) pattern-principle is one. From what can be observed from things, *Yin* and *Yang* imply Ultimate Polarity. However, if we probe their origin, we have to say that it is Ultimate Polarity which creates *Yin* and *Yang*.²⁷⁴

It is very obvious from this quotation, together with a number of similar ones, that Zhu Xi understands the creative sequence between Ultimate Polarity, two modes (the *Yin/Yang* vital energy), and the four images (the five phases and the running of vital-energy during the four seasons), which are mentioned in both the *Appended Texts* and in Zhou Dunyi's *Explanation of the Diagram of Ultimate Polarity* (IDUP), are those of ontological dependence, rather than of cosmological succession. In Zhu Xi's own terms, it is an order of "solid pattern-principle" (實理) rather than one of "observed things" (見在).

By the same token, "Birth Birth" (生生) in the *Yijing*, which is typically understood by most of his contemporary Ru interpreters as solely concerning the constant cosmological succession of changing realities, is perceived by Zhu Xi as also about the creative sequence between Ultimate Polarity and other basic forms of cosmological realities. In other words, "Birth Birth" can also be about ontological creation:

²⁷⁴ “如‘易有太極，是生兩儀，’則先從實理處說。若論生則俱生，太極依舊在陰陽里，但言其次序，須有這實理方始有陰陽也，其理則一。雖然，自見在事物而觀之則陰陽函太極，推其本則太極生陰陽。” Zhu Xi 朱熹，《朱子語類》七十五，recorded when Zhu was 70 years old, quoted in Chen Lai 陈来，*A Study on Master Zhu's Philosophy* 朱子哲学研究 (华东师范大学出版社，2000): 98. The English translation of Zhu Xi's works is neither comprehensive nor well-coordinated among translators. In this dissertation, I translate most of Zhu Xi's letters and dialogues by my own after considering available English translations such as the ones in Justin Tiwald and Bryan W. Van Norden, Ed., *Readings in Later Chinese Philosophy: Han to the 20th Century* (Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. 2014).

“The creativity of Ultimate Polarity is like a tree. It branches, and again, from the branches flowers and leaves are generated. The process of ‘Birth Birth’ is therefore endless. When fruits are formed, there is a pattern-principle of “endless Birth Birth” within them. These principles begin to give birth. An infinite number of ultimate polarities are therefore generated, forever and ever.”²⁷⁵

In conclusion, it is fair for us to portray Zhu Xi’s metaphysics as a combination of two dimensions: one horizontal/cosmological and the other vertical/ontological. In my view, this portrait is applicable to Zhu Xi’s thought in general. However, as some of the most important contemporary interpreters of Zhu Xi’s thought noticed, Zhu Xi’s view of the creativity of Ultimate Polarity changed during his lifetime. In particular, in regard to the question of how to use the basic dyad of categories, pattern-principle (理, *Li*) and vital-energy (氣, *Qi*), to interpret the creative sequence between Ultimate Polarity and other cosmic realities, Zhu Xi’s thought evolved during several stages in his life. By probing the intellectual dynamics which led to these changes, we can better understand Zhu Xi. By analyzing both the advantages and the disadvantages of Zhu Xi’s thought as it was manifested in this developmental way, we shall also have greater resources with which to figure out what ought to be the most reasonable form of Ru metaphysics in its contemporary context. In the remaining part of this section, I will examine the

²⁷⁵ “太極如一木生上，分而為枝幹，又分而生花生葉，生生不窮。到得成果子，裡面又有生生不窮之理，生將出去，又是無限太極，更無停息。” Zhu Xi, 《朱子語類》七十五, quoted by Chen, *The Study*: 119.

development of Zhu Xi's metaphysical thought, and try to appreciate its strength as well as to point out its potential weakness as he revised them over time.

I The Translation of *Li* (理)

Li (理, pattern-principle) and *Qi* (氣, vital-energy) are the basic dyad of categories in Zhu Xi's metaphysics. Like the Greek conceptual pair of matter and form, *Qi* is the basic cosmic stuff, while *Li* is the principle governing how the stuff gets organized. From a comparative perspective with Greek metaphysics, we can say that *Qi* answers the question of where a thing is from, while *Li* answers the question of what a thing is in contrast to other things. However, because the Chinese cosmological view is typically processual, we have to keep in mind that both *Qi* and *Li* have a distinctly dynamic feature that is not explicitly emphasized by their Greek counterparts of matter and form. Perhaps, it is more accurate to say that *Qi* answers the question where the energy of a thing's becoming is from, while *Li* answers how a thing comes to be in a harmonizing process with other becoming things.

Inspired by Prof. Stephen Angle's discussion in his book, *Sagehood: the Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy*, I define *Li* as "the dynamic and harmonious way in which a set of cosmic realities fit together." This act of "fitting-together" can emerge spontaneously, which is consistent, in the eyes of ancient Chinese philosophers, with the way most natural phenomena emerge. In contrast, for the human world, *Li* must be realized by human efforts. Overall, the key ideal of Ruism is to have the entire human society fit together, both within itself and with the environing cosmos.

There are several benefits for understanding *Li* in this way.

First, as mentioned briefly, this definition refers to *Li* in both the cosmological and the anthropological domains.

Second, it does not deny the individuality of things. This is because every thing is also itself a set of realities, and only when this set of realities dynamically and harmoniously fit together to a certain degree, can the thing maintain its individuality without falling apart. As was shown throughout Chinese intellectual history, the Song and Ming Ru tradition used its emphasis on “nature” (性) to counter the Buddhist teaching of “no self-nature” (無自性), and therefore it is very important for the Song and Ming Ruist tradition to anchor its philosophical discourse about human individuality in an understanding of *Li*.

Third, this understanding of *Li* specifies that a self-harmonized form of individuality cannot be achieved unless the individual fits together with other sets of cosmic realities in its environment. In this way, the idea of “relationship” is also grounded. In my view, some western interpreters tend to overemphasize the “correlative” aspect of ancient Chinese cosmology and ethics. Insofar as they have emphasized insights highlighting the salient nature of ancient Chinese thought in contrast to some parts of western thought such as extreme individualism, they are right. Therefore, I believe they can also find resonance with my understanding of *Li*.

Fourth, this “fitting-together” language is particularly good for interpreting Zhu Xi’s thought. This is because for Zhu Xi, *Li* refer not only to the intelligible features that a set of cosmic stuff — the vital-energy— shows us, but it also refers to the highest ontological principle, Ultimate Polarity. In this way, the *Yijing*’s sentence, “Ultimate

Polarity creates two modes (*Yin* and *Yang*),” is interpreted by Zhu Xi to mean, “Li creates *Qi*” (理生氣). Nevertheless, in the Ruist metaphysics exemplified by Zhu Xi’s view, the entire universe can only be seen as “fits together” from the perspective of Ultimate Polarity, since Ultimate Polarity is the singular ontological principle that creates all and grounds all. Therefore, if we extrapolate with an extension of the term “set of cosmic realities” to include all possible cosmic realities, then Ultimate Polarity, as the supreme *Li* for Zhu Xi, can have these realities “fit together” in the most abstract sense.

Since we now understand the meaning of *Li* as such, we can discuss a bit more about its English translation, which has been a key issue of comparative philosophy in English scholarship for decades.

The etymology of the character 理 refers to the pattern of veins and figures on a piece of jade or on a pebble, according to which the jade or pebbles can be differentiated from one another. In classical Ruism, 理 could either refer to the principle of natural phenomenon, such as the verse, “to see the great *Li* in the cosmos,” in *Xunzi* indicates. Or, it may be referring to moral principles in accordance with which the Ruist rituals were invented and maintained, such as is being indicated by the verse, “The *raison d’être* of Ritual is *Li*” (禮者，理也) in the *Book of Rites*. Note that the impressive use of 理 in the opening chapter of the *Appended Texts*, which I cited in chapter five, referred to both meanings. For western learners, the greatest difficulty in translating 理 is that *Li*, for Ru thinkers, is both descriptive and prescriptive. Or should I say, it is both natural and moral. For example, if we use my above definition of *Li* as “the dynamic and harmonious way in

which a set of cosmic realities fits together,” we will know that if we understand the *Li* in the natural world, we will, at first, take the *Li* of things to be referring to some instrumental values to be used in human endeavors. We can try to have human behaviors *fit into* the *Li* of the surrounding environment and thereby realize more human-related harmonies. However, what is more important is that by pondering how the all-inclusive set of cosmic realities, i.e., the universe, fit together, Ruists’ mind-hearts can be aesthetically galvanized such that they grasp the values of objective natural entities, and then try to accommodate them in the human world. Therefore, the world of *Li* can be seen as a holistic world consisting of a value-laden anthropo-cosmic continuum. Knowing their nature is also knowing humans themselves, and vice versa.

Based upon these features of *Li*, its traditional English translations fumble. If we try to maintain its etymology and translate it as “pattern,” then its prescriptive meaning is lost.²⁷⁶ If we try to emphasize its intelligible characteristic and interpret it as “principle,” it loses its aesthetic connotation since, when the English word “principle” is used to describe natural phenomena it will mostly sound like it is describing a scientific theorem. Prof. Stephen Angle’s translation, “coherence,” does not quite fit either. The major problem of “coherence” is that it smooths out the Ru worldview too much. Natural disasters, like floods and earthquakes, and unavoidable human predicaments, such as disease and gratuitous suffering, have their *Li*, but these *Li* are hardly to be depicted as

²⁷⁶ This is also the reason that I think Stephen Angle’s and Justin Tiwald’s new way of translation of *Li* as a capitalized “Pattern” in their book, *Neo-Confucianism: a Philosophical Introduction* (Polity, 2017) doesn’t entirely fit. No matter whether capitalized or not, the word “pattern” cannot convey two meanings well, for *Li* are both normative ethical principles human behaviors must comply with, and are also the ultimate ontological principle, *Taiji*, which creates and grounds all cosmic realities in the world.

“coherent” unless we have a very abstract understanding of “coherence.”²⁷⁷ This is also the reason that I insist upon using vague terms such as “the dynamic and harmonious way in which a set of cosmic realities fits together” to define *Li per se*, because from the all-inclusive and most abstract perspective of Ultimate Polarity, the “dynamic harmony” that enables all cosmic realities to fit together can then be appreciated in the loosest sense that all realities exist and come to be together in the unsummed whole of the cosmic process. This does not imply that realities are necessarily “coherent” with one another, anyway.

In a word, just like some other Ruist concepts such as 氣 (vital-energy), 儒 (literati), 士 (scholar-official), in the case of 理, we cannot find a single English word or phrase to perfectly match its original Ru meaning. Instead, I follow the main trend of current English scholarship to translate *Li* either as “principle,” or “pattern-principle.” I will include the original Chinese character in my translation if the ideas of the Chinese sentences cannot be illuminated otherwise.

II. Dualism of *Li* and *Qi* in the first stage of Zhu Xi’s understanding of Ultimate Polarity.

I follow Chen Lai [陈来] in dividing Zhu Xi’s thought into three stages concerning *Li* and *Qi* in relation to Zhu Xi’s understanding of Ultimate Polarity,²⁷⁸

²⁷⁷ One of the most extensive research on the concept of *Li*, tentatively translated by the author as coherence, in ancient Chinese philosophies, is from Brook Ziporyn, *Ironies of Oneness and Difference: Coherence in Early Chinese Thought – Prolegomena to the Study of Li* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012) and *Beyond Oneness and Difference: Li in Chinese Buddhist Thought and Its Antecedents* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013). Dr. Ziporyn discusses the advantages and disadvantages of the translation in varying places of the two volumes, and they are highly recommendable for readers to delve into details of the term as it is used by all major schools in ancient Chinese thought.

²⁷⁸ Chen Lai 陈来, *A Study on Master Zhu’s Philosophy* 朱子哲学研究, 华东师范大学出版社, 2000.

though my understanding of the core features of Zhu Xi's thought at each stage is different from Chen Lai's.

The first stage is manifested in Zhu Xi's commentary on Zhou Dunyi's works, including his commentaries on the *Diagram of Ultimate Polarity*, the *Explanation of the Diagram of Ultimate Polarity* (EUPD), and the *Book of Penetration* (BP). I summarize this stage of Zhu Xi's thought as an ontological dualism of *Li* and *Qi*, because Zhu Xi didn't think *Li* capable of creating *Qi*. Neither did he think that *Li* was ontologically prior to and thus able to be independent from *Qi*. My argument is as follows:

In interpreting the opening sentence in Zhou Dunyi's IDUP, Zhu Xi says:

“(The upper circle in the *Diagram of Ultimate Polarity*) stands for ‘Non-polar and yet supreme Polarity,’ which is the fundamental substance (本體) by which *yang* arises from activity and *yin* from stillness. But it (*wuji-taiji*) cannot be separated from *yin* and *yang*; it is precisely *yin* and *yang* which indicate the fundamental (substance). It is only for the sake of speech that they are distinguished from *yin* and *yang*.”²⁷⁹

Here, what Zhu Xi means by “fundamental substance” is not totally clear. But it is clear that as the fundamental substance of the vital-energy of *yin* and *yang*, the non-polar Ultimate Polarity is understood by Zhu Xi to be inseparable from them. In other words, for Zhu Xi, the actual movement of *yin/yang* vital-energies is always there, and the non-polar Ultimate Polarity is just what is used to explain why there is such a movement.

²⁷⁹ “此（太極）所謂無極而太極也，所以動而陽、靜而陰之本體也。然非有以離乎陰陽也，即陰陽而指其本體，不雜乎陰陽而為言耳。” Zhu Xi 朱熹，“太極圖說解。” See Adler, *Construction*, 45.

Another two commentarial verses from the *Explanation of the Diagram of Ultimate Polarity* (EUPD) [太極圖說解] may enhance this interpretation:

Thus, Ultimate Polarity is what is wonderful about the fundamental substance; what is moving and still is the “occasion” (機, *ji*) on which it (Ultimate Polarity) rides and thus manifests itself. Ultimate Polarity is the *Dao* beyond shape, while *yin* and *yang* are the utensils under shape (i.e., “utensil,” 器, is the concrete/shapable manifestation of the shapeless *Dao*). In this way, observing from what is evident, one can see that while activity and stillness are not simultaneous, and *yin* and *yang* are not the same, nevertheless there is nowhere that the Ultimate Polarity does not exist in them. Observing it in terms of its subtlety, it is full of profundity, and the principles (理, *li*) of activity and stillness, *yin* and *yang*, are completely contained in it.²⁸⁰

It is certain that Ultimate Polarity and *yin/yang* are not two principles. However, since Ultimate Polarity has no image while *yin/yang* have their vital-energies, how can we not differentiate between them what is upper and what is below? This is the reason that there is a differentiation between *Dao* and utensils [器].

Therefore, Master Cheng says: “*Dao* is beyond shape, and utensils are under shape. We must say this. However, we must also know that *Dao* is utensil and

²⁸⁰ “蓋太極者，本然之妙也；動靜者，所乘之機也。太極，形而上之道也；陰陽，形而下之器也。是以自其著者而觀之，則動靜不同時，陰陽不同位，而太極無不在焉。自其微者而觀之，則沖漠無朕，而動靜陰陽之理，已悉具於其中矣。” Ibid., 175. Minor changes have been made to the translation.

utensil is also *Dao*.” If we can understand this and then extrapolate it to other related topics, then our learning will not deviate.²⁸¹

I will quote another saying from Zhu Xi’s letter written in the same period before my final analysis of Zhu Xi’s thought at this stage:

“Ultimate Polarity means the utmost point of *Li*. *Li* implies the existence of things, and there is no order of priority between them. Therefore, the *Yijing* verse, ‘there is Ultimate Polarity in the Change,’ means that Ultimate Polarity is within *yin/yang* and thus is not outside *yin/yang*. ...The existence of *Li* entails the existence of *Qi*, and *Qi* always has two forms. Therefore, the *Yijing* says that ‘Ultimate Polarity creates two modes.’”²⁸²

From these quotations, we find that the “fundamental substance” mentioned in the first quotation is actually the *Li* of *yin/yang* vital-energy. Therefore, Ultimate Polarity is *Li*, and it is thus the reason that *yang* gets moved and *yin* gets stilled, and hence, *yin/yang* vital-energies are differentiated from each other.

However, in this stage of Zhu Xi’s thought, *Li* cannot be said to create *Qi* yet, since according to his initial explanation, *Li* is always within *Qi* and cannot be separated

²⁸¹ “陰陽太極，不可謂有二理必矣。然太極無象，而陰陽有氣，則亦安得而無上下之殊哉！此其所以為道器之別也。故程子曰：‘形而上為道，形而下為器，須著如此說。然器，亦道也，道，亦器也。’得此意而推之，則庶乎其不偏矣。” Zhu Xi 朱熹，“太極圖解附論” in 《朱子全書》卷 23 (合肥：安徽教育出版社，2010)，第 77 頁。Translation is my own.

²⁸² “太極之義，正謂理之極致耳，有是理即有是物，無先後次序之可言，故曰易有太極，則是太極乃在陰陽之中，而非在陰陽之外。…有是理即有是氣，氣則無不兩者，故易曰太極生兩儀。” Zhu Xi 朱熹《朱子文集》三十七，“答程可久第三”，quoted by Chen, *The Study*, 82. Translation is my own.

from *Qi*. Ultimately, *Li* remains at the same ontological rank as *Qi* since *Li* and *Qi* are said to be not two separate principles.

Following my analysis of Zhou Dunyi, we see that Zhu Xi explicitly denies there is any intermediary stage of “primordial vital-energy” between Ultimate Polarity and *yin/yang* vital-energy. In this way, any form of vital-energy must be either *yin* or *yang*, and they have their explanatory principles within Ultimate Polarity. Since Zhu Xi doesn’t think it is *Li* that creates *yin/yang* vital-energy, and instead views Ultimate Polarity as the supreme *Li*, which is just what explains how *yin/yang* moves and thus are differentiated from each other, I will summarize Zhu Xi’s thought at this stage as an ontological dualism.

In this stage, Zhu Xi takes the existence of *yin/yang* vital-energies, the two most basic forms of cosmic realities, for granted. In other words, he doesn’t intend to probe the ultimate reason for where the being of *yin/yang* vital-energies comes from. In this sense, the principle of Ultimate Polarity, as the *Li* of vital-energy which always exists within the functioning of vital-energy, is mainly used for explaining what *yin/yang* vital-energy is, rather than where it comes from.

Correspondingly, the “non-polar” feature of “Ultimate Polarity,” at this stage of Zhu Xi’s thought, is more apt as a description of the non-*Qi* feature of *Li*, rather than as the unconditionality of Ultimate Polarity’s creative power which brings either form of *Qi* into being. In other words, since vital-energy is always within shape as “utensils,” the non-*Qi* feature of *Li* is typically construed by Zhu Xi as beyond shape and “without

sound, without smell” (無聲無臭). It is understandable that principles, which are used to explain the movement of shaped realities, cannot be said to have the same shape anymore. Just as in the Platonic theory of forms, the form of redness cannot be said to have the same visible features as a concrete mode of redness that a flower, for instance, has. In this sense, Zhu Xi’s thought has not yet delved into the sequence of ontological dependence between “Ultimate Polarity” and “two modes” which is very explicitly addressed by both the *Yijing*’s text and Zhou Dunyi’s IDUP.

III. The Ontological Priority of *Li* over *Qi*.

The first stage of Zhu Xi’s thought contains an intrinsic difficulty because both the *Yijing*’s and Zhou Dunyi’s texts explicitly articulate the notion that it is Ultimate Polarity which creates *yin/yang*. If we follow Zhu Xi’s interpretation and understand Ultimate Polarity to be the *Li* of vital-energy, while simultaneously claiming that *Li* is always within *Qi* and can’t be separated from it, it will be very hard to get to the fact that it is “Ultimate Polarity”, *Li*, which creates *Qi*, and thus is ontologically prior to *Qi*.

It was through a series of letter exchanges with other eminent Ru thinkers that Zhu Xi finally found his more developed idea: *Li* is not only within *Qi*, but also ontologically prior to *Qi*. Among these exchanges, the debate between Zhu Xi and the Lu brothers, Lu Zimei (陆子美) and Lu Zijing (陆子静), played a crucial role. My analysis of the second stage of Zhu Xi’s metaphysical thought will therefore pivot upon this debate.

There are three major points upon which the Lu Brothers (mainly Lu Zijing, also known as Lu Jiuyuan 陸九淵, a pioneering Ru thinker of the School of Mind-Heart 心學 in Song and Ming Ruism) disagree with Zhu Xi:

First, both Lu brothers and Zhu Xi agree that Ultimate Polarity is the root of all changes in the world. However, for the Lu brothers, in order to articulate the foundational role of the creative power of Ultimate Polarity, there is no need to add another phrase “non-polar” before it. They think this is redundant and will make the distinctive Ru cosmology, which is founded in “solid principle” (實理) rather than “vacuous principle” (虛理), sound too Daoist.

Second, Zhu Xi construes the meaning of the character 極 in 太極 (Ultimate Polarity) as “the utmost pole” or “ultimacy” (致極). For Zhu Xi, because “Ultimate Polarity” is the ultimate creative cosmic power beyond which nothing can be said, we need another phrase for “non-polar” so as to characterize its unconditionality.²⁸³ However, Lu Jiuyuan 陸九淵, the younger brother, thinks 極 should be construed as “centrality” (中), meaning that “Ultimate Polarity” is the root of all cosmic changes, and thus stands in the center of the entire universe. In Lu’s view, accordingly, people can take the ontological features of Ultimate Polarity’s creative power to refer to the ultimate moral standards for human deeds. In this sense, there is really no need to add the phrase “non-

²⁸³ This thought of Zhu Xi is in the second stage, which I will analyze more in what follows.

polar” to “Ultimate Polarity”, since this will make human beings lose their moral standards and thus become morally disoriented and “non-centered.”

Third, Zhu Xi understands anything said about *yin/yang* is up to *yin/yang* vital-energy, and therefore, that those sayings belong to learning about “what is under shape” (形而下). However, Lu Jiuyuan thinks, according to the *Yijing* verses, “One *yin* and one *yang* is called *Dao*,” and “What is beyond shape is called *Dao*,” that *yin/yang* is already *Dao*, and thus, that sayings about *yin/yang* really pertain to “what is beyond shape” (形而上).

We can see that the first two points are interrelated. As for the third, it concerns how to correctly understand the ontological rank of the categorical dyad of *yin/yang*. Correspondingly, Zhu Xi’s answers to the first two challenges are also interconnected, and for us they are also the most important since they revealed Zhu Xi’s further understanding of the creative sequence between Ultimate Polarity and *yin/yang* in this, his second stage of thought. In the following, I will quote and first analyze Zhu Xi’s answers to the first two points, and then express my own opinion in regard to Zhu Xi and Lu Jiuxuan’s controversy over the third point.

In replying to Lu Zimei’s doubt as to whether we need to add “non-polar” before “Ultimate Polarity,” Zhu Xi answers:

“If ‘non-polarity’ is not mentioned, Ultimate Polarity will be understood to be equal to a thing, and therefore it cannot be qualified to be the root of all changes in the world. If ‘Ultimate Polarity’ is not mentioned, non-polarity will degenerate into pure

emptiness and quiescence (空寂), and then it cannot qualify as the root of all changes in the world, either.”²⁸⁴

This is to say that the first sentence of Zhou Dunyi’s IDUP, “Non-polar, and yet Ultimate Polarity,” describes two intimately interrelated aspects of Ultimate Polarity as the foundational ontological creative power. Non-polarity connotes its unconditionality. However, non-polarity does not mean that Ultimate Polarity doesn’t function. In other words, non-polarity is not an opposing positive power to the power of Ultimate Polarity. To say “non-polarity is Ultimate Polarity” just implies that the ontological creative power of Ultimate Polarity, because of its ultimate status, is not conditioned by anything. Correspondingly, since “Ultimate Polarity” is not conditioned, it is not any created thing. Therefore, to say Ultimate Polarity is non-polar means that it doesn’t belong to the ontological domain of what is created. In a word, “non-polarity” and “Ultimate Polarity” are merely the same thing, an ontological creative power which conditions all creatures without itself being thus conditioned. In a comparative perspective, we have to conclude that Zhu Xi’s understanding of “Ultimate Polarity” achieves the same ontological depth as Plotinus’ thought concerning his idea of “Oneness” as the “generator of being,” or Paul Tillich’s thought in his idea of “God” as the “ground of being.” This also locates Zhu Xi in the Ruist “*generatio ex nihilo*” metaphysical tradition defined by the *Appended Texts* and by Wang Bi and Han Kangbo as I explained in Chapter Five.

In answering a similar doubt from Lu Jiuyuan, the younger brother, Zhu Xi further explained his understanding of the “non-polar” feature of Ultimate Polarity:

²⁸⁴ “然殊不知不言無極則太極同於一物而不足為萬化之根，不言太極則無極淪於空寂而不能為萬化之根。” “答陸子美一”， in 《朱子文集》三十六， quoted by Chen, *The Study*: 83.

Master Zhou characterizes Ultimate Polarity as “non-polar” because it has neither position nor shape. Ultimate Polarity is able to exist before no thing exists, while simultaneously, it still establishes itself after things are generated. It is able to exist outside *yin* and *yang*, while simultaneously, it still functions within *yin* and *yang*. It is omni-present and thus runs throughout the entire universe; nevertheless, at the beginning, neither sound, smell nor any kind of influence can be found in it. Now if you think the word “non-polarity” is unnecessary (for depicting this nature of Ultimate Polarity), then you actually take Ultimate Polarity as something with shape and with position.²⁸⁵

It can be seen from this answer how different Zhu Xi’s metaphysical thought differs from what it was in its first stage. In the first stage, as I quoted above, Zhu Xi thought that “Ultimate Polarity is within *yin/yang* and thus, is not outside *yin/yang*.” However, here, Zhu Xi said that Ultimate Polarity “is able to exist outside *yin* and *yang*, while simultaneously, still functioning within *yin* and *yang*.” It is legitimate for us to claim that here, Zhu Xi finally catches the exact meaning of “ontological dependence” implied by the original *Yijing*’s and Zhou Dunyi’s sentence, “Ultimate Polarity creates two modes.” From the perspective of “ontological dependence,” Ultimate Polarity is ontologically prior to the two modes, while the two modes and other concrete forms of cosmic realities are all manifestations of Ultimate Polarity. In this sense, it can be said

²⁸⁵ “周子所以謂之無極，正以其無方所，無形狀，以為在無物之前，而未嘗不立於有物之後，以為在陰陽之外，而未嘗不行乎陰陽之中，以為通貫全體，無乎不在，則又初無聲臭影響之可言也。今乃深詆無極之不然，則是直以太極為有形狀有方所矣。” “答陆子静第五”，in 《朱子文集》三十六，quoted in Chen, *The Study*: 85.

that Ultimate Polarity exists even before no thing exists, since it is Ultimate Polarity that creates everything. On the other hand, Ultimate Polarity still “establishes” or “functions” when things in the universe are changing, since concrete cosmic realities are all manifestations of the ultimate ontological creative power of Ultimate Polarity. To be fair, we must remember that no sequence of priority mentioned in this quotation is temporal. Ultimate Polarity is able to exist “before” any things exist. The “before” here means ontological priority. By the same token, Ultimate Polarity exists “outside” *yin* and *yang*. This “outside” means the ontological independence of Ultimate Polarity from its created outcomes since it is ontologically prior.

With Zhu Xi’s answer to Lu Jiuxuan’s third challenge about how to construe the meaning of 極, we will be able to understand the reason that Zhu Xi could have reached this exact idea of “ontological dependence” in his new understanding of Ultimate Polarity at this second stage:

“What is the Ultimate Polarity mentioned by the *Great Commentary*? It is the principle of two modes, four images, and eight trigrams; that principle exists before them, while simultaneously being embodied within them. It is thorough and extends to the ultimate point (of beings). There is no name able to name it. Therefore, the sage called it ‘Ultimate Polarity’. ... The meaning of 極 is ultimacy (致極).”²⁸⁶

²⁸⁶ “且夫《大傳》之「太極」者，何也？即兩儀、四象、八卦之理，具於三者之先，而蘊於三者之內者也。聖人之意，正以其究竟至極，無名可名，故特謂之太極。…極者，至極而已。”

“答陸子靜五”，in 《朱子文集》卷三十六，《朱子全書》，p. 1567.

In Zhu Xi's further explanation, the meaning of "centrality" can be seen to be an outcome of the primary meaning of 極 as ultimacy. For Zhu Xi, only because the creativity of Ultimate Polarity is ultimate, human beings' deeds are conditioned by it and thus can refer to it as the ultimate moral standard. However, the most important thing for us in this quotation is that it shows the intellectual origin of Zhu Xi's idea. It is clear that Zhu Xi's idea of "ontological dependence" comes from the operational process for how the two modes, four images and eight trigrams in the *Yijing* symbology derive from each other and ultimately from Ultimate Polarity. As I discussed in Zhou Dunyi's case, Zhou's *Diagram of Ultimate Polarity* also intends to illustrate an ontological cosmogony, or "chain of being," which corresponds to this *Yijing* operational process. In a word, we have to conclude that this seminal *Yijing* text has a foundational role for all possible ontological thinking in Ruism. Zhou Dunyi and Zhu Xi are eminent representatives of this type of thinking in Song and Ming Ruism. And their predecessors can clearly be identified in Wang Bi's and Han Kangbo's commentaries on the same text. This is because Zhu Xi's words, "extends to the ultimate point (of beings)" and "no name able to name it" are so reminiscent of Wang and Han's words which I quoted in Chapter Five. Hence, we have to conclude that Wang Bi, Han Kangbo, Zhou Dunyi and Zhu Xi belong to the same lineage of Chinese Ru metaphysics, the "*generatio ex nihilo*" lineage which is comparable to the "*creatio ex nihilo*" of the Greek-European Christian tradition.

Through such exchanges of letters with the Lu brothers and other distinguished Ru scholars, we find that Zhu Xi has fully reached the idea of the "ontological priority" of Ultimate Polarity over *yin/yang* vital-energies. Using the same character *Li* but with a

new understanding of its role in Ru cosmology, Zhu Xi furthermore paraphrases the ontological priority of Ultimate Polarity over *yin/yang* vital-energies as the ontological priority of *Li* over *Qi*. Therefore, in this stage of Zhu Xi's thought, we can find similar expressions as such:

“Ultimate Polarity creates *yin* and *yang*. This means *Li* creates *Qi*. After *yin* and *yang* are created, Ultimate Polarity is within them, and thus *Li* is also within *Qi*.”²⁸⁷

“(Ultimate Polarity) moves and then *yang* is created, it stills and then *yin* is created. The creative power referred to by the word ‘birth’ (生, *sheng*) is from Ultimate Polarity. ...Non-polar and yet Ultimate Polarity: this means non-being can create being (无能生有).”²⁸⁸

“Although *Qi* is created by *Li*, ...”²⁸⁹

Compared with the first stage of Zhu Xi's metaphysics, which I characterized as an ontological dualism of *Li* and *Qi*, there are two new features for this second stage: first, the radical expression, “non-being can create being,” refers to the ontological dependence of the entire world upon Ultimate Polarity, and thus Zhu Xi was not taking the being of *yin/yang* vital-energies for granted and instead was trying to answer where the world was ultimately from. Second, it is no longer the case that *Li* is to be thought of as a parallel principle to *Qi*, which purports to explain what a thing is rather than where the thing is from. Instead, Ultimate Polarity was still considered by Zhu Xi to be *Li*, but because of

²⁸⁷ “太極生陰陽，理生氣也。陰陽既生，太極在其中，理復在氣之內也” 《元公周先生濂溪集》上卷二，quoted by Chen, *The Study*: 91.

²⁸⁸ “動而生陽靜而生陰，說一生字便是見其自太極而來。……無極而太極，言無能生有也” 《朱子語類》九十四，quoted by Chen, *The Study*, 91.

²⁸⁹ “氣雖是理之所生，……” 《朱子語類》卷四，quoted by Chen, *the Study*: 91.

its ontological priority over all other derived cosmic realities, Zhu Xi thought *Li*, as a singular principle, could explain both where the world is from and how the beings within the world continue to be diversified on a daily new basis. We can now say that Zhu Xi's understanding of *Li* has achieved the same unconditionality, singularity, and thus, non-duality of the Good for Plato, of the Oneness for Plotinus, and of God in the Christian "*creatio ex nihilo*" tradition. In this sense, we can characterize this stage of Zhu Xi's metaphysics as an ontological monism of *Li*.

IV. The Confusing Use of the Term *Li* by Zhu Xi.

After Zhu Xi reached this insight concerning the ontological priority of *Li* over *Qi*, his metaphysical thought entered into its third and final stage in which the conceptual pair of *Li* and *Qi*, with their newly developed meanings, was used to tackle a number of issues in relation to metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and psychology, etc.

As I briefly discussed above, in Zhu Xi's case, *Li* can be defined generally as "the dynamic and harmonious way in which a set of cosmic realities fits together." However, because of the newly gained meaning of "ontological priority" of *Li* over *Qi* (which meaning I think can still be applicable to my definition of *Li*), and also because Zhu Xi still kept his first-stage conception of *Li* and used this same term *Li* to analyze a number of different issues, his words were somewhat confusing in this third stage of his writings.

As discussed above, seen from the perspective defined by the created realm of beings, *Li* and *Qi* ought to be thought of as located at the same ontological rank. *Qi*

explains where the energy of a thing's becoming comes from and *Li* explains how a thing comes to be in a harmonizing relationship with other things. Whether from a cosmologically temporal perspective or from an ontologically non-temporal one, there is neither priority nor posteriority concerning the realities that these two terms refer to. However, once *Li* was considered by Zhu Xi in his second stage of thought as ontologically prior to *Qi*, and Ultimate Polarity *per se* was also named *Li*, doing so increased the potential for confusing either the use of terms or the philosopher himself. I will use two examples from Zhu Xi's texts to illustrate the consequences of his incautious use of terms.

In one of Zhu Xi's letters in response to Liu Shuyi, he talks about the relationship between *Li* and *Qi*:

Li and *Qi* are absolutely two things. However, seen from the perspective of concrete things, the two are mixed with each other, and cannot be separated from each other. However, this doesn't deny the fact that they are originally two things. If seen from the perspective of *Li* (理; in this context, it also means 'seen logically'), a thing's principle exists even before the thing exists. However, in this case, only *Li* exists and the thing has not yet come into solid existence.²⁹⁰

In my view, this is a greatly confusing statement. From a *de facto* empirical perspective, neither the *Li* nor the *Qi* of any concrete thing should be said to be prior to the other.

Instead, they are equal and indispensable to each other in regard to their roles in

²⁹⁰ “所謂理與氣，此決是二物。但在物上看，則二物渾淪不可分開各在一處，然不害二物之各為一物也。若在理上看，則雖未有物，而已有物之理；然亦但有其理而已，未嘗實有是物。”“答刘叔一”，《文集》卷四十六，quoted by Chen, *The Study*: 92-93.

explaining concrete cosmic entities. Zhu Xi's metaphysical thought in its first stage backs up this interpretation. Only if *Li* is interpreted as Ultimate Polarity, the singular principle which is ontologically prior to any concrete principles which may explain both where a thing is from and what it is, we can safely say that even if a thing does not exist, its *Li* is able to be there. However, if we confuse these two very different meanings of *Li* and say, as Zhu Xi did in that quotation, that even if things don't exist, their *Li* are already there, this will very much sound like the idealism of Hegel whose view was that the entire cosmos is the unfolding of a pre-existing ideal world of absolute spirit. In this way, the creation of Ultimate Polarity would not be qualified as "unconditional" since its creativity would unfold in accordance with a pre-existing world of *Li*.

The second example is from a discussion between Zhu Xi and his correspondents about whether *Li* moves or is stills:

It is allowable to say Ultimate Polarity contains movement and stillness (this is from the perspective of its role as the fundamental substance (comment by Zhu Xi himself). It is also allowable to say Ultimate Polarity has movement and stillness (this is from the perspective of its running and performing function (comment by Zhu Xi himself). However, if it is said that Ultimate Polarity is the movement and the stillness, then this saying confuses the two domains of discourse —the one about what is beyond shape and the one about what is under shape. In this case,

the *Yijing* sentence, “there is Ultimate Polarity in cosmic changes” will become redundant.²⁹¹

Some one asked about the teaching, “*Li* is prior to *Qi*.” Zhu Xi answered: “It doesn’t need to say this. So far, who knows whether it is *Li* prior to *Qi* or *Qi* prior to *Li*? No alternative can be made clear. However, according to my guess, it should be the case that it is *Qi* which runs according to *Li*, and when *Qi* gathers, the *Li* is also within it. This is because *Qi* can come together, produce and make things up, while *Li* has neither emotions nor intentions, no calculations and thus no function for producing and making things up.”²⁹²

Zhu Xi’s thought in the first quoted letter is very clear, and it refers to Zhou Dunyi’s verse about how Ultimate Polarity produces *yin* and *yang* through its movement and stillness. In Zhu Xi’s mind, Ultimate Polarity is the reason that *yin* and *yang* are produced, so that the movement and stillness of *yin* and *yang* are the manifestations of the creative power of Ultimate Polarity. In this sense, it can be said that Ultimate Polarity contains the principle for the way in which *yin* and *yang* change, and that Ultimate Polarity is manifested in the form of the changes of *yin* and *yang*. However, it is illegitimate to say that Ultimate Polarity *per se* is the movement and stillness of *yin* and *yang*. This tends to confuse the cosmological and the ontological, i.e., the physical and metaphysical features

²⁹¹ “蓋謂太極含動靜則可，（以本體而言也，自注）。謂太極有動靜則可，（以流行而言也，自注）。若謂太極便是動靜，則是形而上下者不可分，而「易有太極」之言亦贅矣。”“答楊子直一”，《朱子文集》四十五，quoted by Chen, *The Study*: 101.

²⁹² “或問先有理後有氣之說。曰：‘不消如此說。而今知得他合下是先有理，後有氣邪；後有理，先有氣邪？皆不可得而推究。然以意度之，則疑此氣是依傍這理行。及此氣之聚，則理亦在焉。蓋氣則能凝結造作，理卻無情意，無計度，無造作。’”《朱子語類》卷一，recorded after Zhu Xi turned 69, quoted by Chen, *The Study*: 95.

of cosmic changes, and makes the original teaching in the *Yijing* ambiguous and redundant.

Zhu Xi's thought in the second quotation is also relatively clear. From the point of view of the created world, *Qi* explains where the dynamic features of things which are in the process of becoming ultimately come from, and *Li* explains how things which are in the process of becoming take place in relation to other things which are becoming. In this sense, *Li* is just the feature that the process of a thing's becoming presents to us. It is the intelligible principle underlying the dynamics of *Qi* and thus explains how *Qi* operates. In this sense, it is totally legitimate for Zhu Xi to say that it is *Qi* which produces and makes things up, while *Li* is just the way in which this generative process becomes organized.

However, if we read these two letters together, a great confusion will definitely arise. Because Zhu Xi also calls Ultimate Polarity *per se* by the name of *Li*, it is hardly legitimate for him to say that in general *Li* does not produce and make things up.

In a word, I think that the likely fault in Zhu Xi's unclear thinking and wording about the relationship between *Li* and *Qi* is due to his obscure use of the term *Li*. In comparing these ideas with the Greek-European Christian tradition of "*creatio ex nihilo*," philosophers in that tradition usually use one term when referring to the singular supreme principle and another term to distinguish it from the principle used for explaining what a thing is. For Plato, these are Demiurge and Form. For Plotinus, they are Oneness and Intellect. For medieval Christian thinkers, they are God and divine intellect. Although this western tradition has its own intrinsic difficulties to overcome, none are engendered by the confused use of terms as in Zhu Xi's case. Therefore, to improve Zhu Xi's

systematic metaphysics, I will suggest not using the term *Li* to name Ultimate Polarity *per se*. It is Ultimate Polarity which creates both *Qi* and *Li*, and thus *Qi* and *Li* belongs to the same ontological rank and are equally applicable for explaining concrete cosmic entities. In this way, the cognitive process for a Ru in probing how a cosmic entity changes will become totally empirical, since it will not be constrained by any potentially pre-existing idea of *Li*, and correspondingly, the creativity of Ultimate Polarity will be secured as truly unconditional.

As will be shown in the following sections, some later versions of Ru cosmology in Song and Ming Ruism after Zhu Xi was actually oriented toward my suggestion.

V. Zhu Xi's view of Lao Zi

The last thing I need to reflect on about Zhu Xi's metaphysics is his view towards Lao Zi and the related Daoist cosmology.

According to my analysis in Chapter Five, Lao Zi's and other Daoist philosophical cosmologies played a significant role in the formation of Ruism's corresponding thought. It was Wang Bi and Han Kangbo who read the distinctively Daoist phrase, "being comes from non-being" (有生于无), and construed it to refer to the unconditionality of the *Dao*'s ultimate ontological creative power proposed in the *Yijing* text, following which the Ru commentarial tradition on the *Yijing* finally reached the idea of Ultimate Polarity as "*generatio ex nihilo*." According to the current chapter, their way of interpreting the *Yijing* was followed by Zhou Dunyi and Zhu Xi. I have already analyzed the fundamental difference between Lao Zi's *Dao De Jing* and Confucius' *Appended Texts* in Chapter Five. Following this analysis, it will be of value for us to

probe how Zhu Xi understood the Daoist founding text. This will be salutary for our understanding of Zhu Xi's own metaphysics.

The following two quotations are from the first stage of Zhu Xi's metaphysical thought:

“The gist of (Zhou Dunyi's) *Diagram*, which illustrates the lost meaning of the *Yijing*, is different from Lao Zi. Lao Zi thinks things are created from being, and being is created from non-being. He proposes a beginning and an end for cosmic changes, and this view is the opposite of the *Diagram*.”²⁹³

“The existence of *Li* implies that of *Qi*, and *Qi* always has two forms; therefore the *Yijing* says Ultimate Polarity creates two modes. In comparison, Lao Zi says *Dao* creates One at first, and then One creates Two. Lao Zi's insight is therefore not refined.”²⁹⁴

Earlier, I characterized Zhu Xi's metaphysics in its first stage as an ontological dualism between *Li* and *Qi*. Although he had not yet reached the idea of an ontological priority of *Li* over *Qi*, his understanding of the creative relationship between Ultimate Polarity, the two modes and four images, which are portrayed in the *Yijing* text, is definitely non-temporal. In contrast, he understands Lao Zi's cosmology, which centers upon the creative sequence starting from the nothingness of *Dao*, and then the being of Oneness, Two, etc., as temporal. This highlights the ontological feature of Zhu Xi's

²⁹³ “此一圖之綱領，大易之遺意，與老子所謂物生於有、有生於無，而以造化為真有始終者，正南北矣。”《文集》四十五，《答楊子直第一》，quoted by Chen, *The Study*, 80.

²⁹⁴ “有是理即有是氣，氣則無不兩者，故易曰太極生兩儀。而老子乃謂道先生一而後乃生二，則其察理亦不精矣。”“答程可久第三”，《朱子文集》三十七，quoted by Chen, *The Study*: 82.

metaphysics. In my view, this ontological feature runs through Zhu Xi's thought consistently. In other words, Zhu Xi has the clear intention to differentiate temporal cosmological thinking from non-temporal ontological thinking in his work.

In the second stage of Zhu Xi's metaphysics, Lu Jiuyuan once accused Zhu Xi of using the word "non-polarity," which was Zhou Dunyi's and Zhu Xi's way of interpreting Ultimate Polarity, as being too Daoist. Zhu Xi's first response was that Ruism is a progressive tradition, and thus that though there were no prior Ru talks about the "non-polar" feature of Ultimate Polarity that doesn't mean that later Ru cannot talk of it. Neither does it mean that this new way of thinking cannot reach the truth about the ultimate creative power of Ultimate Polarity. Beyond this, we find two other points in Zhu Xi's responding letters which tried to differentiate Zhu Xi's thought from Daoism:

"I (Zhu Xi) think that when Lao Zi talks of being (有) and non-being (無), he thinks these are two separate things. However, when Master Zhou talks of being and non-being, they are the same thing. Their thoughts are opposite to each other like north is to south and fire is to water."²⁹⁵

"When Lao Zi says 'to return to non-polarity', 'non-polarity' here means indefiniteness (無窮). It is like saying, 'Pupil Zhuang enters into the door of

295 “熹詳老氏之言有無，以有無為二；周子之言有無，以有無為一，正如南北水火之相反。” “答陸子靜第五”，《朱子全書》，1571.

indefiniteness, and thus travels in a wild field of non-polarity.’ This is not the meaning of Master Zhou.”²⁹⁶

The first quotation reemphasizes Zhu Xi’s insight which is shared in the first and second stages of his metaphysical thought: non-polarity is one feature of Ultimate Polarity, and thus it is none other than Ultimate Polarity. Instead, Lao Zi’s thought is viewed by Zhu Xi as understanding non-being to be separated from and prior to being, and in Zhu Xi’s view, Lao Zi’s philosophy has therefore no real foundation compared with its Ru counterpart.

The most interesting point for us is from the second quotation. Here, Zhu Xi denies that “non-polarity” could mean the “indefiniteness” of a wild field. When I examine Zhou Dunyi’s thought, I differentiated Han’s interpretation of Ultimate Polarity into two schools. One belonged to Wang Bi and Han Kangbo, which uses the unconditional “non-being” to explain Ultimate Polarity and thus is comparable to the western “*creatio ex nihilo*” tradition. The other understands “Ultimate Polarity” to be an undifferentiated whole of primordial vital-energy, and “non-being” in this school means the formless nature of this primordial whole. We can see that in denying that “non-polarity” can mean the “indefiniteness” of a wild field, Zhu Xi clearly separated himself from the second Han school which construed Ultimate Polarity to be primordial vital-energy. This stance can be confirmed by Zhu Xi’s frequent statement that he doesn’t believe there is a kind of vital-energy which can be without *yin/yang* determinations.

²⁹⁶ “老子‘復歸於無極’，‘無極’乃無窮之義。如‘莊生入無窮之門，以遊無極之野’雲爾，非若周子所言之義也。” Ibid., 1569.

In a word, Zhu Xi's view towards Lao Zi and the related Daoist cosmology is similar to my own which I expressed in the Chapter Five. I must confess to my readers that my reading of Lao Zi took place much earlier than my reading of Zhu Xi, so the similarity was a coincidence, although from a logical perspective, both Zhu Xi's and my own reading are implied by our understanding of the logic of the *Dao De Jing* and the *Appended Texts*. Last but not least, we can clearly see from Zhu Xi's views towards Lao Zi that his Ru metaphysics follows the tradition of Wang Bi, Han Kangbo, and Zhou Dunyi, and is thus comparable to the western tradition of "*creatio ex nihilo*."

6.3 A Minor Challenge Made by Cao Duan about Zhu Xi's Understanding of "Ultimate Polarity"

Because of the huge success of Zhu Xi's Ru learning in the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368 C.E.), his thought was not significantly challenged until Wang Yang-ming in the Middle Ming Dynasty. However, Wang Yang-ming's differences with Zhu Xi are more about ethics than metaphysics, so that it is even more difficult for us to find a significant challenge to Zhu Xi's metaphysics in Song and Ming Ruism after his commentary on Zhou Dunyi's *Diagram* became well-known. However, as my analysis shows, Zhu Xi's final achievement in Ru metaphysics was not perfect. He is confusing in his use of the term "principle" (理) which leads to a potentially confusing conception of "Ultimate Polarity." It seems that what later Ru metaphysicians need to do in order to improve Zhu Xi's system is "to chip off" and then "to bind back up." They need to chip off the unnecessarily confusing thoughts due to his less than clearly defined use of terms, and then bind up the Ru metaphysics surrounding the central idea of "Ultimate Polarity" in a

more coherent way, but whether they can succeed in doing so is open to debate. In order to illustrate this process, I will take Cao Duan and Luo Qinchun as two exemplary Ru metaphysicians during the period of Ming Ruism.

I Cao Duan's Understanding of Ultimate Polarity and Principle (理, *Li*)

Cao Duan's thought was once recommended by later Ruist intellectual historians as "the crown of the learning of *Li* at the beginning of Ming Dynasty (明初理學之冠)."²⁹⁷ This phrase speaks to the close connection between Cao Duan's thought and Zhu Xi's. By the same token, Cao Duan's understanding of Ultimate Polarity maintained a basically congruent format to Zhu Xi. He said:

"Ultimate Polarity is another name for *Li* (理, pattern-principle). It is where the Way of *Tian* is established, and how the solid principle acts. This is the origin of the learning of *Li*, and actually drives from *Tian*."²⁹⁸

"'Polarity' means 'the utmost pole' (至極), and this is another name for principle. 'Ultimate' (太) means nothing greater can be added. As for principle, it has no image, thus invisible; no sound or vital-energy, and thus inaudible. It has no boundary or position to be attached, while its function pervades heaven and earth, penetrates into the ancient and contemporary. It is so all-encompassing, how can we add anything?"²⁹⁹

²⁹⁷ Zhang Tingyu 張廷玉 (《明史》, 中華書局: 1974): 7238 -7239.

²⁹⁸ "太極, 理之別名耳, 天道之立, 實理所為; 理學之源, 實天所出。" Cao Duan 曹端, "太極圖說述解序", 《周子全書》卷五, 商務印書館萬有文庫本, 第 79 頁。As no English translation is available, I have translated the text on my own.

²⁹⁹ "極為至極, 理之別名也。太者, 大無以加之稱。...惟理, 則無形象之可見, 無聲氣之可聞, 無方所之可指, 而實充塞天地, 貫徹古今, 大孰加焉。" Cao Duan 曹端, 《曹端集》, 北京: 中華書局, 2003, 第 11-12 頁; No English translation is available, so I have translated it on my own.

As for the relationship between principle (理, *Li*) and vital-energy (氣, *Qi*), Cao Duan's thoughts are also similar to Zhu Xi's:

“Vital-energy is created by pattern-principle, and pattern-principle becomes solid because of vital-energy. There is no separation between them.”

“Ultimate Polarity is the pattern-principle. *Yin* and *Yang* are the vital-energy. The existence of pattern-principle implies that of vital-energy. Where *Qi* is, *Li* is, and how can *Li* be separated from *Qi*?”

“Although *Li* is within *Qi*, *Li* is not mixed with *Qi*. That is why Master Zhou describes *Li* within the movement and stillness of *yin* and *yang*, but also highlights it as being beyond them. This is because *Li* cannot be mixed with *Qi*.”³⁰⁰

It will not be surprising to us that Cao Duan's thoughts about the relationship between *Li* and *Qi* continue the same ambiguity as Zhu Xi's since they both use *Li* to refer to two ontologically disparate things: Ultimate Polarity, and the pattern-principle according to which a thing comes to be in a harmonizing relationship with other things in a *de facto* way. In my view, only when *Li* is referring to Ultimate Polarity, can it be said that *Li* creates vital-energy and can't be mixed with it in an ontological way. And only when *Li* is referring to the latter, can it be said that there is no split between *Li* and *Qi* in an ontological way. Thus, Cao Duan also uses the term *Li* in an obscure way and thus we see ambiguous thoughts in the quotations which are similar to those in Zhu Xi's case.

II Cao Duan's Challenge to Zhu Xi

³⁰⁰ “氣以理而生，理以氣而實，無彼此之間也。” “太極，理也。陰陽，氣也。有理則有氣，氣之所在，理之所在也，理豈離乎氣哉？” “理雖在氣中，卻不與氣混雜，此周子既圖之於陰陽動靜之中，而又特揭於上，以著理氣之不相雜也。” Ibid., pp.5-7.

Though entertaining so many similar ideas, Cao Duan still challenged Zhu Xi on one crucial point: whether Ultimate Polarity could be said to be “moving” or “stilling.”

Cao Duan says:

Master Zhou says, “Ultimate Polarity moves and then generates *yang*,” and “Ultimate Polarity stills and then generates *yin*.” This means that the generation of *yin* and *yang* results from the movement and stillness of Ultimate Polarity. Master Zhu’s interpretation (of these words) is also very clear. Master Zhu says: “The division of the two modes is because of the movement and stillness of Ultimate Polarity; the generation of the five phases is because of the alternation and congealing of *yin* and *yang* vital-energy.” This is not different from Master Zhou’s meaning. However, when I read his ‘recorded dialogues’ (語錄), I find that Master Zhu says: “Ultimate Polarity cannot move or be still by itself. It rides on the movement and stillness of *yin/yang* vital-energy and then it can move and be still.” Then, Master Zhu says: “The way *Li* rides on *Qi* is like a human riding on horse. Because the horse goes outside and inside, the human also goes outside and inside.” This is a metaphor for describing that, due to the movement and stillness of *Qi*, *Li* also moves and stills. If this is the case, the man (riding on the horse) is a dead one, and then cannot be qualified to be the most spiritual among the myriad things (萬物之靈); the *Li* (riding on the vital-energy) is a dead *Li*, and cannot qualify to be the origin of all changes. Is there still anything about *Li* that will be cherished and anything about humans that will be valued? Now I would say the

person riding on the horse is alive. In this sense, the outside-and-inside, slow-and-fast running of the horse is entirely governed by the human beings. A principle that is alive should also be like this.³⁰¹

We know from these words that Cao Duan's doubt about Zhu Xi is that if *Li*'s movement and stillness is due to the movement and stillness of vital-energy, it can hardly be said that Ultimate Polarity, as the supreme *Li*, can be the creative origin of all things under heaven. In this sense, he would like to change the metaphor of “dead rider” to “alive rider” in order to illustrate that Ultimate Polarity is a lively principle.

Nevertheless, I don't think Zhu Xi's thought necessarily fell into the defect that Cao Duan was challenging. We can see Zhu Xi's words about the movement of Ultimate Polarity here:

It is allowable to say Ultimate Polarity contains movement and stillness (this is from the perspective of its role as the fundamental substance (comment by Zhu Xi himself). It is also allowable to say Ultimate Polarity has movement and stillness (this is from the perspective of its running and performing function (comment by Zhu Xi himself). However, if it is said that Ultimate Polarity is the movement and the stillness, then this saying confuses the two domains of discourse —the one about what is beyond shape and the one about what is under shape. In this case,

³⁰¹ “先賢之解太極圖說，固將以發明周子之微奧，用釋後生之疑惑矣。然而有人各一說者焉，有一人之說而自相齟齬者焉。且周子謂太極動而生陽，靜而生陰，則陰陽之生，由乎太極之動靜，而朱子之解極明備矣。其曰：‘有太極，則一動一靜而兩儀分；有陰陽，則一變一合而五行具。’尤不異焉。及觀語錄，卻謂‘太極不自會動靜，乘陰陽之動靜而動靜耳。’遂謂‘理之乘氣猶人之乘馬，馬之一出一入而人亦與之一出一入，以喻氣之一動一靜，而理亦與之一動一靜。’若然，則人為死人而不足以為萬物之靈，理為死理而不足以為萬物之原。理何足尚，而人何足貴哉。今使活人乘馬，則其出入行止疾徐，一由乎人馭之何如耳，活理亦然。” Ibid. 23-24.

the *Yijing* sentence, “there is Ultimate Polarity in cosmic changes” will become redundant.³⁰²

According to my previous analysis, Zhu Xi’s insight here resonates with Zhou Dunyi when Zhou explains in what sense Ultimate Polarity can be portrayed as “moving” or “stilling”: it is only from the result that it creates that it can be seen as “moving” or “stilling.” However, because Ultimate Polarity’s creativity is prior to all derived observable realities, there is no way for human beings to describe how Ultimate Polarity creates all these realities in a moving or ‘stilling’ way. In this sense, Ultimate Polarity is alive, but the way it creates the two modes is beyond the movement and stillness of any set of cosmic vital-energies.

However, *Li* was used by Zhu Xi to refer to both Ultimate Polarity *per se* and to the pattern-principle by means of which cosmic realities become organized in a *de facto* way, and this sort of “pattern-principle” is ontologically lower than Ultimate Polarity. As a result, Zhu Xi can use the latter meaning of *Li* to emphasize that it is vital-energy that is the origin of things’ becoming, and in this sense, *Li* doesn’t move or become still by itself. This is the major reason that Zhu Xi’s thought was challenged by Cao Duan: if the latter reference of *Li* overlaps “Ultimate Polarity” *per se*, then the statement that *Li* does not move or create is obviously contradictory to Zhu Xi’s thought on Ultimate Polarity.

Still, Cao Duan did not bring much new to the conversation since his seemingly reformative point is already contained in Zhu Xi’s thought, and he didn’t even make any effort to clarify this confusing use of terms by Zhu Xi in his system. But Cao’s challenge

³⁰² See footnote 288.

does bring to our attention an issue which ought to be tackled by later interpreters of Zhu Xi's thought: we ought to make the references to *Li* tidier, and thereby avoid the confusion that Zhu Xi's various formulations about Ultimate Polarity and *Li* have caused. We will find this conundrum within Zhu Xi's metaphysics was also reflected in Luo Qinshun's (罗钦顺, 1465-1547 C.E.) thought.

6.4 “Principle as the Pattern of Vital-energy” — Luo Qinshun's View of Ultimate Polarity

I

The development of Song and Ming Ruist thought in the school of Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi, usually named the “School of principle” (理學), which in contrast with Lu Jiuyuan and Wang Yang-ming's “School of the mind-heart” (心學), underwent a major transformation led by Luo Qinshun during the Ming Dynasty.

We already know about the challenge brought by Cao Duan to Zhu Xi's metaphysics in the early Ming Dynasty, which was that if *Li* refers only to the intelligible way in which a body of vital-energy structures itself and relates to other entities in a *de facto* way, the “alive” and creative aspect of Ultimate Polarity will be rejected. Based on this point, Cao Duan argued that we should insist instead that *Li* is also “alive.”

However, interestingly enough, what we see in Luo Qinshun's criticism is an explanation of the consequences which can be inferred from Zhu Xi's metaphysics when we accept the basic assumption that *Li* is indeed only the intelligible way in which a body of vital-energy structures itself and relates to the others in a *de facto* way. In other words,

Luo Qinshun's metaphysics are premised upon the *de facto* and eternal existence of vital-energy as the basic "stuff" that fills in the entire cosmos. As a result, all the other key terms in Zhu Xi's metaphysics can be re-interpreted.

I Principle as the Pattern of Vital-energy

In the section in which I described Zhu Xi's ideas, we saw that *Li* can be translated into English in multiple ways. This discussion is particularly relevant to Luo Qinshun's thought because in his case *Li* is more appropriately translated as "pattern," rather than as "principle." This is because the English word "Principle" connotes something similar to the Platonic idea of "Form." These forms are independent entities which exist in an intelligible world. However, for Luo Qinshun, all *Li* is the *Li* of vital-energy, and therefore there is no way to imagine that there could be a world of "principles" that are independent from the empirical world. This said, in order to maintain a uniformity of terms for translation purposes, I will continue to use the term "principle" or "pattern-principle," rather than "pattern," in the remainder of this section.

We can observe Luo Qinshun's understanding of *Li* in the following two quotations:

Principle is all about principles of vital-energy, and we should recognize the principle from where vital-energy turns and twists. Leaving and then coming, coming and then leaving, this is where vital-energy turns and twists. What leaves cannot fail to come again. What comes cannot fail to leave again. We don't know why this happens but we do know it indeed happens. It seems to us that there is

one thing dominating this coming-and-leaving process, and this thing makes the entire process happen. This is why ‘principle’ gets its name.³⁰³

I think that when vital-energy gathers, this is the principle for gathering. When vital-energy disperses, that is the principle for dispersing. Because vital-energy can gather and disperse, ‘principle’ gets its *raison d’être*.³⁰⁴

According to Luo Qinshun’s view, the ontological realm of *Li* perfectly overlaps the one of *Qi*. *Li* is just the pattern in which *Qi* runs forth-and-back, and humans can know these patterns in a purely empirical way. In this sense, *Li* is one aspect of *Qi*. Epistemologically, we can differentiate them as two, the one connoting the stuff comprising any becoming cosmic reality, and the other referring to how the stuff changes. However, ontologically, they belong to the same reality. This ontological insight is further encapsulated nicely by Luo in this sentence, “I always think that principle and vital-energy are one thing.”³⁰⁵

II. Luo Qin-shun’s view of Ultimate Polarity

Because, according to Luo Qinshun, *Li* is to be thought of as ontologically identical with *Qi*, Zhu Xi’s original insight that “*Li* creates *Qi*” was also abandoned, and therefore we come to an innovative understanding of Ultimate Polarity. The following is a very long quotation, but we can parse it out step by step afterwards:

When Confucius comments on the *Classic of Change*, the topic “to thoroughly investigate principles” began to be addressed. What is this so-called “principle”?

³⁰³“理只是氣之理，當於氣之轉折處觀之，往而來，來而往，便是轉折處也。夫往而不能不來，來而不能不往，有莫知其所以然而然，若有一物主宰乎期間，而使之然者，此理之所以名也。” Luo Qinshun 羅欽順，困知記，北京：中華書局，2013，第 68 頁；the translation is by my own.

³⁰⁴“嘗竊以為氣之聚便是聚之理，氣之散便是散之理，惟其有聚有散，是乃所謂理也。”Ibid, 38.

³⁰⁵“僕從來認理氣為一物。” Ibid, 151.

Between Heaven and Earth, from of old until now, there is only one vital-energy.

Vital-energy is one, and then it moves and stills, leaves and comes, opens and closes, ascends and descends. It runs cyclically and endlessly. Its function becomes explicit because of the accumulations of what is implicit. Then, its function becomes implicit again after turning to be explicit. This is manifested as the warm, cool, cold and hot in the four seasons, as the birth, growth, fruition, and hiddenness of the myriad things, as the daily life and relationships of people, and as the success, failure, achievement and mistakes in human affairs.

These things are entangled with each other in thousands of ways, and ultimately, they are not in disorder. It seems that we don't know the reasons that they are as such but we do know they are as such, after which the term "principle" was invented. *Therefore, (The Principle) is originally not a separate thing that establishes itself alongside vital-energy and runs along attaching to vital-energy* (emphasis is my own). Some scholars, because of the verse, "there is Ultimate Polarity in the Change," think that there is a single thing dominating the change of *yin/yang* vital-energy. Actually, they are wrong. *The truth is that the Change is the overall name for two modes, four images, and eight trigrams; and Ultimate Polarity is the overall name for all principles. "There is Ultimate Polarity in the Change" means that all particular things derive from a single origin; from here, we can infer the order of the birth-birth process, and then we can understand how the single origin is dispersed among all particular things. What this verse means (about Ultimate Polarity) is the engine of the nature. It dominates in a non-*

dominant way, and how can we make images of it with shapes or traces?

(emphasis is my own).

(Among Ru masters), Cheng Hao understands and formulates this point in the most refined way, and I doubt that what Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi taught is actually completely correct. ...The reason I say Cheng Yi is not completely correct is that Liu Yuan once recorded Cheng Yi's teaching as, "*Dao* is the reason that *Yin* and *Yang* come up," and "*Dao* is the reason that the open-and-close process comes up." I think the two characters, "*suo yi*" (所以, the reason that something happens), refers to what is beyond shape, but it still sounds like there are two things involved here. According to Cheng Hao's words, "What comes up is just this *Dao*," I find how complete and wonderful the entire process of change is, and think there is no need to add "*suo yi*" within this sentence. The reason I think Zhu Xi is not completely correct is that he once said, "principle and vital-energy are indeed two things." Zhu Xi also said many similar words like "the vital-energy is strong and the principle is weak," and "if there is no vital-energy, how and where can we locate the principle," etc.³⁰⁶

³⁰⁶ “自夫子贊《易》，始以窮理為言，理果何物也哉？蓋通天地亙古今，無非一氣而已，氣本一也，而一動一靜，一往一來，一闔一闢，一升一降，迴圈無已，積微而著，由著復微。為四時之溫涼寒暑，為萬物之生長收藏，為斯民之日用彝倫，為人事之成敗得失，千條萬緒，紛紜繆轆，而卒不克亂，有莫知其所以然而然，是即所謂理也。初非別有一物依於氣而立，附於氣以行也。或者因《易》有太極一言，乃疑陰陽之變易，類有一物主宰乎其間者，是不然。夫《易》乃兩儀四象八卦之總名，太極則眾理之總名也。雲《易》有太極，明萬殊之原於一本也；因而推其生生之序，明一本之散為萬殊也。斯固自然之機，不宰之宰，夫豈可以形跡求哉？斯義也，惟程伯子言之最精，叔子與朱子似乎少有未合。... 所謂叔子少有未合者，劉元成記其語有雲：「所以陰陽者道。」又雲：「所以闔闢者道。」竊詳所以二字，固指言形而上者，然未免微有二物之嫌，以伯子「元來隻此是

There are several key points in this quotation which demand explanation in order to understand Luo Qinshun's stance concerning Ultimate Polarity:

First, since principle is only about patterns of vital-energy, there is no way for Luo Qinshun to hold an idea similar to Zhu Xi's that it is principle which creates vital-energy. Instead, "Ultimate Polarity", as the supreme "principle" in Zhu Xi's case, is understood to be the overall name of all the pattern-principles (理, *Li*) which we can possibly find among cosmic realities. In other words, there is no "creating-created" relationship between Ultimate Polarity and all the pattern-principles, and the former is just a "name" for the latter.

Second, for Luo Qinshun, the most basic patterns that are indicated by the movement and stillness of vital-energy are *yin* and *yang*. All the other patterns can be seen as a further complication and combination of these two basic patterns. Therefore, when Luo Qinshun identifies Ultimate Polarity as the overall name of all pattern-principles, and when he furthermore submits that Ultimate Polarity is the "engine" of nature, his view is that the all-pervasive vital-energy with *yin* and *yang* as its basic patterns is the origin of cosmic creation. In this way, the movement and stillness of vital-energy is thought of as the basic driver of cosmic changes, and the entire changing cosmos can therefore be seen as a self-determination of the same all-pervasive vital-energy.

道」觀之，自見渾然之妙，似不須更著「所以」字也。所謂朱子少有未合者，蓋其言有雲「理與氣決是二物」，又雲「氣強理弱」，又雲「若無此氣，則此理如何頓放」，似此類頗多。” Ibid., 4-5.

Third, because the creating role of Ultimate Polarity, which is described in the original *Yijing* verse, “Ultimate Polarity creates two modes,” has been rejected by Luo Qinshun, its dominant role upon the entire cosmos is reinterpreted in a non-dominant way. That means that the entire cosmos is generated by the interaction of *yin/yang* vital energy, and this is a natural process on its own terms. Since Ultimate Polarity has been identified as merely a name for the *yin/yang* “principles” that are also just names describing how vital-energy moves and becomes still, its dominant role claimed in the *Yijing* verse is also nominal. It thus governs in a non-governmental way.

Fourth, the comparison made by Luo Qinshun about the contrast between Cheng Hao, on the one hand, and Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi, on the other, is very interesting. According to Luo, only Cheng Hao gets the idea that *Li* and *Qi* are actually the same thing, just as the Way and the utensil-like things are also the same thing. For Luo, both Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi tend to think of *Li* as something separate from *Qi*, and the major reason that they have this tendency is that they ask the question, “*suo yi*,” (所以, the reason that something comes up) and try to answer it. For contemporary readers, Luo’s argument brilliantly speaks to the key difference between him and Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi, since for Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi, *Li* not only refers to the pattern according to which vital-energy organizes itself, but it also connotes the origin of vital-energy. However, Luo doesn’t think the latter question is legitimate, and all he does is take the existence of the one all-pervasive vital-energy for granted, and then analyze its patterns.

Interestingly enough, Luo also identifies Zhou Dunyi as belonging to the same group of Ru scholars as Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi, and he further thinks that the reason that

Zhu Xi tends to take a dualistic view about *Li* and *Qi* is rooted in his reading of Zhou Dunyi:

About Master Zhou's *Explanation of the Diagram of Ultimate Polarity*, when I read its verse, "The reality of Nonpolarity and the essence of the Two Modes and Five Phases mysteriously combine and coalesce," I feel doubtful. There must be two things and then they can be said to be "combined." However, are Ultimate Polarity and *yin/yang* really two things? If they really are two things, when they are not yet combined, where are they? Throughout Zhu Xi's entire life, he recognizes principle and vital-energy as two different things, and the reason comes from this verse.³⁰⁷

From the ontological perspective represented by Zhou Dunyi and Zhu Xi, the creative power of Ultimate Polarity and that of *yin/yang* vital-energy can be seen as "coalescing" because the latter is a manifestation of the former such that when you count the creative origin of any concrete thing in the cosmos, you can't fail to mention either of them. However, for Luo Qinshun, Ultimate Polarity is not different from *yin/yang* vital-energy, so that it is really needless to say they can "coalesce" in any sense.

Quite obviously, Luo's metaphysical thought does not belong to the group of Ru philosophers which I earlier characterized as forming the tradition of "*generatio ex nihilo*." He does not question the origin of vital-energy, which is the basic stuff filling the entire cosmos. Neither does he even think we need to ask this question. From the

³⁰⁷ "《太極圖說》「無極之真，二五之精，妙合而凝」三語，愚不能無疑。凡物必兩而後可以言合，太極與陰陽果二物乎？其為物也果二，則方其未合之先，各安在耶？朱子終身認理氣為二物，其源蓋出於此。" Ibid., 29.

perspective of the Ru “*generatio ex nihilo*” philosophers, I will respond to his concerns with the following points:

- (1) Luo’s thought did not answer the question of where the being of vital-energy comes from, and in this sense, his metaphysics is not complete.
- (2) His interpretation of “Ultimate Polarity” rejects the creative relationship which was articulated in the *Yijing* text, and in this sense, his interpretation is misplaced.
- (3) One major reason that Luo doesn’t endorse the “non-polarity” interpretation of “Ultimate Polarity” according to its mainstream Ruist “*generatio ex nihilo*” understanding is that he thinks the priority with which his metaphysics endows the existence of vital-energy makes Ruist ethical teaching more realistic than its alternative, since Ru ethics would then be grounded on the patterns of the always being-and-becoming vital-energy. This point was actually made earlier by Lu Jiuyuan, and is just being repeated in a more subtle way by Luo Qinchun. Lu says that if “non-polarity” is placed beyond “Ultimate Polarity” in the ontological sense, this would make Ruist teaching sound more like the Daoist nihilism. However, we already set out our opinion of Zhu Xi and Lu Jiuyuan’s debate: the “non-polarity” feature of “Ultimate Polarity” means the unconditionality of Ultimate Polarity’s creative power. Quite opposite to Lu Jiuyuan’s charge that Zhu Xi’s metaphysics is Daoist, the recognition of the “non-polar” feature of Ultimate Polarity makes its creative power more real than any derived realities, since all the other realities are derived from it.

Given all these apparently weak points in Luo Qinchun's metaphysics, we have to acknowledge that there is one strong point in his system that Zhu Xi's metaphysics had not yet incorporated: consistency in the use of terms, and as its natural consequence, consistency of thought. Luo can now be seen as the Ru metaphysician who pushed Zhu Xi's metaphysics into its complete and consistent form based upon a revised assumption that *Li* was only the *Li* of *Qi*, and not any separate creative force lying beyond *Qi*. Although this innovative interpretation does not do justice to Zhu Xi's metaphysics and the Ruist "*generatio ex nihilo*" tradition in general, its consistent power allowed Luo Qinchun's thought to decisively influence the development of Ru metaphysics in its late Ming period. After Luo Qinchun, important Ru metaphysical thinkers were all more or less influenced by Luo's *Qi*-monism, and I have not found a single metaphysician in this period who attempted to revive Zhu Xi's thought along the lines of "*generatio ex nihilo*."

Based upon these considerations, I suggest the following revision of Zhu Xi's metaphysics:

If *Li* is only understood as the patterns of vital-energy, then Ultimate Polarity is neither *Li* nor *Qi*. Instead, Ultimate Polarity is the ultimate creative power that generates all possible vital-energies and their principles. Because this ultimate creative power is unconditional, the only way we know it is through its creative outcomes which are manifested as the *de facto* conditions of cosmic realities which are typically termed in Ruism "the myriad things under heaven." In other words, we must acknowledge both the ontological priority of Ultimate Polarity and the epistemological priority of derived cosmic realities.

If *Li* is understood to be Ultimate Polarity *per se*, we must have a very careful way of thinking whenever we use the term *Li* to describe cosmic realities. We need to carefully explain that there is a significant difference between *Li* as Ultimate Polarity and *Li* as patterns of vital-energy so that neither the ontological commitment to the unconditionality of Ultimate Polarity nor the epistemological commitment to Ruism's empirical approach to the investigation of things is compromised.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusion: Comparative Reflections on the Transcendence Debate

7.1 Conclusion

After surveying the two intellectual histories of “*creatio ex nihilo*” in the Greek-European Christian tradition and the conception of Ultimate Polarity’s “Sheng *Sheng*” as “*generatio ex nihilo*” in the Chinese Ru tradition, we can now present our final comparative reflections on the transcendence debate, which was the initial motif of this comparative project.

We have to conclude that the ideas of “*creatio ex nihilo*” and “*sheng sheng*,” as illustrated by key moments in their respective intellectual history, share a philosophical conception of transcendence as ultimate reality which is lacking any ontological conditions *vis-à-vis* ontologically dependent proximate realities. No matter how disparately the two traditions conceive of the realities themselves, the logic of the relationship between the realities emerges as comparable when interpreted in the context of their philosophical and religious thought. Therefore, we need to propose an affirmative answer to the debate under consideration that, though expressed in vastly different languages and cultural symbols far from those of Christianity, the Ruist idea of “*sheng sheng*” can be understood to contain a transcendent dimension which specifies ontological relationships among cosmic realities in a Ruist way.

Taking the entire spectrum of thought illustrated with these disparate cases within their own respective intellectual histories, we find that the most comparable point between “*creatio ex nihilo*” and “*sheng sheng*” converges into two sets of thinkers: on the

side of Christianity, we have René Descartes' voluntaristic understanding of divine creation, which is followed by the de-anthropomorphic understandings of divine creation in Schleiermacher's and Tillich's thought. On the side of Ruism, we have Wang Bi's understanding of Ultimate Polarity's creativity as "being is generated from non-being," which is followed by Zhou Dunyi's cryptic verse "Non-Polar, and yet Ultimate Polarity," which is itself further interpreted by Zhu Xi. For these two sets of thinkers, the "*creatio ex nihilo*" of the Christian God and the "*sheng sheng*" of the Ru Ultimate Polarity are both conceived of as an ultimate and *indeterminate* creative power conditioning all existing realities in the world without itself being thus conditioned. In this sense, although we cannot affirm that for these two sets of thinkers, the Christian God and the Ruist Ultimate Polarity are referring to exactly the same entity, we can at least conclude that according to the logic of "ontological dependence" which specifies ontological relationships among cosmic realities, "*creatio ex nihilo*" and "*sheng sheng*" are, for these thinkers, located on the same supreme tier of these relationships, and hence, share a cluster of ontological features unique to the reality of entities on this tier. For example, the following insights on the characteristics of ultimate reality are shared: One, there is a difference between cosmological/temporal and ontological/non-temporal orders among cosmic realities, and the transcendence of ultimate reality is defined according to the second, rather than the first order. Two, ultimate reality is indeterminate in the sense that human intelligence cannot give any account of it except through the effects of its creating. In other words, although the ontologically grounding power of ultimate reality can be made certain, what is behind the power *per se* is utterly beyond the full grasp of

human intelligence. In this sense, human intelligence is a result, rather than a cause, of ultimate reality's creativity. Three, as a result, a mystical commitment to the unfathomable fecundity of ultimate reality's creativity is expressed.

However, the first two chapters of this dissertation provided answers concerning the “why” and “how” this comparative project should be pursued. The two intellectual histories which followed have surveyed the continuity of these two lineages of thought. This entails that what we are able to compare regarding the two central ideas concerning transcendence ought to amount to much more than we have just concluded. First, the comparative methodology proposed in Chapter Two requires, in our case, the use of vague categories, such as “creativity” or “ontological dependence” in order to understand the two disparate traditions cross boundaries, and then, the furnished interpretations must succumb to a continuous back-and-forth re-interpretative process surrounding multiple themes of common interest to the scholarly community. This will open our “final” comparisons to scholars' unrestricted reflections and discussions. Second, the comparative methodology proposed in Chapter One requires a reply to major contentions in the transcendence debate. This second point also speaks to the direct relevance of this comparative project to its targeted audience: Christian scholars, Ru scholars, and independent comparativists who are interested in the transcendence debate.

Therefore, in the remaining sections of Chapter Seven, I will furnish a reply to major contentions in the transcendence debate, and then compare “*creation ex nihilo*” and “*sheng sheng*,” immersing them in multiple themes in order to bring out the rich implications of these two ideas, and also to point out potential directions for scholars'

further engagement in this comparative project. Since at certain points of this dissertation, such as Chapter One and the end of Chapter Five, I have addressed to a certain extent what I intended to demonstrate here, so the following will be a further refinement of my preliminary reflections.

Last but not least, comparative reflections on the content of the transcendence debate also drive us to provide additional reflections on the form of it. Therefore, at the end of this dissertation, I will evaluate whether my comparison fully complies with the comparative methodology which I mainly devised in Chapter 2, and thereafter, I will offer some reflections as to future directions for scholars who may wish to engage in this comparative study.

7.2. Reflections on the Transcendence Debate

While affirming that the Ruist idea of Ultimate Polarity in Ruism's classical period (i.e., from Confucius to Wang Bi) to the Song period implies a different idea of "ontological dependence," and that Ultimate Polarity's creativity can be understood to be transcendent in the sense of "ontological unconditionality," my comparative conclusion stands in line with Hyo-Dong Lee and Robert C. Neville. While affirming that the Ruist understanding of the transcendence of Ultimate Polarity's creativity in Ruism's classical and Song periods refers to "something indeterminate and ontologically unconditioned by the existing world," my comparative conclusion stands with Robert C. Neville.

However, in line with this basic orientation of my comparative conclusion, a reply to each contention in the transcendence debate including Hyo-Dong Lee's and Robert Neville's will be undertaken as follows:

I. Matteo Ricci and his followers in the first stage of the transcendence debate

When Matteo Ricci came to China and tried to accommodate his Christian message within Chinese cultural soil in the late Ming dynasty, Ruism's metaphysics had already been highly influenced by Luo Qinchun's theory of "vital-energy only" (氣本論). Therefore, it will be no surprise for us to witness that Ricci understood Ultimate Polarity as "the overall name for all kinds of 'pattern-principles' such as the musical codes played by instruments or the geometrical figures embodied by furniture, and thus it cannot sustain itself." (quoted in Chapter One of this dissertation) We find that this conception of Ultimate Polarity is straightforwardly influenced by Luo Qinchun's.

Further, when Ricci's followers, such as Julius Aleni and Alexandre de la Charne, likened Thomas Aquinas' idea of "plenitude of being" to Ultimate Polarity, and then construed Ultimate Polarity as "original material" or "primitive vital-energy," we can now see that their understanding of Ultimate Polarity still followed Luo Qinchun's. In the perspective of the intellectual history of ancient Chinese cosmologies which we analyzed in Chapters Five and Six, Luo Qinchun's "vital-energy only" interpretation of Ultimate Polarity followed the school of cosmology in pre-Song periods which had construed Ultimate Polarity as "formless primitive vital-energy" or "an overall name for existing things in the world." In the sections which discussed Wang Bi's and Zhou Dunyi's thought, we also summarized the idea that this school of cosmology was influenced by Lao Zi's cosmology which emphasized the relationship of cosmological succession over that of ontological dependence among cosmic realities. However, in Ruist cases such as what happened to Zhang Zai's and Luo Qinchun's thoughts,

Ultimate Polarity as a form of “vital-energy” can also be thought of ontologically. It can be taken to be a foundational cosmic material pervading the entire cosmos, i.e., *Qi* in general, followed by its further self-differentiation as *yin/yang* alternation and combination which gives rise to the myriad things, whose changes and transformations are typically thought of as having neither beginning nor end in the temporal sequence of cosmological succession. Briefly, Luo Qinchun’s understanding of Ultimate Polarity belongs to a school of ancient Chinese cosmology which is different from the one that is represented by Wang Bi, Han Kangbo, Zhou Dunyi and Zhu Xi. In Luo’s school of thought, the existence of the world as a self-diversifying, unfolding process from an originally inchoate and formless status is taken for granted. There is no further motif in this school which insists on inquiring into where this original status of the world comes from. Seen from this perspective, it is no surprise for us to witness Julius Aleni and Alexandre de la Charne finding this sort of Ultimate Polarity to be ontologically inferior to the idea of divine creation in Thomas Aquinas’ thought, since Thomas Aquinas’ idea of divine creation as “*creatio ex nihilo*” radically asked the question about the origin of anything and everything in the universe. In conclusion, if Ultimate Polarity is understood according to the school of ancient Chinese cosmology congenial to Luo Qinchun’s thought, and if we abide by the definition of transcendence as the unconditionality of something’s ontological status, we have to admit that Ricci and his followers were correct to affirm that the Ruist Ultimate Polarity cannot be regarded as the origin of the world, and thus is less transcendent than the Christian idea of “*creatio ex nihilo*,” as construed by Thomas Aquinas.

However, if we switch our understanding of Ultimate Polarity from Luo Qinshun's explanation to the alternate school of cosmology in the Ruist tradition, we will have to tell a different story. Ultimate Polarity, as construed by Wang Bi, Han Kangbo, Zhou Dunyi, and the second stage of Zhu Xi's metaphysical thought, is the single principle which *explains* the ontological origin of the existence of the world. It is neither *Qi* (vital-energy) nor *Li* if *Li* is understood as the patterns of the existing and changing *Qi*. In particular, this single ontological principle of Ultimate Polarity was thought of by this school of Chinese cosmology to be indeterminate *per se*. In Wang Bi's thought, the process by means of which things are created by Ultimate Polarity remains unknowable (Section 5.5). Following this thought, Han Kongbo described the process of Ultimate Polarity's generativity as, "we do not understand why all this is so, so we characterize it as the numinous." (Section 5.5). Similarly, Zhu Xi described Ultimate Polarity's creativity as "without sound, without smell," not "a thing," with no "shape" or "position" (Section 6.2). In other words, for this alternative school of Ruist cosmology, Ultimate Polarity's unconditioned creating power is affirmed, even while the nature of Ultimate Polarity *per se* is typically conceived of as indeterminate. This implies that any human knowledge of determinate, created things in the universe cannot be used to fully grasp the unfathomable fecundity of Ultimate Polarity's creativity. Briefly, if the idea of "transcendence" is understood according to the definition of (1) which we analyzed in Chapter One to be referring to "something indeterminate ontologically unconditioned by the existing world," this school's understanding of Ultimate Polarity is transcendent *par excellence*. Because the "birth birth" power of Ultimate Polarity is understood in this

way, we then proposed in Chapter Five that the power could be rendered as a sort of “*generatio ex nihilo*,” if we need an alternative term for “creation” in order to show the indeterminate feature of Ultimate Polarity’s creativity.

However, in our final analysis, Thomas Aquinas’ understanding of divine creation as “*creatio ex nihilo*” is not indeterminate. We concluded in section 4.1 that although Aquinas’ thought in his analysis of causality and the relationship between divine knowledge and human freedom abides quite well by the logic of “ontological dependence” which was championed by the earlier tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*,” his thought on the “process” of divine creation is not so ontologically unconditioned as it is supposed to be. In Aquinas’ thought, the process of divine creation is thought of as one of divine will intending ideas of divine intelligence, and then putting these ideas into the divine abundance of being so that a variety of concrete cosmic beings are created. The resulting cosmos comprises a harmonious hierarchy of beings, which cannot be said to be deficient in any anthropocentric or anthropomorphic motif. Since the world is created according to a divine plan, and the divine plan is intelligible even before the plan is implemented, Aquinas’ conception of divine creation cannot be thought of as ontologically unconditioned.

In other words, we can compare the Ruist tradition of conceiving Ultimate Polarity’s creativity as “*generatio ex nihilo*” with Thomas Aquinas’ idea of “*creatio ex nihilo*,” but since Aquinas’ idea had not yet achieved a similar idea of “ontological unconditionality” as in the Ruist case, we have to conclude that Aquinas’ understanding of ultimate reality is less transcendent than the Ruist one. As a result, Ricci and his

followers should have radically changed their way of looking into their own Catholic understanding of divine creation compared with the Ruist understanding of Ultimate Polarity's creativity.

This last sentence also makes it highly understandable why counterarguments from Ruist literati in Ricci's time emphasized the grounding power of Ultimate Polarity's creativity and its transcending conceptual status to both "pattern-principle" and "vital-energy." This is what the Ruist school of thought about "*generatio ex nihilo*" is all about.

II James Legge in the second stage of the transcendence debate.

With historical hindsight, I am startled by James Legge's ambiguous, sometimes incoherent, analysis of the question of whether the Ruist cosmology in the *Appended Texts* intends to answer of whether *Qi* "is eternal or created." This is especially surprising because we find that Legge mentioned Wang Bi, Kong Yingda and Zhu Xi in his commentary on key cosmological verses of the *Appended Texts*, while simultaneously asserting that "neither creation nor cosmogony was before the mind of the author whose work I am analyzing" (quoted in Chapter One). According to my analysis in Chapters Five and Six, one primary motif for the cosmogonical thought rooted in the *Appended Texts* and elaborated by Wang Bi and Zhu Xi is to furnish a singular supreme principle to account for the existence and order of the world. The contrast between this tradition of ancient Ruist cosmogony and Legge's presentation of it is more than startling.

However, in Legge's discussion of "original Confucianism," he furnished an answer to the question of where vital-energy comes from, which he thought came from Confucius' own thought and referred exactly to the same God of Christianity. In other

words, Legge doubted, if he didn't utterly deny, every non-theistic answer given by the later Ru cosmological tradition to the same question. Alternatively, he thought "the numinous and wonderful" mentioned in the *Appended Text* must be the Christian God who created the entire world, including the all pervasive vital-energy, from nothing. Although we have mentioned that no words in the *Appended Texts* can even slightly support Legge's interpretation, Legge's misplacement of the Christian God's ontological creativity into his interpretation of the corresponding verses in the *Yijing* speaks to the argumentative power of *ontology* which is intrinsic to those verses. As we concluded at the end of Chapter Five and the section on Zhu Xi's thought, the ontological power intrinsic to *Yijing*'s verses is the foundation for the Ruist cosmogonical tradition conceptualizing the "birth birth" power of Ultimate Polarity as "*generatio ex nihilo*."

III Christian scholars in the third stage of the transcendence debate.

Julia Ching

When Julia Ching affirms that "Confucianism has not developed any doctrine of creation" and "the Confucian tradition has never developed a theory of creation *ex nihilo*" (quoted in Chapter One), she mainly meant that Ruism doesn't question the origin of the existing world. In this sense, Julia Ching's understanding of the Ruist *Tian* (heaven) is congenial to Ricci and his followers' understanding of Ultimate Polarity. According to our analysis above, Ricci and his followers' comparative insights landed in ancient Chinese cosmological thoughts which were not those of the school of "*generatio ex nihilo*." In this way, Julia Ching, Ricci and his followers all lost the opportunity to find a

more comparable point within the Ruist cosmological tradition to the Christian one of *creatio ex nihilo*.

Hyo Dong-Lee

Regarding Hyo Dong-Lee's central motif, that of constructing an Asian contextual theology, we have to emphasize, drawing on what we have illustrated in previous chapters, that not all metaphysics which is centered on the priority of "Oneness" represents an imperial order from the "empire." In parts of the Christian tradition of "*creation ex nihilo*" and the Ru tradition of "*generatio ex nihilo*," the theme of the all-interconnectedness of cosmic events can be easily related to that of the ontological priority of God's or Ultimate Polarity's creativity such that the ontological priority of "Oneness" does not bring extra order to the *de facto* order among cosmic entities.

Thomas Aquinas and Schleiermacher are the best who exemplify this stream of thought within the tradition of "*creatio ex nihilo*." As we explained in Chapter Four, divine omniscience does not contradict human freedom for Aquinas. This is because whether cosmic events are contingent or necessary depends upon their mutual relationship in the order of "proximate cause," which itself hinges upon the relationship of cosmological succession among these events. However, no matter whether an event was caused contingently or necessarily by another event, each of them will still be ontologically caused by the "first cause" of divine creation. In other words, the primary function of the "first cause" of divine creation is to explain the origin of the entire universe, while the order of created cosmic events is more directly explained by another set of categories, such as forms, ideas and measures in Thomas's case, which are

ultimately treated as the manifestation of the creative power of the first cause. Therefore, the primary ontological causal power of “Oneness” of “*creatio ex nihilo*” and the secondary cosmological order shown by mutual relationships among “many” cosmic events go hand-in-hand in Thomas’s thought.

This point of Thomas’ was nicely recapitulated in Schleiermacher’s thought. Schleiermacher used the term “coincidence of opposites” to describe the relationship between God and the world, because he thought of the range of divine causality as “opposite in kind and equal in scope to the world” (Section 4.3). Schleiermacher affirms further that “God is expressed in the world in the natural order, and does not disrupt the unity of the natural order” (Section 4.3). In other words, the idea of “*creatio ex nihilo*” can accommodate whatsoever natural scientists want to say about the world based upon their empirical studies. Because of this, I also commented that “*creatio ex nihilo*” is the most promising religious idea still holding its value in the contemporary context.

In comparison, the earliest point for the Ruist “*generatio ex nihilo*” tradition to clearly articulate its awareness of the difference between the order of “cosmological succession” and the order of “ontological dependence” appeared in Zheng Xuan’s commentary on the *Qian Zao Du*, which we analyzed in Section 5.4, II. Zheng Xuan thought that the stage of Great Change in the *Qian Zao Du*’s cosmology, construed in the text as a great vacuum existing before any cosmic stuff filled in, has no role whatsoever in generating the stage of Great Initial from which the primordial vital-energy was derived. Instead, Zheng Xuan thought Great Change was just one feature which was intrinsic to, rather than prior to, the stage of *Hunlun*, and hence he transformed this

quintessentially cosmological concept in the *Qian Zao Du* into an ontological one. While doing so, Zheng Xuan used the words, “The Great Initial actually generates itself all of a sudden,” to explain the origin of the Great Initial, an inchoate form of any existing cosmic event. If we take into consideration Zheng Xuan’s account of the ontological relationship between *Dao* and cosmic events which we quoted immediately after the last quotation in Section 5.4 II, we will gain a further understanding of Zheng Xuan’s thought regarding our current concerns about Hyo Dong-Lee’s thought: the capability of “self-generation” of cosmic events acknowledged in Zheng Xuan’s thought speaks to a distinct Ruist awareness of the intimate interconnectedness of two cosmic orders. On the one hand, the ultimate ontological origin of cosmic events is *Dao*, fecund yet without any determinate feature in itself. On the other hand, the sequence and order among the continually emerging cosmic events have their *de facto* cosmological reasons which can be explained in a purely empirical way. In a word, the fecundity of *Dao* does not impose any extra order on the *de facto* order of the spontaneously emerging cosmic events, although this fecund ontological principle is indispensable to a complete explanation of why and how cosmic events come about.

This idea of Zheng Xuan’s was reaffirmed in Wang Bi’s and Han Kangbo’s thoughts in a more articulate way. For Wang Bi, the myriad things under heaven are generated “during the process of ‘being,’” but when considered as whole, this process of being is rooted in the fecundity of *Dao*, or Ultimate Polarity (which, in Wang Bi’s terms, is equal to *Dao*), which itself does not cling to any fixed shape or boundary, and thus must be named “non-being” (Section 5.5). Han Kangbo clearly explains that things

themselves cannot bring about their own existence. However, the Ultimate Polarity grounding their existences is not a “Master” to “transform” them; thus, the only legitimate way to describe how things come about is that everything, “all of a sudden, comes into existence spontaneously.” (Section 5.5, IV) Clearly, an awareness of the close combination of an indeterminate ontological creative power and an empirically traceable *de facto* cosmic sequence among cosmic realities underlies all these Ruist philosophers’ thinking. Given the high repetitiveness of some of those words quoted above in Zhou Dunyi’s and Zhu Xi’s thought, we have to conclude that similar thoughts are also sustained by later Ru thinkers in the Ru tradition of “*generatio ex nihilo*.”

Understood as such, we find that it is not totally legitimate for Hyo Dong-Lee to worry that metaphysical talk about “Oneness” will inevitably undermine the democratic power of “many” cosmic events, and thus build an unjust order into the Eurocentric theological “empire.” For the Christian tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*,” we found that the counter examples come from Thomas Aquinas when he talked about the relationship between divine knowledge and human freedom, from Schleiermacher when he discussed the relationship between God and the world, and from Paul Tillich when he insisted that the “*creatio ex nihilo*” of God renders God the “ground of being,” rather than a supreme being. Within this lineage of Christian thought, the ontological priority of “*creatio ex nihilo*” does not compromise the natural order of the world.

By the same token, it is not legitimate, either, for Hyo Dong-Lee to worry that the admission of the idea of ontological hierarchy into Zhu Xi’s thought will bring a concern of ontological imperialism similar to the Christian case. If we focus on the second stage

of Zhu Xi's cosmological thinking about Ultimate Polarity and *Li* (理) (Section 6.2 III), we will find that Zhu Xi's thought follows Wang Bi and Han Kangbo quite closely regarding the relationship between Ultimate Polarity and the world. Since the creativity of Ultimate Polarity is indeterminate, there is no justification for worrying that an affirmation of the ontological priority of Ultimate Polarity will bring any extra order to the *de facto* order among created cosmic realities.

However, Hyo-Dong Lee's "imperialist worry," so-to-speak, is not entirely ungrounded, since not every major thinker in the tradition of "*creatio ex nihilo*" or in "*generatio ex nihilo*" thoroughly abides by the principle of ultimate reality's indeterminacy. In the Greek-European tradition of "*creatio ex nihilo*," virtually every major thinker we have examined prior to René Descartes holds a similar conception of the "process" of divine creation in the form of a supreme agency putting intelligible ideas and forms into an abundant, yet inchoate form of being so as to create concrete things in the world. We frequently noticed in our previous chapters that in this way the logic of "ontological unconditionality," implied by the original philosophical and theological impetus of the idea "*creatio ex nihilo*" has not been adhered to. In other words, if God had a plan before the world was created and the resulting world is thereby conceived of as manifesting this pre-existing divine plan, then the power of divine creativity *per se* cannot be thought of as indeterminate, and thus this now determinate divine power indeed brings extra order to the *de facto* order among created cosmic realities, one which is discoverable in a purely empirical way. Hyo Dong Lee's contextual Asian theology, which centers on the democratic power of the Ruist idea of an all-pervading vital-energy,

ought to have had many things to say about this sort of determinate conception of divine creation.

Similarly, in the third stage of Zhu Xi's cosmological thought, the confusing use of the term *Li* made Zhu Xi sometimes entertain the thought that even before a thing is created, its *Li* already existed. This made Zhu Xi's thought similar to Plato's idealism by affirming that things exist for the sake of a pre-existing reason and model. This is easily translated into the idea in the Christian tradition of a "divine plan." In this sense, Zhu Xi's thought indeed raises a legitimate alarm for Hyo Dong-Lee that the affirmation of the ontological priority of Ultimate Polarity, also a sort of *Li* in Zhu Xi's thought, brings an extra imperial order to the *de facto* democratic order among cosmic realities.

However, we also discussed in Chapter Six that Zhu Xi does not necessarily need to confuse his cosmological thinking with an unwarranted use of the same term *Li* to refer to different sorts of cosmic realities. In comparison, since the Ru tradition of "*generatio ex nihilo*" is non-theistic from its very first beginning, it is easier for this Ru tradition to avoid Hyo Dong-Lee's criticism so that the ontological priority of a supreme One principle and the cosmological diversity among Many cosmic realities can be simultaneously acknowledged without contradiction.

And last but not least, after considering both the "*creatio ex nihilo*" and the "*generatio ex nihilo*" arguments along with Hyo Dong-Lee's criticism, we can conclude that the understanding of the transcendence of ultimate reality as "something indeterminate ontologically unconditioned by the existing world" is the most promising

conception with which contemporary metaphysicians can maintain a good balance between the supreme priority of One and the fecund diversity of Many.

Paulos Huang

In comparison with his Christian predecessors in the history of transcendent debate, Paulos Huang has noticed the agential role of *Taiji* in “producing” the world. However, his view that “when *Taiji* is considered as the source of all things in the world, the producer and the world are of the same substance, bearing no distinction between the world and the producer” still does an injustice to the Ru tradition of “*generatio ex nihilo*.”

For Zheng Xuan, Wang Bi, Han Kangbo, Zhou Dunyi and Zhu Xi, the ultimate creative power of *Taiji* is not bounded by any concrete thing in the world, yet it is still being manifested in the world. The relationship between *Taiji* and the world maintains a subtle balance with a two-dimensional asymmetry: *Taiji* is ontologically prior to the world, yet epistemologically posterior to the world. In this sense, it is not correct, as Paulos Huang claims, that *Taiji* produces the world, but yet is of the same substance as the world. On the contrary, these thinkers of “*generatio ex nihilo*” frequently expressed similar mystic insights that anything we know about the world cannot exhaust the unfathomable fecundity of *Taiji*’s creativity. Since the created world cannot exhaust *Taiji*’s creativity, and what *Taiji* is *per se* remains radically unknowable by human beings, *Taiji* cannot be of the same substance as the created world.

However, Paulos Huang’s differentiated use of “creation” and “production” indeed does raise a worthwhile question concerning in what sense the creative powers of

God as “*creatio ex nihilo*” and of *Taiji* as “*sheng sheng*” can both be described as “creation.”

Huang insists that “‘creating’ implies that the creator of the world has personality, and that the creator and the world are of different substances,” (section 1.3) and according to his understanding of *Taiji* as “producing” the world, and yet of the same substance as the world, he further submits that *Taiji*’s productive power cannot be described as “creation” proper. To this view of Huang’s, we have the following important responses:

First, it is unfair to the Christian tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*” to assert that sort of strict understanding of “creation.” Among the Christian philosophers under analysis, Huang’s view of “creation” can only be applicable to Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas, who thought of God as a supreme person freely willing a world of ideas and forms in the divine intelligence such that the divine abundance of being can be differentiated and thereby create a variety of things in the world. In contrast, for Descartes, Schleiermacher, and Paul Tillich, the act of divine creation is singular, with no process, and thus cannot be thought of as a determinate “personal” deed which can be captured by descriptions in anthropomorphic human languages. In this way, divine creation for these cohorts of Christian thinkers is not issued from a determinate person, and ultimately not even from a substance. If we take into consideration the Hellenistic root of the Christian tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*,” this minor de-anthropomorphic tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*” (Descartes, Schleiermacher, and Tillich), Plotinus’

language of “sheer making,” i.e., “something determinate derives from something ultimately indeterminate and unknowable,” is the best way to describe God’s “creation.”

Second, if we follow Plotinus’ understanding of ultimate reality’s creativity as “sheer making,” isn’t it fair to describe the generative power of Ultimate Polarity as conceived in the Ru tradition of “*generatio ex nihilo*” to be just as much a “creation”? I think the answer is yes. For Zheng Xuan, Wang Bi, Han Kangbo, Zhou Dunyi and Zhu Xi, the power of “*sheng sheng*” (birth birth) of *Taiji* can be construed in two different dimensions. First, it means a determinate cosmic reality, with its determinate set of *yin/yang* and spatial/temporal features, which spontaneously emerges from another determinate cosmic reality with its own determinate set of *yin/yang* and spatial/temporal features. Second, it also means that determinate cosmic realities, among which *yin/yang* is the most generic feature, spontaneously emerge from something indeterminate and ultimately unfathomable, the so-called *Dao* or Ultimate Polarity. Taking these two dimensions into consideration, we can generalize that the power of “*sheng*” (birth) in the *Appended Texts* of *Yijing*, ascribed by the Ru interpretative tradition to Ultimate Polarity, can be construed in the most generic sense to refer to a process in which a determinate cosmic being spontaneously emerges from something else. This “something else” may be another determinate thing in a prior status of the cosmos, or an indeterminate, unfathomable, yet abundantly fecund generative power. We conclude that the second sense of “something else” overlaps nicely with Plotinus’ and the aforementioned three Christian thinkers’ understanding of divine creation as “sheer making,” and in this sense,

the “sheer making” capacity of God’s “*creatio ex nihilo*” and Ultimate Polarity’s “Sheng Sheng” can be equally described as “creation.”

Third, my third response to Paulos Huang’s argument leads to a crucial point of my methodology of comparative philosophy of religion. Echoing my argument in Chapter Two, I need to make a further explanation that “creation,” understood as a process of “sheer making” where something determinate ontologically derives from something indeterminate, is the “vague category” or “bridge concept” that links our understanding of the vastly different metaphysical systems of the Christian “*creatio ex nihilo*” and the Ruist “*generatio ex nihilo*.” As partially explained at the end of Chapter Five, the ultimate reason that we are able to find this “vague category” or “bridge concept” and thus be able to make two vastly different metaphysical systems compatible is because the Christian tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*” and the Ru tradition of “*generatio ex nihilo*” share the same logic of “ontological dependence” when they strive to use a singular principle to explain the order and existence of the existing world. In the Christian tradition, the initiating moment for this logic is Plato’s ontological turn from the Pre-Socratic natural philosophers to a search for a logical and ontological foundation for the existing world. In the Ru tradition, the *Yijing*’s symbology, which indicates the ontological relationship among layers of cosmic realities, provides the basic driver for later metaphysical thinkers to articulate what exactly are contained in the disparate layers of cosmic realities and how they are related. Because both traditions use the same logic of “ontological dependence” to articulate relationships among cosmic realities that lie at the cusp of each chain of “ontological dependence,” i.e., the “*creatio ex nihilo*” of God and

the “*sheng sheng*” of *Taiji*, we have been able to find a bridgeable concept such as “sheer making” to describe the relationship between ultimate reality and those derived realities which are characterized by different symbols and languages in the two traditions. At this conclusive moment after the survey of these two intellectual histories, we have to say that we still cannot affirm that the “sheer making” powers of God’s “*creatio ex nihilo*” and Ultimate Polarity’s “*sheng sheng*” refer to exactly the same thing. This is so because such a claim would be so strong as to potentially collapse any essential difference in thinking and languages between the two traditions which are being compared. However, we can have the confidence to say that as bridged by the vague category of “creation,” which is implied by the logic of “ontological dependence,” the Christian idea of God as “*creatio ex nihilo*” and the Ru idea of *Taiji* as “*sheng sheng*” are comparable. Furthermore, if we correctly choose representative thinkers from these two traditions, i.e., the ones mentioned above as members of the Christian minor de-anthropomorphic tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*” and the Ru tradition of “*generatio ex nihilo*,” we can confidently affirm that the aforementioned two ideas are not only comparable, but extremely similar.

IV Contemporary Chinese Ru Philosophers

Mou Zongsan and Liu Shu-hsien

It is regrettable that Mou Zongsan and Liu Shu-hsien did not discuss the “transcendence” of *Tian* in comparison with the Christian idea of “*creatio ex nihilo*,” and thus that neither directly responded to scholars’ concerns about the presence of the idea of “ontological transcendence” in the intellectual history of Ru metaphysics.

In this regard, Liu Shu-hsien is closer than Mou Zongsan in recognizing the ontological idea in Ru metaphysics, since his frequent insistence that *Tian* “is not a thing, but it is the origin of all things,” reminds us well of similar insights by major figures in the Ru metaphysical tradition who were identified here among those who proposed “*generatio ex nihilo*.” In hindsight, I submit that Liu Shu-hsien’s limited knowledge of the variety of Christian understandings of divine creation may have led to his lack of sharper conceptual tools with which to present the idea of “ontological transcendence” in the Ru tradition in a more explicit way. As shown in Chapter Five, Liu Shu-hsien’s limited knowledge of the Christian cases was made clear by his sweeping judgment about “the pure transcendence of the Christian faith in a supreme God who created, but is not part of, the world.” According to my analysis of the Greek-European Christian tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*,” the world is in general thought of as what manifests the ultimately unfathomable creative power of God, and in this way, it is illegitimate to claim that the supreme God in the Christian faith creates the world, yet is not part of the world. In other words, a more complete understanding of the Christian tradition of divine creation should have allowed Liu Shu-hsien to be conceptually more adept at presenting the type of “ontological transcendence” in the Ru idea of *Tian* when comparing it to Christianity. In this sense, I have to affirm that trans-tradition comparison is a powerful method for philosophers to understand important themes in their own traditions which would not have been easily understood otherwise.

However, when commenting on Mou Zongsan’s and Liu Shu-hsien’s thoughts in Chapter One, I noticed that their ideas addressed an epistemological question: “whether

humans have a cognitive capacity able enough to fully grasp *Tian*'s all-encompassing creativity." On that occasion, I raised a caveat that while engaging in the transcendence debate, scholars should distinguish two kinds of "priority": *Tian* may be ontologically prior to the world, yet epistemologically posterior to it. After pursuing the needed survey of the intellectual histories of "*creatio ex nihilo*" and "*generatio ex nihilo*," we concluded that the relationship between ultimate reality and derived realities is commonly thought by these two traditions to be maintaining a very subtle two-dimensional asymmetry: ontologically, God's "*creatio ex nihilo*" and *Taiji*'s "*Sheng Sheng*" are both prior to the created world, and yet, epistemologically, humans can only rely on their knowledge of the created world in saying anything of God's or *Taiji*'s creativity. This also leads to a shared commitment in both traditions to the mystery of the ultimately unfathomable fecundity of ultimate polarity's creativity.

This comparative point is particularly worthy of being mentioned here because in the thought of both Mou Zongsan and Liu Shu-hsien, they both realize the limitedness of human cognition in face of the all-encompassing creative power of *Tian*. Even so, in looking more carefully into their words which express this point, we find that the limitedness of human cognition that they recognized actually only addresses "empirical experience" or "sense perceptions." It doesn't address human intelligence in general. This is particularly true for Mou Zongsan because he identifies *Tian*'s all-encompassing creative power with "the infinite awakening mind-heart," which seems to suggest that humans have a supreme cognitive capacity to fully grasp *Tian*'s all-encompassing creativity. We also know that Mou Zongsan's thought derived mainly from Wang Yang-

ming's Ruist epistemology in the Ming Dynasty, and that sometimes scholars used the term "epistemological optimism" to describe this sort of ancient Chinese epistemology which affirms the sufficiency of human intelligence to fully understand the world.³⁰⁸

In light of the aforementioned comparative point about the mystical commitment of both traditions to the unfathomability of ultimate reality's creativity, and also stimulated by Mou Zongsan's thought and other scholars' related discussions of "epistemological optimism," a legitimate comparative question needs to be raised as

³⁰⁸ Inspired by Karl Popper's epistemological terms, Thomas Metzger used "epistemological optimism" to define the tendency of thought among modern Chinese thinkers who believe that knowledge is available in all three ontological realms identified by Popper: the physical world, the world of beliefs, and the world of objective knowledge. In contrast, he used "epistemological pessimism" to denote a disparate tendency of thought among modern Western thinkers under the influence of the Great Modern Western Epistemological Revolution (which he termed as "GMWER"). This pessimistic view denies the availability of knowledge in the prior two realms, and also doubts it in the third. In a more detailed categorization of the realms of knowledge, Metzger mentioned "ontological knowledge" that thematized "the oneness of all aspects of existence, a notion described as 'linkage' in my *Escape From Predicament* and summed up in Neo-Confucianism as t'ien-jen-ho-I (the oneness of heaven and man)." (Thomas Metzger, "Western Philosophy on the Defensive," Issue 26, *Philosophy Now*, https://philosophynow.org/issues/26/Western_Philosophy_on_the_Defensive, accessed Jan. 2018) In other words, "epistemological optimism," in Metzger's usage, can refer to an optimistic view in the Ru tradition that affirms the availability of knowledge in the realm of *Tian* whose ontological origin of *Taiji* is a key idea for my comparative project. Although Metzger admits that his use of "epistemological optimism" vs "epistemological pessimism" is intended to be neutral with the mainly descriptive purpose of illuminating the intellectual history of epistemological ideas in the East and the West, his statement that both ideas share a common potential to criticize each other alludes to a negative reading of the term "epistemological optimism." (A more detailed account of these two terms can be found at Thomas A. Metzger, *A Cloud Across the Pacific: Essays on the Clash between Chinese and Western Political Theories Today*, Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2005: 21-31.) For example, Barry Allan in his *Vanishing into Things: Knowledge in Chinese Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015, pp. 8 and 52) reads the idea negatively and thinks that Metzger's term contains a criticism of the traditional Confucian understanding of knowledge. In this chapter, I also use the term "epistemological optimism" negatively because the ontological priority of *Taiji*'s creativity, as viewed by the Ru tradition of "*generatio ex nihilo*," implies that humans *cannot* have any apodictic knowledge of *Taiji*'s creative act *per se* except through its created outcomes. Therefore, if a Ruist metaphysician does not stick to this implied logic and affirms instead that all aspects of the cosmic creativity of *Tian* can be penetrated by the human mind-heart, they will be committing an error of "epistemological optimism." However, this doesn't mean that I endorse the alternative "epistemological pessimism" view identified by Metzger as prevalent among modern Western thinkers. In my view, in face of the fecundity of the ontological creative power of *Taiji* and the continually emerging novelties in the cosmic process of *Tian*, we should nurture the virtue of "epistemological humbleness" that forces us to admit the basic limits of human cognition, but nevertheless to carefully and bravely continue to investigate the pattern-principles of things in order to realize the ideal of the Ru Way of life: to create more cosmic harmonies within human civilization.

follows: since both the Christian tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*” and the Ru tradition of “*generatio ex nihilo*” maintain a two-fold asymmetrical understanding of the relationship between ultimate reality and derived realities, which leads to their common commitment to the mystery of ultimate reality’s creativity, how thoroughly is this commitment enacted in the thought of the major figures from each tradition?

In the tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*,” although thinkers vary in their degree of thoroughness in sticking to the idea of “ontological unconditionality” when they articulate their understandings of divine creation, they all express views at certain moments in their philosophical systems about the utter limitedness of human intelligence in grasping ultimate reality’s creative power. For examples, Plotinus insists that nothing about lesser things can be fully applicable to the Oneness (*Enneads*, 6.8.8.1-15, quoted in Section 3.6 II). Augustine of Hippo envisions the possibility of other worlds radically different from the current one because of his commitment to the utter freedom of divine creation (Section 3.8 I). Thomas Aquinas denies that humans, during their lifetimes, can ever arrive at quidditative knowledge of God and furthermore, supports the idea that the knowledge of God can only be obtained through negating what is affirmed by created things (Section 4.1 I). The “incomprehensibility” of divine creation is a pivotal theme in Descartes’ theory of created eternal truth (Section 4.2). Schleiermacher says that the transcendence Whence of the human feeling of utter dependence “exceeds the limits of imagination” (Section 4.3). For Paul Tillich, God’s creativity as the ground of being, or as Being-itself, “lies beyond the polarity of finitude and infinite self-transcendence” (Section 4.4 III). Each of these examples are illustrative of how committed these

exemplary thinkers in the tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*” were to the mystery of ultimate reality’s creativity.

In comparison, the first moment in which the Ru tradition of “*generatio ex nihilo*” realized the aforementioned two-fold asymmetrical relationship took place in Confucius’ purported discussion of the relationship between the Change and the hexagrams Qian and Kun in Chapter 12 of Part I of the *Appended Texts*. Because *yin* and *yang*, the most generic categories to depict concrete cosmic realities, cannot be used to fully understand Ultimate Polarity, or *Dao*’s creativity, the text also uses the cryptic verse, “what cannot be fathomed by *yin* and *yang* is numinous and wonderful” to characterize the aforementioned two-fold asymmetrical relationship. Echoing Zhuang Xuan’s view of the relationship between *Dao* and things (section 5.4, II), Wang Bi was very explicit that because *Dao* is ontologically prior to any created thing in the world, including human knowledge, humans “don’t exactly know the process (by which the things are generated).” (Section 5.5, I) Also, because of the indeterminate features of *Dao*, Wang Bi depicts the *Dao per se* mainly through a way of negating by saying: *Dao* “has neither boundaries nor shaped bodies, and is neither *yin* nor *yang*,” and therefore “it can be called what is numinous and wonderful” (Section 5.5, III). The same insight was understood by Han Kangbo, when he describes the process by which Ultimate Polarity creates the world, using words such as, “Thus we do not understand why all this is so, so we characterize it as the numinous” (Section 5.5, IV). What is worth mentioning here is that when Wang Bi and Han Kangbo pointed out that humans cannot understand how *Dao* creates the entire world, they refer to human intelligence in general. This is different from

Mou Zongsan and Liu Shu-hsien because Mou and Liu only addressed the limit of the empirical or sensible dimension of human intelligence in comprehending *Tian*'s creative power. By comparison, we must conclude that Wang Bi and Han Kangbo's insight on the radical limitedness of human intelligence in general in being able to grasp Ultimate Polarity's creativity is more in line with the logic of the two-fold asymmetrical relationship between Ultimate Polarity and derived realities in the Ru tradition of "*generatio ex nihilo*."

Wang Bi and Han Kangbo's insights were also adopted by Zhou Dunyi and Zhu Xi. In my interpretation, Zhou Dunyi's seemingly inscrutable words about the stillness and activity of Ultimate Polarity (section 6.3) can be understood when we place Zhou Dunyi's thought in the tradition of "*generatio ex nihilo*." Accordingly, the reason that we cannot use "stillness" or "activity" to accurately depict Ultimate Polarity's creativity is that it is the same feature described by Wang Bi and Han Kangbo: humans cannot fully know how Ultimate Polarity creates. By the same token, in the second stage of Zhu Xi's metaphysical thoughts, he paraphrased many of Wang Bi's and Han Kangbo's words in describing the indeterminacy of *Taiji*'s creativity, such as that it has "neither sound, smell, nor any kind of influence can be found about it;" that *Taiji* is without "shape" or "position;" that "There is no name able to name it (*taiji*)," etc. In this way, Zhu Xi also lines up with predecessors in the Ru tradition of "*generatio ex nihilo*" in affirming the radical finitude of human intelligence in being able to grasp *Taiji*'s creativity.

However, given our analysis of Zhu Xi's thought, we now understand that he didn't always thoroughly carry through with the ontological acumen that he had achieved

in the second stage of his metaphysical thought. Instead, when he used similar words “without sound, without smell” to depict Ultimate Polarity’s creativity, he may just have meant by *Li* the non-*Qi*, abstract feature of Ultimate Polarity. This wouldn’t have expressed any mystical commitment to the ultimate unfathomability of *Taiji*’s creativity. Also, at the third stage of Zhu Xi’s metaphysics, he sometimes alluded to the possible existence of a world of pattern-principles even before anything had been generated. In light of Zhu Xi’s famous comment on the steps for “Attaining One’s Knowledge” in his *Collected Commentary on the Greater Learning*, which affirms that by means of an accumulative process of “investigations of things,” humans can reach a comprehensive and thorough understanding of every pattern-principle in the world, we cannot say that Zhu Xi’s thought was fully exempted from the “epistemological optimism” that scholars have charged the Ru tradition with.

By comparison, we find that the Greek-European Christian tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*” quite thoroughly abides by the two-fold asymmetrical relationship between ultimate reality and derived realities and its implied principle of the radical finitude of human intelligence in grasping the mystery of divine creation. This speaks to a virtue of “epistemological humbleness,” so-to-speak, that I think humanity should embrace when we face the ever changing and transforming created world. However, in the Ruist tradition of “*generatio ex nihilo*,” only when the aforementioned logic of the two-fold asymmetry had been thoroughly complied with, did thinkers and texts in the tradition express a similar commitment to the unfathomable mystery of Ultimate Polarity’s creativity. If we take into consideration the fact that the tradition of “*generatio ex nihilo*”

is just one among many traditions in ancient Chinese metaphysics, we are obliged to admit that the virtue of “epistemological humbleness” was indeed practiced less impressively by Chinese thinkers than by their counterparts in the Greek-European Christian tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*.”

Tu Wei-ming

After the previous chapters, I can confidently say that the reason that Tu Wei-ming denies any similarity between “*creatio ex nihilo*” and the Ru conception of *Tian* is that he chose an unfit candidate from the Ru metaphysical tradition with which to pursue his comparison. Tu’s understanding of *Tian* hinges upon Zhang Zai’s metaphysics, which, despite not being a major element in our comparative project, is congenial to our analysis of Luo Qingshun’s thought. In this lineage of Ru metaphysics, the world begins from an inchoate form, the all-pervading vital-energy in general, and the things in the world are conceived as being derived from a process of self-differentiation of *Qi* in general. Here, there was no further ontological impulse for questioning the radical origin of *Qi*, and thus this branch of metaphysics actually takes the existence of the world for granted. In comparison to Western metaphysical views, Zhang Zai’s and Luo Qingshun’s perspectives are more comparable to that of Aristotle, Spinoza and Hegel, whose thought also takes the existence of the world as granted and hence stands outside the metaphysical tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*.”

When commenting on Tu Wei-ming’s comparative achievements in Chapter One, I said that the confusing use of the same term *Tian* to refer to two fundamentally different things makes Tu’s argument compromise the difference between cosmology and

ontology in Ru metaphysics. However, Tu's case does indeed raise a legitimate comparative question concerning how the relationship between a time-based, cosmological mode of thinking and a separate logic-based, non-temporal, and ontological mode of thinking is treated by the tradition of "*creatio ex nihilo*" and by the one of "*generatio ex nihilo*."

Part of the answer to this comparative question has been alluded to in my aforementioned analysis on whether the supreme "One" principle undermines the diversity of "Many" in the section on Hyo-dong Lee.

In the Ru tradition of "*generatio ex nihilo*," the temporal elements arise in its vision of the "birth birth" process of Ultimate Polarity only when the *yin/yang* vital energies are manifested in the perpetual movement of the four seasons, which is typically conceived of as being without a beginning or an end. This can be shown vividly in the chart in Section 5.5³⁰⁹, which tries to map out the Ruist metaphysical thought implied by the *Appended Texts* as refined by Wang Bi and Han Kangbo. The same point can be equally applicable to Zhou Dunyi's Diagram of Ultimate Polarity and Zhu Xi's interpretation of it, since the diagram was based upon the metaphysical thought represented in our chart, and hence Zhou Dunyi and Zhu Xi share a common ontological acumen, that of differentiating temporal and non-temporal elements in their metaphysics. Accordingly, I can focus on the chart and conclude my understanding of the cosmology-ontology relationship in the Ru metaphysics of "*generatio ex nihilo*." Whether items listed in the chart are cosmological, temporal elements or ontological, non-temporal

³⁰⁹ Figure 3, page 309.

elements depends upon one's perspective. If we see them horizontally, then all of them have their cosmological consequences: the ultimate creative power of the non-polar Ultimate Polarity is manifested in changes and transformations of cosmic realities in the lower ranks of the chart, and all concepts lower than Ultimate Polarity can be used to explain how cosmic changes take place in their concrete terms. However, if we see the chart vertically, then all the involved concepts speak to a set of generic features of cosmic realities from a holistic perspective, and thus can be thought of as non-temporal and ontological. For example, *yin* and *yang* are among the most generic features of cosmic realities if we see the cosmic changes as a whole. In a word, the cosmological and ontological thinking in the Ru metaphysical tradition of "*generatio ex nihilo*" are so intertwined with each other that it will be legitimate for us to characterize this Ruist type of metaphysics as a "cosmontology."

By comparison, the relationship between cosmology and ontology in the Greek-European Christian tradition of "*creatio ex nihilo*" can also be possibly understood the same way. From the first moment when the doctrine of "*creatio ex nihilo*" was explicitly stated by the Christian theologian, Theophilus of Antioch, he kept the ontologically driven Platonic idea of time in mind: what "*creation ex nihilo*" furnishes is different, though perhaps compatible with, the thought of the Pre-Socratic philosophers of nature which pivots upon a cosmological explanation of events in a temporal sequence. As particularly attested to by Thomas Aquinas' argument concerning the possibility of the eternity of the world, and Schleiermacher's "scientific" consciousness that "*creation ex nihilo*" doesn't undermine the natural order of the world, we can furthermore confirm that

the doctrine of “*creatio ex nihilo*” is potentially compatible with any empirically approached account of the cosmos concerning either its beginning, its proceedings or its ending. Regarding the compatibility of an ontology for the “one” principle with an open cosmology of “many” cosmic events whose rules and patterns can be empirically surveyed, there is no difference between the Ruist tradition of “*generatio ex nihilo*” and the Christian one of “*creatio ex nihilo*.” However, two significant differences do need to be brought to the fore. First, open cosmology is quite often envisioned by thinkers in the tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*” as an idea of “other possible worlds” which have a completely different set of intelligible rules and patterns. For example, the idea of “other possible worlds” is prominent in Augustine’s thinking on the radical contingency of this world, and it also looms large in Descartes’ understanding of the “incomprehensibility” of God’s creation. However, in the Ru tradition of “*generatio ex nihilo*,” we seldom find any such idea. From the grounding moment of this tradition in the *Appended Texts* of *Yijing*, rules and patterns of the world are thought of as functioning within the *de facto* existing things of this world as seen from a human perspective, that is, one including heaven, earth and human beings. Accordingly, the ontological relationship is also conceptualized among tiers of rules and patterns in this world. In this way, open cosmology is not primarily envisioned by Ru thinkers as the existence of “other possible worlds.” Rather, it is envisioned as the possible existence of radical novelty that may exist in the ever changing-and-evolving realm of reality. As examined in Chapter Five, I translated the Chinese term “神” as “what is wonderful and numinous,” according to my understanding of the *Appended Texts*’ semantics and its commentarial interpretations by

Wang Bi and Han Kangbo. This meant that even *yin* and *yang*, the most generic cognitive tools used by these Ru thinkers to capture the rules and patterns of cosmic reality, may come up short of the ultimately unfathomable fecundity of Ultimate Polarity. We can say, however, that the idea of “open cosmology” is shared by both traditions, though with differing expressions. In the Christian tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*,” this idea is mainly embodied in a mode of thinking called “cosmologies + ontology,” since different cosmologies may be needed to account for different possible worlds which are each ultimately created by the same singular creative act of being “*creatio ex nihilo*.” In the Ruist tradition of “*generatio ex nihilo*,” it is embodied in a “cosmontology” mode of thinking, since the world seen from a human perspective potentially extends to all realms of reality, and all these realities are thought of as being generated from the singular creative power of “birth birth” from Ultimate Polarity. However, in my view, ultimately it makes no difference whether we view the fecundity of ultimate reality’s creativity in the form of a possible new world or in the form of possible new phenomena in the entire realm of reality, since both visions point to an utterly new set of rules and patterns which have not yet been made available to human preconception.

Second, as was partially addressed in my earlier comment on Hyo-Dong Lee’s work, the overall theistic tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*” cannot easily accommodate the aforementioned compatibility. If thinkers insist that divine intelligence has a pre-existing plan to implement in the world even before any world has been created, an empirically approached cosmology may be in contradiction to it. This will make the cosmologies conceived by the tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*” less open than it is supposed they are. By

comparison, in the mainly non-theistic Ruist tradition of “*generatio ex nihilo*” it is easier to get rid of this preconceived idea of divine creation which is potentially at odds with the empirical sciences. I think this strength of Ru cosmology has not yet been fully realized in the contemporary context. The major concepts in this cosmology have not witnessed any fruitful interaction with those of modern science, and we also rarely find scientists overtly expressing the collegiality of their scientific thought in relation to Ruism. In this regard, we have to hope for a more dialogical and fruitful future.

V. Western Comparativists

Roger Ames and David Hall

Several major points in our comparative conclusion to this project run counter to Roger Ames and David Halls’ comparative scholarship.

First, if we define what is transcendent as what is indeterminate, ontologically unconditioned by the existing world, we find that the de-anthropomorphic minor tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*” and the Ru tradition of “*generatio ex nihilo*” are not only compatible, but share the same idea of an indeterminate, ontologically unconditioned ultimate reality. In this regard, I think Ames and Hall’s definition of “strict transcendence” is not refined enough to bridge our understanding of these two similar metaphysical traditions.

Second, the two types of cosmologies termed by Ames as “*creatio ex nihilo*” and “*creatio in situ*” are, under an appropriate analysis, actually compatible with one another. This is mainly because the idea of “*creatio ex nihilo*” is mainly used by the Christian tradition to explain the origin of the being of the existing world, while “*creatio in situ*,”

as presented by Ames, describes the way how ancient Chinese cosmology used processual concepts to present the order of evolving cosmic entities in an all-interconnected existing world. According to my earlier reflections on the relationship between One and Many in Hyo-dong Lee's thought and on the relationship between ontology and cosmology in Tu Wei-ming's thought, "*creatio ex nihilo*" and "*creatio in situ*" are compatible with one another. They can coexist in the same metaphysical system as that presented in the Ru tradition of "*generatio ex nihilo*," which was characterized as a "cosmontology."

Third, Ames and Hall's comparative methodology for trying to find a genuine Chinese alternative to the Western version is also different from mine. I tried to find controversial points in the transcendent debate, took a survey of two intellectual histories, and then made use of a pragmatist theory centering upon the use of "vague category" to reach comparative conclusions in order to verify the aforementioned points. This entailed trying to maintain an impartial stance before beginning my comparative work and attending to both the similarities of and the differences between the two compared traditions. The strength of Ames and Hall's method is to highlight the distinctive feature of Chinese thought in comparison to some fragments of Western thought. Regarding the transcendence debate, however, it may be not a good idea to use their method as a way of pursuing an accurate comparison.

Robert C. Neville

Two major points in my comparative conclusion agree with Neville's stance in the transcendence debate:

First, if we define transcendence as the feature of something indeterminate and ontologically unconditioned by the existing world, the Ruist tradition has such a something, and according to the strict logic of ontological unconditionality, the Ruist idea of transcendence is even more so than the idea of “*creatio ex nihilo*” is in the mainstream theistic Christian tradition.

Second, Wang Bi and Zhou Dunyi are those Chinese Ruist thinkers whose thought on *Dao*, or Ultimate Polarity can be characterized by the feature described in the first point.

I suggest two major improvements to Neville’s comparative project regarding the transcendence debate:

First, I do not include Lao Zi’s *Dao De Jing* in the Ruist tradition of “*generatio ex nihilo*,” which in fact bears the most similarity to the minor de-anthropomorphic Christian tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*.” As examined in Chapter Five, only under the interpretation of Wang Bi, can key verses in the *Dao De Jing* be understood to be congenial to the ontological mode of thought in the *Appended Texts* of the *Yijing*. Prior to Wang Bi, the tradition of ancient Chinese cosmologies was more Daoist than Ruist, and pivoted on the idea of “cosmological succession” rather than on “ontological dependence.” I also include Han Kangbo and the second stage of Zhu Xi’s metaphysical thought in this Ruist lineage of “*generatio ex nihilo*,” which expands the Ruist tradition which was originally conceived by Neville to envision a more transcendent idea of ultimate reality than its Western counterpart.

Second, my comparative methodology begins with a situational study of the motif of my comparative project, i.e., that of engaging the transcendence debate in the history of Christian-Ru interaction. Although I am significantly indebted to Neville's pragmatist comparative methodology of "vague category," this situational thinking equips my comparative project with the extra benefits that I have elaborated in Chapter Two.

7.3 General Comparative Points

I. Summary of the points already made

Soon it will be time for us to open our inquiry and address comparative issues that have not yet been addressed by our responses to various stances in the transcendence debate. But before that we need to summarize the comparative points that have already been made, even though I definitely want this lengthy dissertation to contain as few redundancies as possible.

Regarding the Greek-European Christian tradition conceiving of God's creation as "*creatio ex nihilo*" and the Chinese Ruist tradition conceiving of Ultimate Polarity's power of "*sheng sheng*" as "*generatio ex nihilo*," the following further comparative points were made beyond our comparative conclusion which we stated at the beginning of this final chapter:

(1) In comparing the two traditions, according to the logic of "ontological unconditionality," we have discovered which thinkers' thought on ultimate reality is the more transcendent. (Section 7.2, I and Section 5.5, V, "difference, point one")

(2) The central philosophical motifs, those which ground the beginning of each tradition, find ontological explanations of the overall existence and order of the existing

world: Plato's turn toward "words" and the *Yijing's* authors' reflections on the references of and the relationship between the *Yijing* symbols. (Section 5.5, V, "similarity, point one," and Section 7.2, II)

(3) For each tradition, whether a unifying commitment to the principle of "Oneness" undermines the *de facto* empirical order among "Many" depends upon whether the logic of "ontological unconditionality" is thoroughly followed. (Section 7.2 III).

(4) We have discussed in what sense the "*creatio ex nihilo*" of God and the "*sheng sheng*" of Ultimate Polarity can be commonly described as "creation." (Section 7.2, III)

(5) The two-dimensional asymmetrical relationship between ultimate reality and derived reality. (Section 7.2, IV and Section 5.5, V, "similarity, point four")

(6) How thoroughly did the two traditions commit themselves to the mystery of ultimate reality's creativity? In other words, how was the characteristic of "epistemological optimism" or "epistemological humbleness" played out in each tradition? (Section 7.2, IV).

(7) The relationship between cosmology and ontology, and the compatibility between "open cosmology" and the One principle of ultimate reality. (Section 7.2, IV and section 5.5, V, "similarity, point three")

II. Traditions of Cosmologies within the Two Traditions.

The eighth insight resulting from our comparison is this: we are now clear that there are multiple cosmological traditions within each of the so-called “Western” and “Eastern” intellectual histories.

Since it was intensively analyzed or partially alluded to in my analysis of the Greek-European Christian tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*,” we can at least differentiate three major or minor “traditions” regarding the issue of “creation” in Western intellectual history. The first is the Greek-European Christian tradition which conceives of divine creation as “*creatio ex nihilo*.” The second is the tradition represented by Aristotle, Spinoza and Hegel. These philosophers take the existence of the existing world and its original inchoate form for granted, and do not question further into its radical beginning. The first tradition can be further divided into two sub-traditions, one mainstream and the other minor: the mainstream tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*” is represented in Plato, then received its first systematic Christian elaboration in the thought of Augustine of Hippo, and then was further strengthened by the thought of Thomas Aquinas. This tradition typically conceives of God as a supreme deity who created the world by putting intelligible ideas and forms into either a formless matter or the divine abundance of being. Its minor tradition was earlier illuminated in Plotinus’ thought, and later articulated by modern figures such as Descartes, Schleiermacher and Paul Tillich. Rather than envisioning divine creation as issuing from a supreme deity, this minor tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*” would like to think of God or ultimate reality as the “ground of being,” or the “initiator of being,” rather than as a being himself. At certain moments in

this minor tradition, such as in Descartes' theory of created eternal truth and Schliermacher's reflection on the relationship between God and the world, God is even thought of as being something indeterminate and ontologically unconditioned by the world.

Before enumerating a similar feature of diversity within ancient Chinese cosmologies, one caveat needs to be added. Even if I speak about "traditions" here, I don't intend the term to be a sociological one which may be alluding to the possible existence of a "teacher-disciple" relationship among representative philosophers. Instead, it is mainly a philosophical term indicating the collegiality of philosophers' thoughts across time. And, since I am talking about a "tradition" across time, this does mean that philosophers within each tradition are significantly different from those in other ones regarding key metaphysical issues. It also implies that we cannot easily present a "Western" view of these issues without further parsing intrinsic nuances and differences among philosophers.

By the same token, we can analyze at least three traditions of ancient Chinese cosmology regarding the creativity of *Dao* or Ultimate Polarity. First, we have a Daoist tradition from the text of the *Dao De Jing* to the one of *Qian Zao Du* presented in Chapter Five. This tradition tends to view the creativity of *Dao* to be mainly manifested in a sequence of cosmologic successions where the abundance of diversities within cosmic realities derives from a self-differentiating and self-generating process beginning from an inchoate form of the cosmos. Under the influences of the Ruist cosmology which is centered on the generative power of Ultimate Polarity, this tradition tends to

pigeonhole Ultimate Polarity into one stage of a cosmological sequence, either referring it to as a stage of formless primitive vital-energy or a cap name encapsulating all concrete things after they garner a form during a later cosmological sequence. The second tradition is a Ruist tradition which prioritizes the relationship of “ontological dependence” over that of “cosmological succession” among cosmic realities under the inspiration of the ontological mode of thinking in the *Appended Texts* of the *Yijing*. This second tradition can be further parsed into two sub-traditions. One tradition is defined by Wang Bi, Han Kangbo, Zhou Dunyi and the second stage of Zhu Xi’s metaphysics. This tradition questions the radical origin of the existing world, and therefore construes the “birth birth” power of Ultimate Polarity to be “*generatio ex nihilo*.” However, another sub-tradition incorporates the Daoist idea of “primitive vital-energy” but renders it in a Ruist ontological fashion. This sub-tradition typically thinks that the ontological primary tier of cosmic realities is the pervading vital-energy in general, following which its self-differentiation leads to the endless changing and transforming of cosmic realities in time. As directly analyzed or partially alluded to in my previous chapters, this Ruist sub-tradition can be found in the thought of Dong Zhongshu, Zhang Zai, and Luo Qingshun. It is hard to affirm which sub-tradition might be considered mainstream in the Ruist history of cosmologies. But when the Jesuits came to China and tried to figure out what the Ruists meant by “Ultimate Polarity,” it was definitely Luo Qingshun’s thought and its repercussions which were on the rise.

An additional major comparative conclusion we can reach here is that the diversity of ideas and theories within each compared tradition is undeniable. More

importantly, these major and minor traditions have been discovered by my research only under a unique set of enabling preconditions. In other words, it is for the purpose of engaging the transcendence debate and thus of becoming intensely aware of the problem of “creation” that we have discovered and studied these traditions. I believe that if we shift our original perspectival focus, we will find even more diversities among thinkers for each of the compared traditions. This belief is partially confirmed by the original methodological choice that I made at the beginning of Chapter Three. We have not yet included Christian mysticism in the project. If we had, doubtless more diversity would likely have come into vision.

Therefore, one major insight we can come to is that there is no way to essentialize the so-called “Western” or “Chinese” traditions. Which features of Western or Chinese thought are highlighted depends upon the motives and perspectives of comparativists, and for every particular comparison, a more accurate approach will require comparativists to attend to both similarities and differences among the ideas compared.

III. Theodicy

The last comparative point we need to make concerns theodicy, the problem of evil.

We find that the problem of evil takes a prominent position in the intellectual history of the Greek-European Christian tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*” which is under our analysis. Before Augustine of Hippo, we witnessed a dualistic worldview among thinkers even though some of them were trying to find a single principle which would account for everything in the world. For Plato, “matter” is the reason that changes in

cosmic realities tend to deviate from orders and measures such that the actual cosmic process is thought of as succumbing to a constant cycle of decay and recovery. For Plotinus, “matter” is the last remnant issued from the emanation of the “One.” Because it lacks any kind of order or measure, Plotinus sometimes termed “matter” as “utterly evil.” If we add to this list the Gnostic view of acosmism, we find that before Augustine, the way to account for the existence of evil under a purportedly absolutely good “one” principle was a great challenge for thinkers in the tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*.”

However, based on my analysis in Chapter Three, the first systematic resolution of the problem of evil for the “*creatio ex nihilo*” tradition was the thought of Augustine which was not very successful. In summary, Augustine’s solution fails on two points. First, it violates the principle of “ontological unconditionality” by affirming that there is a divine plan for God’s creation, and hence the existence of evil in the world could become good if it would only fit into the overall plan. Second, Augustine’s confused thinking on metaphysical and moral evils runs counter to ordinary moral consciousness: it makes little sense, at least to me, to affirm that congenital infirmities of new-borns are divine punishment by God for humanity’s original sin.

Nevertheless, Augustine’s failed efforts also pointed out the way to more effectively tackle the problem of evil in a Christian manner: First, we must give up the idea of God as a supreme deity implementing a divine plan which was designed prior to the creation of the world. Second, we must differentiate more firmly metaphysical evil from moral evil so as not to allow the thought of these two to be conflated and so run counter to our ordinary moral consciousness. These two moves were added by Paul

Tillich, and according to my analysis in Chapter Four, it was not until Tillich that the Christian tradition furnished a nearly successful resolution of the problem of evil.

First, Tillich's conception of God as the "ground of being", rather than as a supreme being, represents the de-anthropomorphic tradition of "*creatio ex nihilo*" as represented by figures such as Plotinus, Descartes and Schleiermacher. This makes Tillich reject the traditional idea of a divine plan, one consequence of which is that Tillich doesn't think of "eschaton" in the temporal sense. Instead, Tillich renders "eschaton" as the "aim of history" that humans ought to strive to realize at any moment of history. In this updated vision of history, the existence of evil in the human world is not to be thought of as becoming good again in the overall perspective of a divine plan. Rather, evil exists because of the failure of human beings to realize the aim of history at various historical moments, which failure does not affect the validity of the claim that history has an aim, and that the aim is worth fighting for.

Second, the differentiation between the "*ouk on*" and the "*me on*" understandings of "nothing" in the phrase, "*creatio ex nihilo*," is a crucial step by which Paul Tillich reaches an awareness of the distinction between metaphysical and moral evils. According to my analysis in Chapter Four, the "*ouk on*" type of "nothing" implies the unconditionality of divine creation, and more importantly, seen from the holistic perspective of the entire created realm of cosmic realities, the unconditionality of divine creation as the ground of being enables us to think of none of the cosmic realities as evil from the standpoint of God. In other words, metaphysically, there is no evil. However, the "*me on*" type of nothingness speaks to the intrinsic finitude of every concrete cosmic

reality. In the case of human beings, the “*me on*” type of nothingness implies that humanity always ought to strive to become good and then better in order to overcome a particular mode of human finitude in particular moments of human history. If we combine the two types of understanding of “nothingness” in Tillich’s worldview, which pivots on a conception of divine creation as “*creatio ex nihilo*,” we can say that metaphysically there is nothing that is evil. However, morally, the evilness of human behavior consists in whether it can accept the all-encompassing, unconditional divine creation as its ideal, and thus strive to realize this ideal in the human world. Here, the problem of evil is more successfully resolved in the sense that the existence of moral evil doesn’t affect the all-pervading metaphysical goodness of divine creation, and more importantly, this resolution furnishes the criteria of good and evil for human behavior and a rationale for humans’ moral efforts to become good. In this latter sense, Tillich’s thought also furnishes a firm metaphysical foundation for ethics.

However, as also examined in Chapter Four, I do not think Tillich’s resolution of the problem of evil is entirely satisfactory because the use of the dyad of categories, “essence” and “existence,” and its related theory of “essentialization” prevented Tillich from treating this distinction between metaphysical and moral evils in a more consistent way. In revising his thought, I would urge Tillich not to rely on “essentialization,” so that we can conclude something like this: whether humanity succeeds in realizing the ideal of divine creation or not in the human realm utterly depends upon the freedom of human beings, i.e., it depends on human effort. This way there is no affect on the all-pervading metaphysical goodness of the “eternal act of creation.”

By comparison, although the problem of evil is also a problem for classical Ruism and Song and Ming Ruism, it is not so prominent in the Ruist texts and in the thought of those Ruist thinkers who primarily focused on analyzing the idea of Ultimate Polarity. In other words, there is less tension between the monistic commitment to a singular principle of ultimate reality and the variety of good and bad aspects of human society and behaviors in the Ru tradition we are examining. This is also the major reason that the problem of evil has not been a major focus in my survey of the intellectual history of the Ruist idea of the “birth birth” of Ultimate Polarity as “*generatio ex nihilo*.” In this regard, I think the ultimate reason for the lesser tension is that the Ru metaphysical tradition is better equipped with conceptual tools and metaphysical insights for resolving the problem of evil from the very first beginning.

In section 5.2, based upon my reading of the *Appended Text of Yijing*, I earlier characterized the Ruist understanding of the relationship between the cosmic *Dao* and the human world as one of “escalated continuum” and “manifesting unity.” If we summarize the major points of this understanding, we find that they contain all the aforementioned conditions which led to a successful resolution of the problem of evil in the Christian tradition: first, Ultimate Polarity is not a personal deity. There is no divine plan, either in the anthropomorphic nor in the anthrocentric sense, for the creativity of Ultimate Polarity. Second, Ultimate Polarity’s creativity is so all-encompassing and sublime that it can be taken to be an ideal for human enterprises; accordingly, any manifesting human enterprise can be defined as good or bad, better or worse. Third, compared with non-human nature, human enterprises which manifest Ultimate Polarity’s creativity are to add

unique humanistic values to the non-human natural world such that the co-evolving world of a human-nature continuum can be harmonized by human efforts. In this sense, the moral and metaphysical senses of evil are also firmly distinguished: no matter what happens to the human world, the cosmic *Dao* is still creating naturally and constantly. Nevertheless, bad things which happen to the human world are just bad from a human perspective. From a human point of view, humans have the obligation to constantly overcome those bad things in order to realize an all-encompassing cosmic harmony in the human world.

By comparison, this Ruist understanding of the problem of evil is very similar to my revised version of Tillich's thought concerning the same problem. We earlier stated the following conclusion regarding the comparability of two traditions: the Ruist tradition of "*generatio ex nihilo*" is most similar to the minor de-anthropomorphic tradition of "*creatio ex nihilo*." In exactly these two traditions, we also find a very similar case for resolving the problem of evil under the shared commitment to the absolute metaphysical goodness of ultimate reality's creativity: one is Paul Tillich's thought, and the other is implied by the earliest text in the Ruist metaphysical tradition of "*generatio ex nihilo*."

7.4 Methodological Reflection

After reaching nine major comparative conclusions which address issues raised both in the transcendence debate and in our comparative project, this project comes close to an end.

Echoing the comparative methodology I devised in Chapter Two, this concluding section of my dissertation will reflect on whether my comparative study complies with

the major points of the methodology, and if so, on the possible directions for future scholars who intend to engage in this comparative study.

While articulating their criteria of “genuine comparisons,” Robert Neville and Wesley Wildman furnished three criteria: “if the category of comparison vaguely considered is indeed a common respect for comparison, if the specifications of the category are made with pains taken to avoid imposing biases, and if the point of comparison is legitimate, then the translations of the specifications into the language of the category can allow of genuine comparisons” (quoted in Chapter Two). Since the major facets of my comparative methodology are in line with Neville and Wildman and pivot upon the pragmatist use of vague category, I endorse the idea that we can use these three criteria to gauge whether I have reached a warranted comparison.

First, we find that the major vague categories used by our project to bridge our understanding of the vastly different metaphysical traditions, such as “ontology,” “ontological dependence,” “ontological unconditionality,” “creation,” and “transcendence,” all derive from our careful reading of the two intellectual histories from an internal point of view. In other words, I tried to show that the logic of “ontology,” as well as its implied understanding of the relationship of “ontological dependence” among cosmic realities leading to a conception of “transcendence” as something indeterminate and ontologically unconditioned by the existing world, is intrinsic to each compared tradition. In this sense, I made efforts to show that the categories vaguely considered have “indeed a common respect for comparison.”

Two, my awareness about avoiding the imposition of biases when I introduced the

specification of each selected vague category into each compared tradition is manifested by my efforts to find the most comparable sub-traditions. As illustrated by some of our earlier comparative conclusions, such as that regarding the understanding of “ontological creation” as being issued from something indeterminate and ontologically unconditioned by the existing world, we found that the de-anthropomorphic minor tradition of “*creatio ex nihilo*” was most comparable to the Ruist one of “*generatio ex nihilo*.” Although we still cannot confirm that the conception of God in this minor tradition is exactly the same as the conception of Ultimate Polarity in the Ruist tradition, the discovery of the most comparable sets of thinkers and texts within the two traditions furnished a vantage-point for our comparison while avoiding the imposition of biases. At that point we knew which thinkers and texts would need to be addressed first and foremost in serving as the options requiring for comparing the Christian and the Ruist metaphysical traditions surrounding the theme of “creation” and “transcendence.” Furthermore, the efforts made to find the most comparable points in order to avoid imposing biases during the comparison also addressed concern for the tension between “locality” and “holism” mentioned in Chapter Two. We tried to include enough cases within each compared tradition so as to find the most comparable points. Because of this, I also believe the inclusion of the figures and texts in this comparative project was necessary for its comparative motif.

Third, the problem of the “legitimacy” of comparative projects has been resolved in my project by my Gadamerian or Jonathan Smith-type of hermeneutical awareness towards my scholarly situation in engaging the so-called transcendence debate. My major comparative conclusions are intended to respond to controversies in the debate, and

therefore, so far as this comparative project makes a contribution to a lasting, yet unsettled scholarly debate, it is legitimate.

7.5 Future Directions of Related Comparative Studies

How future scholars continue to pursue comparative studies inspired by my project obviously remains a wide-open question. However, I do hope scholars will now be generally more equipped when they have to answer the question of whether there is anything transcendent in ancient Chinese cosmologies. In addition, a modest suggestion for future scholars may be ritually appropriate before ending my dissertation.

As indicated by point 8 in our comparative conclusions, we find that the Western metaphysical tradition represented by Aristotle, Spinoza and Hegel is very similar to the Ru metaphysical tradition represented by Dong Zhongshu, Zhang Zai, and Luo Qingshun. Both of these traditions are located outside the traditions compared in this project. Neither of them therefore questions the radical beginning of the existing world. Perhaps a future comparative project considering these two traditions is needed in order to help us better understand the unfathomable fecundity of the intellectual histories of the so-called Eastern and Western thought.

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Zhu, Youwen 朱幼文. “析利玛窦对理学的批判及其影响.”《华东师范大学学报 (哲学社会科学版)》, 1997 (5) :46-51.

Ziporyn, Brook. *Ironies of Oneness and Difference: Coherence in Early Chinese Thought – Prolegomena to the Study of Li*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2012.

_____. *Beyond Oneness and Difference: Li in Chinese Buddhist Thought and Its Antecedents*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2013.

Curriculum Vitae

Bin SONG

ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT

- Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Religion, Washington College, MD, beginning from Fall 2018.
- Teaching Fellow, Graduate Division of Religious Studies, Boston University, Boston, MA, 2016-2017.
- Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Department of Philosophy, Nankai University, Tianjin, China, 2009-2013.
- Lecturer of English Language, part-time, College of Adult Education, Hebei University of Technology, Tianjin, China, 2004-2007.

AREAS OF SPECIALIZATION

Ancient Chinese Philosophies, Methodology of Comparative Philosophy/Religion, History of Confucian-Christian Interaction, History of Western Philosophy and Theology (ancient and modern), Philosophy of Religion, Metaphysics, Epistemology, Philosophy of Science.

AREAS OF COMPETENCE

Sociology of Religion, Studies of Spirituality, Ethics, Economic History

EDUCATION

Boston University, Boston, MA.

Ph.D. Religious Studies, expected: Sep. 2018.

Dissertation: *A Study of Comparative Philosophy of Religion on "Creatio ex nihilo" and "Sheng Sheng" (Birth Birth, 生生)*. Readers: Robert C. Neville, and Stephen C. Angle.

S.T.M. Theology, 2014. Thesis: *Confucian Sacred Canopy in the Yijing*. Advisor: John Berthrong.

Nankai University, Tianjin, China.

Ph.D. Philosophy, 2009.

Dissertation: *Descartes' Mechanical Philosophy – from the Perspective of Metaphysics and Physics* (in Chinese), with the highest honor.

B.A. Philosophy, 2003.

ADDITIONAL PROFESSIONAL TRAINING

Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

Harvard-Yenching Visiting Fellow. **Asian Studies**, 2011-2013.

FU JEN Catholic University, Taiwan, China.

Career Development Courses on **Medieval Scholasticism** for junior faculty, 2010.

University of Paris-Sorbonne (Paris IV), Paris, France.

China-France Jointly Supervised Doctorate Program. Dissertation research, Center for **Cartesian Studies**, 2007-2008. Advisor: Fabien Chareix.

Renmin University of China, Beijing, China

Philosophy Summer School in China: China, Britain and America. **Kantian Philosophy**, 2006.

Thesis: *"Intuition" in Kantian Philosophy*, with distinction.

COURSES TAUGHT

Teaching Fellow at Boston University for "World Religions: East" (RN 103), "Death and Immortality" (RN 106), "Introduction to Religion" (RN 100), "Introduction to the Bible" (RN 101), 2015-2017.

Instructor at Nankai University, Tianjin, China, for undergraduates: "Introduction to Philosophy of Science," "History of Physics," "History of the Culture of Science and Technology;" for graduates: "Philosophy of Science," "Topics on Western Philosophy: Descartes, Kant, and Heidegger," 2009-2012.

PUBLICATIONS

Monographs:

Descartes' Mechanical Philosophy - from the Perspective of Metaphysics and Physics (in Chinese), Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2012.

Translations:

Ru (Confucian) Meditation: Gao Pan Long (1562-1626 C.E). Boston: Ru Media Company, 2017.

An annotated translation of Gao Panlong's writings on Ru meditation. Featured at the international blog of Chinese Philosophy *Warp, Weft and Way*:

<http://warpweftandway.com/new-book-song-trans-ru-meditation-gao-panlong-1562-1626-c-e/>, posted Dec. 23, 2017.

莱布尼茨传记，北京：中国人民大学出版社，2015. Translation of Maria Rosa Antognazza, *Leibniz An Intellectual Biography*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Peer-reviewed Journal Articles and Book Chapters:

"Three Sacrificial Rituals' (三祭) and the Practicability of Ruist (Confucian) Philosophy," in the *APA (American Philosophical Association) Newsletter on Asian and Asian-American Philosophers and Philosophies*, Vol. 17 (2), Apr., 2018: 2-5.

"Shengsheng and the Confucian Sacred Canopy in the *Yijing*," *Studies of Zhouyi* (English version), Mar. 2018 (1). In Print.

"The Confucian Philosophy of Education in Hexagram 'Meng' (Shrouded) of the *Yijing*," in *Confucianism Reconsidered: Insights for American and Chinese Education in the 21st Century*, edited by Xiufeng Liu and Wen Ma. New York: State University of New York Press, 2018 (June): pp.131-150.

Academic Adviser and Co-author for "Mencius 372-289 B.C.," in *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism (CMLC)*, edited by Lawrence J. Trudeau, vol. 197, Gale, 2018: pp 103-297.

"Political Mysticism and Political Theology of Dorothee Sölle," *Studies in Spirituality*, vol. 26, 2016: pp.331-344.

- “‘Five Cardinal Human Relationships’, ‘Three Guides’ and ‘Five Constant Virtues’ - Confucianism’s View of ‘Equality’ in Comparison to Christianity” (in Chinese), *Newsletter of the Chinese Christian Scholars Association in North America*, 2016 (2): pp. 9.
- “The Cartesian Circle and the Principle for the Certainty of Knowledge” (in Chinese), *Review of Phenomenology and Philosophy in China*, 2014 (15): pp. 23-56.
- “The Affectivity between Heaven (*Tian*) and Humans, One Thread to Run Through - An Interpretation of the Happiness of Confucius and Yan Hui from the Perspective of Phenomenology” (in Classical Chinese), *New Asia Journal*, 2012 (13): pp.43-47.
- “An Interaction between Christianity and Science in the Epoch of the Modern Scientific Revolution — Marin Mersenne as an Example” (in Chinese), *Studies In Dialectics of Nature*, 2012 (9): pp.102-107.
- “Being Self-Determined and Obeying Nature — an Exposition of Descartes' Ethics” (in Chinese), *Journal of Tianjin University (Social Sciences)*, 2011 (3): pp.102-106.
- “Descartes’ ‘Hyperbolic Doubt’ as the Origin of the Phenomenological Concept of ‘Intentionality’” (in Chinese), *Modern Philosophy*, 2011(2): pp. 72-78.
- “Why does Modern Science Originate from the West?” (in Chinese), *Newspaper of China Social Sciences*, 02/17/2011: pp.12.
- “Metaphor Rooted in the Human World and the Logic of Classification: Essential Elements in the System of Aristotelian Natural Philosophy” (in Chinese), *Newspaper of China Social Sciences*, 04/01/2010: pp.11.
- “Dichotomy of Soul and Body: An Evil Flower in Human Language” (in Chinese), *Newspaper of China Social Sciences*, 11/03/2010: pp.5.
- Second Author, “Persistent Explanation with Causality – on Vygotsky’s Theory of Passion” (in Chinese), *Journal of Dialectics of Nature*, 2009 (3): pp.7-13.
- “The Concepts of ‘Cause’ and ‘Movement’ in the Physics of Aristotle – from the Perspective of Kuhn” (in Chinese), *Modern Philosophy*, 2008 (5): pp.81-87.
- “Elements Of Hume’s Philosophy in William James’ View of Truth” (in Chinese), *Modern Philosophy*, 2006 (2): pp.72-77.

“The Indivisible Intuition – An Analysis of Kant’s Philosophy of Mathematics” (in Chinese),
Journal of Jimei University (Philosophy and Social Sciences), 2006 (4): pp.11-17.

“Analogy and Model – Metaphor in the Discovery of Universal Gravitation” (in Chinese), *Journal of Yantai University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)*, 2006 (19): pp.33-35.

Book Reviews:

Joan Chittister, *The Monastery of the Heart: An Invitation to a Meaningful Life*, Bluebridge, 2011. Published at “Monasteries of the Heart, a New Movement for a New World”, <https://www.monasteriesoftheheart.org/books/monastery-heart/>, accessed on Sept.6, 2017. This review is recommended in *Old Monk’s Journal*, Entry 23, 2014.

Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Oneness: East Asian Conception of Virtue, Happiness and How We are All Connected*, Oxford, 2017. Notre Dame Philosophical Review, <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/oneness/>, published in May 5th, 2018.

Other Academic Publications:

I am a contributor to the Huffington Post (<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/author/binsong1981-695>) from 2016-2018. Highlighted Articles:

“Is Confucius a Confucian?” discussed by *Warp, Weft and Way*:
<http://warpweftandway.com/should-instead-confucianism/>, posted at May 4, 2016.
Featured at *Pagan News Beagle: Faithful Friday*, Mar. 11, 2016.

“Ancestor Devotion (祭祖),” featured at *Pagan News Beagle: Faithful Friday*, Mar. 25, 2016.

“Dynamic Harmony (和, *he*) as a Principle of Civil Disobedience,” featured at *Pagan News Beagle: Faithful Friday*, Jul. 29, 2016.

“A Chart of Ruist (Confucian) Virtues,” reviewed by the international blog of Confucian studies *Confucian Weekly Bulletin*, Sept. 1, 2016: <https://confucianweekly.com/2016/09/01/a-chart-of-ruist-confucian-virtues/>

“Voting with Their Feet: How Early Ruism (Confucianism) Conceived of the Relationship Between the State and its Citizens,” reviewed at *Confucian Weekly Bulletin*, Nov. 3, 2016: goo.gl/mZqBK7, featured at *Pagan News Beagle: Faithful Friday*, Nov. 4, 2016.

Annotated translation of Zhu Xi’s poem, “Exhortation for Adapting Breath 調息箴,” featured at *Warp, Weft and Way*: <http://warpweftandway.com/translates-exhortation-adapting/>, posted on January 30, 2017.

“The Status of Women is Not an Issue for the Ru (Confucian) Tradition,” featured at *Warp, Weft and Way*: <http://warpweftandway.com/song-women-ruism/>, posted on March 7, 2017.

“Foot-binding and Ruism (Confucianism),” reviewed at *Confucian Weekly Bulletin*, April 4, 2017: goo.gl/ePBA2V

“Today Ruism (Confucianism) Can Unconditionally Support Same-Sex Marriage,” featured at *Warp, Weft and Way*: <http://warpweftandway.com/bin-song-on-ruist-same-sex-marriage/>, posted on Jan. 3, 2018.

CONFERENCE & WORKSHOP PRESENTATIONS

“Ru (Confucian) Business and its Exemplar in Japan – a Re-examination of Max Weber’s Thesis on Confucianism and Capitalism,” 2018 Workshop of Boston University Confucian Association, with responses by Prof. Geoffrey G. Jones (Harvard Business School) and Prof. Manyul Im (University of Bridgeport, Dean of the School of Arts and Science), Boston University, Apr. 7, 2018. Invited.

“ ‘A Sage in the West will Share the Same Mind-Heart and Understand the Same Principle’ - Robert Neville on Comparative Theology and the Christian - Ru (Confucian) Dialogue,” a panel in honor of Robert Neville’s retirement organized by Wesley Wildman, March 21, 2018. Papers are collected in a coming issue of the *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*. Invited.

“Separation of Church and State and Character Education through Literature – a Confucian Example,” in the seminar “World Literature and the Cultivation of Humanity,” 2018 Annual Meeting of the American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA), UCLA in Los Angeles, CA, Mar. 29, 2018.

“The Transcendence Debate in the History of Christian-Ru (Confucian) Interaction,” Doctoral Colloquium of Comparative Religion, Harvard Divinity School, Nov. 13, 2017.

“Confucianism, *Gapponshugi* and the Spirit of Japanese Capitalism,” the Colloquium of “Religion and Social Engagement,” Institute on Culture, Religion & World Affairs, Boston University, Dec. 1, 2017.

“Confucianism, *Gapponshugi* and the Spirit of Japanese Capitalism,” with a response by Prof. Anna Sun (Kenyon College), the Session of International Society of Chinese Philosophy, American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, Boston, Nov. 19, 2017.

“Rising Scholar and the Future of Transreligious Theology,” the Session of Theology Without Walls, American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, Boston, Nov. 18, 2017.

“A Review on the Study and Social Influence of Confucianism in Today’s U.S.” (in Chinese), the International Conference of American Confucianism, Xi’an International Studies University, China, Oct. 12-13. Invited.

“‘Independent Spirit and Free Thought’: The Ruist (Confucian) Idea of ‘Freedom’” (in Chinese), the 2017 International Conference of Christianity and China: Religion and Freedom, Chinese Christian Scholars Association in North America, Lexington, MA, July 15, 2017. Invited.

“Methodology of Comparative Theology/Religion in the Context of Christian/Ruist (Confucian) Dialogue,” the Session of Map Versus Terrain, American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, San Antonio, TX, Nov. 18, 2016.

“Methodology of Comparative Theology/Religion/Philosophy in the Context of Christian/Ruist (Confucian) Dialogue,” the 5th Annual Northeast Conference on Chinese Thought, University of Bridgeport, CT, Nov. 5-6, 2016.

“‘Five Cardinal Human Relationships’, ‘Three Guides’ and ‘Five Constant Virtues’ - Ruism’s view of ‘Equality’ in Comparison to Christianity” (in Chinese), the 2016 International Conference of Christianity and China: Religion and Equality, Chinese Christian Scholars Association in North America, Lexington, MA, July 15, 2016.

Chair/Coordinator for the Panel “Religious Expressions and Encounters: Crossing New Boundaries of Public Space,” Conference on Religious Diversity: Conflict, Cooperation, and Creolization, Boston University, Nov. 14, 2015. Invited

"A Misguided Form of Holism and Ultimate Concern - The Re-institutionalization of Contemporary Confucianism," 2015 Northeast Conference on Chinese Thought, Southern Connecticut State University, Nov. 7-8, 2015.

"*Shengsheng*: A Key Phrase to Understand the Religiosity of Confucianism," the Religion as Creativity Symposium, Miami University (Oxford, OH), Oct. 2-4, 2015.

"Political Mysticism and Political Theology of Dorothee Soelle," the 2015 NEMAAR (New England- Maritimes Religion) Conference, Boston College, Mar. 21, 2015.

"Confucian Sacred Canopy in the *Yijing*," 2014 Northeast Conference on Chinese Thought, Central Connecticut State University, Nov. 8-9, 2014.

"The Confucian Philosophy of Education in the Hexagram '*Meng*' (Shrouded) of *Yijing*," International Conference on Confucianism and Education, the State University of New York at Buffalo, Oct.17-19, 2014.

"The Confucian Sacred Canopy in the *Yijing*," the Comparative Doctoral Colloquium, Harvard Divinity School, Oct.16, 2014.

"The Pitfall and Direction of the Modernization of China from a Confucian Perspective," Conference on "Pluralism in the Mind and Politics: How individuals and Societies Cope with Deep Diversities," organized by Peter Berger, the Institute on Culture, Religions and World Affairs, Boston University, April 11-13, 2013. Invited.

"What is Transcendent in Confucianism?" Workshop of Harvard-Yenching Visiting Fellows, Harvard-Yenching Institute, Oct. 12, 2012.

"Review of Liu Shu-Hsien's Research on the Religiosity of Confucianism" (in Chinese), Harvard Chinese Culture Workshop, Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations, Harvard University, May 17, 2012. Invited.

"Religion, Morality and Politics in the Public and Private Domains" (in Chinese), Symposium of Spiritual Life and Ethical Practice, Chinese Christian Scholars Association in North America, Jamaica Plain, MA, Feb. 18, 2012. Invited.

"Schleiermacher and the Relevance of his Thought to the Study of the Religiosity of Confucianism," Workshop of Harvard-Yenching Visiting Fellows, Harvard-Yenching Institute, Feb. 11, 2012.

“An Introduction to a Study of the Religious Experience Implied by Confucianism and Daoism before the Qin-Dynasty in China — from the Existential-Phenomenological Perspective,” Workshop of Harvard-Yenching Visiting Fellows, Harvard-Yenching Institute, Oct. 30, 2011.

“Cartesian Circle and the Principle of the Certainty of Knowledge” (in Chinese), Symposium of Phenomenology and Contemporary Theology, the Fifteenth Annual Meeting of the Society of Phenomenology in China, Shanghai, Tongji University, Oct. 8-11, 2010.

“An Investigation on the Nature of Belief – through a Study of the Dispute on Truth between William James and Bertrand Russell” (in Chinese), Symposium of Philosophy in China, Beijing: Academy of Social Sciences of China, July 11, 2004.

INVITED SPEECHES, RESPONSES & PUBLIC ATTENDANCE

“Robert Neville on Comparative Theology and Christian-Ru Dialogue,” School of Theology, April 19th, 2018. Video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vV0zP5rBeaE>.

“Cultural Root of Asian Americans, if Needed,” Boston University China Care Fund, Nov. 11, 2017. Interviewed by Amber of BUTV 10. Video can be found at https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/nS7RPQxMLyQqn6hUHmV0_w.

Classroom Lecture, “Evolution of Ruism (Confucianism): a Tradition for and of Guardians of Civilization,” for “Religions of Asia (RN 103),” Boston University, Nov. 3, 2017.

Keynote Speaker, the Second World Conference of Confucianism, Jakarta, Indonesia, Oct. 15-19, 2017. Turned down for visa restriction.

“Dr. Bin Song on the Meaning of *Ren* (Humaneness) for Confucianism,” the Paos Arts Center of Boston Chinatown Neighborhood (BCNC), Aug. 26, 2017. Video available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aB9BhXln2R4>.

“Dr. Bin Song on the Meaning of Ru for Confucianism,” the Paos Arts Center of the Boston Chinatown Neighborhood (BCNC), July 22, 2017. Video available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ti7SuAx7B-w&t=1155s>.

Interview on the series of “Confucianism” created by the “Common Thread Podcast” located at the Howard Thurman Center of Boston University. Podcast available at

<https://www.bucommonthread.com/confucianism-ep2#>. Apr. 25, 2017. Featured in *Warp Weft and Way*: <http://warpweftandway.com/confucianism-podcasts/>, posted on May 2, 2017.

Classroom lecture, "Confucianism as a Misnomer," for "World Religions: East (RN 103)," Boston University, Apr. 6, 2017.

"'Faith Seeking Understanding' vs 'Understanding Seeking Faith'," a response to "On Comparative Theology: Religion-Specific or Trans-Religious?" given by Robert C. Neville, 2017 Comparative Theology Lecture, the Center for the Study of World Religions (CSWR), Harvard Divinity School, Mar. 6, 2017. Video response starting from approximately 57:36 available at <http://cswr.hds.harvard.edu/news/2017/03/06/video-religion-specific-or-trans-religious>.

Classroom lecture, "Introduction to Ruism," for "Introduction to Religion (RN101)," Boston University, Nov. 22, 2016.

Interview on "Educational Institutions and Creativity" (in Chinese), Global Village Education Forum, The Sino-American Educational Research Association (S-AERA), Apr. 24, 2015.

VOLUNTEER AND PROFESSIONAL SERVICE

Board of Directors, The North American Paul Tillich Society, 2018-2021.

Chapel Associate of Confucianism, Marsh Chapel, Boston University, 2018-2019.

Founder and President of Boston University Confucian Association (BUCA), Boston, 2014-present. An accumulative receipt of unsolicited donations of \$22,000. Highlighted activities under my organization and leadership:

- Anna Sun (Kenyon College, U.S.), "The Contemporary Revival of Confucianism," lecture, with responses by Robert C. Neville (Boston University), Yair Lior (Boston University) and Bin Song (Boston University), Mar. 17, 2018.
- Jing Lin (University of Maryland), Min Chen (M.I.T), "Confucian Education in a Global Context," with responses by Yair Lior (Boston University), Bin Song (Boston University) and John Hess (Umass Boston), Nov. 4, 2017.
- Stephen C. Angle (Wesleyan University, U.S.), "Neo-Confucianism as Philosophy," lecture, with responses by Robert C. Neville (Boston University), Lawrence Whitney (Boston University) and Yair Lior (Boston University), Oct. 27, 2017.

- Bryan Van Norden (Vassar College, U.S.), “Like Loving a Lovely Sight: Simile and Metaphor in Chinese Philosophy,” lecture, Mar. 23, 2017.
- Tongdong Bai (Fudan University, China), “A Confucian New *Tianxia* Model and its Superiority to the Nation-State & Liberal Models,” lecture, Sept. 28, 2016.
- The First Ruist (Confucian) “Friends from Afar” Retreat in North America, July 1-3, 2016.
- Weekly Community Lunch and Reading on Ruist (Confucian) Classics, 2014-2016.
- Workshops of Ru meditation and *Taiji* martial art, Jun.–Aug, 2015.

BUCA’s activities are reported by US-China Press (侨报) on Oct. 26/2017 in an article entitled “Merging while Dialoguing, Ruism at Boston Becomes Well-Known” (in Chinese): B06, <http://ny2.uschinapress.com/category/4908-11-27-2017.html>.

BUCA’s activities are reported by *Guang Ming Daily* (光明日报) on Aug.15/2016 in an article entitled “The Recent Boston Confucianism” (in Chinese): http://epaper.gmw.cn/gmrb/html/2016-08/15/nw.D110000gmrb_20160815_1-16.htm

REFEREE for ACADEMIC JOURNALS

Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy

Journal of Cultural and Religious Studies

《道風：基督教文化評論》 (*Daofeng: a Review of Christian Culture*)

MEMBERSHIP of SCHOLARLY ASSOCIATIONS

American Philosophical Association

American Academy of Religion

Association for Asian Studies

International Society for Comparative Studies of Chinese and Western Philosophy

North America Paul Tillich Society (Executive Board)

GRANTS

Chapel Associate of Confucianism at Marsh Chapel, Boston University, \$10,000 gift from the **International Confucian Association** at Beijing, China in January, 2018. My responsibilities include: daily cultural and spiritual guidance, inter-cultural and inter-faith dialogue, and academic conference organization.

Fellow for the 2017 “Religion & World Affairs Colloquium.” \$1,000 grant from the **Institute on Culture, Religion and World Affairs (CURA)** at Pardee School of Global Studies in Boston

University. Proposed Research: “Confucianism, *Gapponshugi*, and the Spirit of Japanese Confucianism.”

Harvard-Yenching Visiting Fellow. \$56,748 grant from the **Harvard-Yenching Institute** to pursue a 17-month (2011-2013) research project at Harvard University. Proposed Research: “The Religious Experience Implied by Confucianism and Daoism before the Qin Dynasty in China – in the Existential-Phenomenological Horizon.”

Scholar in Residence. \$5,000 HK grant from the **Daofeng Institute of Sino-Christian Studies** in Hong Kong to pursue a three-month (March to May, 2011) religious study.

Principal Investigator, “Research on the Spiritual Characteristics of Early Modern Chinese Scientists” (three years, in Chinese). ¥50,000 CNY grant from the **Ministry of Education of the Central Chinese Government**, awarded to Nankai University in July of 2010. I am the primary author of the grant proposal.

Scholar in Residence. \$15,000 NT grant from the **Institute of Scholastic Philosophy in FUJEN Catholic University**, Taiwan, China to attend to a three-month (March to May, 2010) series of advanced courses on Scholastic Philosophy. Thesis: “An Interaction between Christianity and Science in the Epoch of Modern Scientific Revolution — Marin Mersenne as an Example” (in Classical Chinese).

France-China Jointly Supervised Doctorate. €13,000 EUR grant from the **China Scholarship Council** to pursue a one-year dissertation research supervised by a French professor, awarded in Oct. 2007.

HONORS & AWARDS

Teaching Fellowship, Graduate Division of Religious Studies, Boston University, 2015-2017.

Dean Fellowship, Graduate Division of Religious Studies, Boston University, 2014-2015.

Graduate Fellowship, \$5,250, awarded by Hing Wah Cheung Fellowship Fund to distinguished Chinese Students in Boston University, Oct. 2013.

Prize for Excellent Dissertation, awarded by Nankai University, China, Jun. 2009.

Fellowship and a grade of Distinction awarded by the 2006 session of "Philosophy Summer school in China: China Britain America" (Kantian Philosophy), Beijing, China.

Championship in the Competition for Undergraduate Philosophical Treatise, awarded by Nankai University, China, 2002.

LANGUAGES

Mandarin Chinese (Professional Speaking & Writing & Reading)

English (Professional Speaking & Writing & Reading)

Classical Chinese (Professional Writing & Reading)

French (Professional Reading & Basic Speaking)

German (Basic Reading)

