

The Way of the One

By

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I. Introduction

According to Aristotle, it is man's nature to reach out for knowledge. (*Metaphysics*, Book I, 980.a22) Arguably, man can only know through relation: In our pursuit of knowledge, we divide to create relation, so that we may know. Relational knowledge can be most simply illustrated in geometric terms. If one begins with a single point, there is nothing to be known about it. Once another point is added, a line can be produced through the two points. Relationships between the two original points, as well as all the points on the produced line, can then be described. The knowledge that is gained through this division is simply knowledge of parts. The more one divides, the smaller the parts become and thus less like the whole. The question is, then, "How can we come to understand the whole?" If we can only know through relation, then division is necessary. However, one cannot entirely understand the whole by dividing it since the resulting relation could only yield knowledge of those parts produced by the division of the whole. Although, the parts of the whole do provide a sort of knowledge of the whole, this knowledge is insufficient to understand the whole as the whole. We face a paradox: division to produce relation is the condition for knowledge, while it is also the condition that renders knowledge of the whole, as the whole, impossible.

The question is then asked, "How can we understand the whole without relation?" Philosophers and theologians alike have described instances when they have come to know the whole of existence without relation for a moment, but lost it the next moment. Why can't these individuals grasp the whole for more than a moment? I posit that this is because once they have gained unity with the whole, they have gained knowledge of it and begun to identify with it. It is

at this point they attempt to put the whole in relation to something else, but since the whole cannot be put into relation to anything, they return to ordinary relational knowing, where they began.

Let us consider a hypothetical scenario, where two influential minds of human history are given the opportunity to compare their own theories on the matter of understanding the whole. Plotinus and Lao Tzu wrestle with the paradox in question: division to produce relation is the condition for knowledge, while it is also the condition that renders knowledge of the whole, as the whole, impossible. So, Lao Tzu and Plotinus walk into a bar¹. After ample social lubrication, the two champions, one of eastern and the other of western thought, feel comfortable opening up to one another to describe their own theories on existence itself. What similarities or differences could one observe between their theories? Is there any common ground between their theories? Does one theory offer anything that may complete the other? Is the primary difference between the two a notion of motion that Lao Tzu brings to the table? Could one merge the two theories to obtain a more complete theory? In any case, in order to understand the relationships between these two theories, one must first address them individually.

II. Lao Tzu: *Tao Te Ching*

Initially, (assuming that) there is a consistent theme throughout the *Tao Te Ching*, One can discern a description of “the way” by exploring Lao Tzu’s juxtaposition of seemingly contrary qualities and their relations to one another. Lao Tzu urges his readers to recognize the

¹ Lao Tzu was an ancient Chinese philosopher and founder of Taoism who lived approximately in the 5th century BC. Plotinus lived 2nd century AD in Rome.

relationships of these juxtapositions so that the reader may follow “the way.” The first lines of the first fragment read:

*The way that can be spoken of
Is not the constant way;
The name that can be named
Is not the constant name* (Book One, I)

From the very beginning of this book, the focus is on the nature of “the way.” The first lines suggest that “the way” that is spoken of is not the constant way. Hence, it seems pointless to try to describe the way, since once it is described, it will not be so. The way is, always changing and, by definition, therefore, cannot be defined. From the reader’s perspective, it seems Lao Tzu will naturally be contradicting himself, since so much of the text is focused on describing the nature of “the way,” while he explicitly says from the very beginning that “The way that can be spoken of is not the constant way.” The only feasible conclusion is that Lao Tzu is providing a notion of the way rather than a definition. Lao Tzu is providing a notion in the sense that he is acquainting the reader with “the way” rather than saying exactly what the “the way” is. If a definition is a clear view of a subject, then a notion in this sense, is more of a scent that one may be acquainted with, and can follow.

Lao Tzu goes on to compare the popular perspective on the world to how he believes it should be perceived: “*The whole world recognizes the beautiful as the beautiful, yet this is only the ugly; the whole world recognizes the good as the good, yet this is only the bad.*” (Book One, II) He is bluntly opposing the common reader’s intuition that the beautiful is simply the beautiful and the good is simply the good. The use of “only” in both of these cases emphasizes the stark difference between the world’s understanding and the understanding necessary to pursue “the

way.” However, the use of the word “only” is questionable, since in the same fragment Lao Tzu recognizes the difference of opposing qualities and identifies their relationships, when he writes,

*Thus Something and Nothing produce each other;
The difficult and the easy complement each other;
The long and the short offset each other;
The high and the low incline towards each other;
Note and sound harmonize with each other;
Before and after follow each other (Book One, II)*

In all of these cases Lao Tzu uses an active verb to describe contraries’ relation to one another.

Lao Tzu’s use of active verbs suggests the opposing qualities act upon one another. Lao Tzu uses these verbs to acknowledge that the world is in motion and our language should reflect that motion. Language that is in motion is consistent with the notion of “the way,” since it is constantly in motion and indefinable. The discrepancy in the previous use of “only” is that it is a stagnant word and therefore motionless. The appearance of “only,” calls into question its use by the translator, since it is inconsistent with the rest of the relationships. However, it is likely to be used by Lao Tzu to communicate a definite difference between his perspective and the whole world’s.

Furthermore, Lao Tzu describes how language affects our ability to understand “the way” when he states,

*The way is forever nameless.
Though the uncarved block is small
No one in the world dare claim its allegiance...
Only when it is cut are there names.
As soon as there are names
One ought to know that it is time to stop.
Knowing when to stop one can be free from danger. (Book One, XXXII)*

The “uncarved block” in this metaphor is “the way.” By cutting the uncarved block, names are created for things, which implies that through the act of division one is creating. If names are

created by the division, then what is being perceived must be what is divided, since names are given in relation to other things. Lao Tzu says that one should stop dividing at this point to be free from danger. In this statement, he acknowledges the necessity for names of things, since he says one should stop after names are made. However, Lao Tzu implied earlier that the “uncarved block” is “the way” and by dividing it our perception of “the way” is changed. Therefore, the more one divides the “uncarved block” the more it changes, and the perception of “the way” departs from the “the way.” By perpetually dividing the “uncarved block” one is pushing oneself further from “the way.” One may infer that an example of this division is education itself, since it is necessarily the division of things to understand them in relation to one another. Education is, then, both a leading up to relational knowledge in the traditional sense, while also a leading away from “the way.” Lao Tzu writes,

Exterminate learning and there will no longer be worries.

Between yea and nay

How much difference is there?

Between good and evil

How great the distance? (Book One, XX)

“Yea and nay” are affirmation or negation of any thought. Lao Tzu’s rhetorical question suggests that the difference between the two is insignificant. He sees the discussion of the distance between good and evil as arbitrary.

Another rhetorical device Lao Tzu uses is the Sage. The Sage is the ideal example of a person who pursues “the way.” In contrast to the scholar, the Sage recognizes unity in nature through his experience, while the scholar studies the opinions of prior individuals so that he may divide the natural world. The goal of the scholar is to produce theoretical propositions to

understand, whereas the Sage attempts to understand “the way” as it is through experience.

Speaking from the perspective of the Sage, Lao Tzu writes,

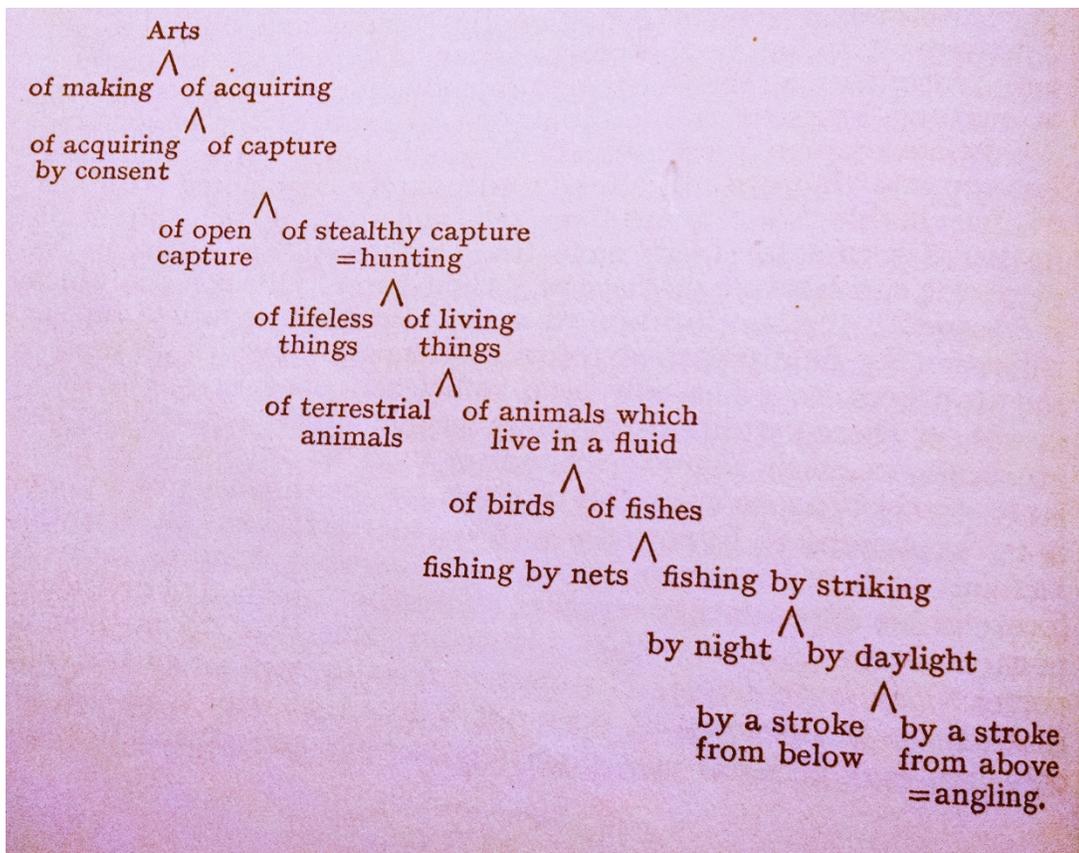
*I alone am foolish and uncouth.
I alone am different from others
And value being fed by the mother. (Book, One XX)*

By describing himself as foolish, he is acknowledging how the Sage appears in society compared to scholars. Then he describes how he alone is fulfilled by this practice, since he values being fed by the mother. The mother in this case is a metaphor for Mother Nature or “the way” itself.

Further on, Lao Tzu writes that the Sage is,

*Bowed down then preserved;
Bent then straight;
Hollow then full;
Worn then new;
A little then benefited;
A lot then perplexed. (Book One, XXII)*

This passage speaks to how the Sage’s actions are rewarded. To bow is a sign of submission and by being submissive, Lao Tzu is suggesting, the sage will be preserved or endure. To be hollow in this sense is to keep one’s mind clear of clutter so that one may be full spiritually. The most significant element in this passage is the juxtaposition of the last two lines: The Sage benefits from a little but is perplexed by a lot. This is the core of Lao Tzu’s text. The Sage is used as an example of how the individual should live so as to pursue “the way.” The individual will be perplexed and confounded by excess and benefit from a moderate life. The excess that the Sage refers to is exponential division into subcategories. An example of this excess is found in Plato’s *Sophist*. While trying to define the sophist’s method, Theaetetus and the Visitor divide Art into several subcategories. The process of division can be represented by this tree,

Figure 1²

By this practice, Theaetetus and the Visitor are able to specify the angler's technique. However, the division of Art provides no clearer understanding of Art itself. On the contrary, the division of Art to identify a specific case that falls into a sub-category of Art, leads the individual further from understanding Art itself. Each subcategory of Art has the potential to produce innumerable subcategories of its own. All that can be said of each subcategory of Art can be considered knowledge of Art as parts are of a whole. However, that more is said about Art does not mean that there is a better understanding of Art. Lao Tzu is making the case that one gets lost in the

² From A. E. Taylor, *Plato: The Man and his Work* (Methuen, 1960), 878.

complexity of division. The Sage is affirming the previous lesson that division leads one further from the truth and that it is by maintaining unity that one will benefit.

On the whole, Lao Tzu effectively enlightens his readers by observing the relationship of seemingly opposite qualities. He recognizes that the world is in motion and is, therefore, like “the way,” indefinable. It is for this reason that it is fruitless to pursue education and detrimental to attempt to divide the uncarved block.

III. Plotinus: *Ennead*

Lao Tzu’s text is a call to pursue “the way,” while Plotinus’ text is focused on understanding “The One.” The basic qualities of “The One” are as follows,

The One is everything and not everything. It is not everything because it is the source of everything. It is-transcendently-everything because there everything is or, more exactly, is not yet but is to be. (V,2[11])

“The One” simultaneously yields contrary qualities, in that it is everything and nothing. “The One” is all things transcendentally, since it produced all things and continues to be the source of production. “The One” is also not all things because “The One” abides within itself in giving existence to everything. Plotinus goes on to speak of a time when he understood “The One,” writing, in the eighth tractate of the fourth *Ennead*, these powerful words:

It has happened often.

Roused into myself from my body- outside everything else and inside myself- my gaze has met a beauty wondrous and great. At such moments I have been certain that mine was the better part, mine the best of lives lived to the fullest, mine identity with the divine. Fixed there firmly, poised above everything in the intellectual that is less than the highest, utter actuality was mine. (Essential, 1)

In this moment, Plotinus describes a presence of mind that he frequently obtains. In this state of mind, he finds peace in knowing his life is not only entirely fulfilled, but also the best life lived. He describes a sense of unity with the divine in this moment, from which he looks down upon everything in the intellectual realm. In these moments, he realizes that existence itself is his. However, this experience quickly passes. As he writes:

But then there has come the descent, down from intellection to the discourse of reason. And it leaves me puzzled. Why this descent? (Essential, 1)

In the moment of unity with “The One,” Plotinus experienced an epiphany of divine understanding. However, he soon descends from this state of mind to another that is tied to the discourse of reason. This may be due to his natural limitations, since it is the tendency for man to reason. As soon as his nature is inclined to reason with his current state of mind, he descends to man’s common ground. One might assume this happened because in that moment, as he tried to put it at rest so he could understand it, “The One” changed--but this cannot be the case, since “The One” is motionless. Plotinus descended from unity with “The One” because as soon as his mind tried to comprehend “The One,” he could not, since there can be nothing comparable to “The One.”

To further elaborate, Plotinus writes,

The chief difficulty is this: awareness of The One comes to us neither by knowing nor by the pure thought that discovers the other intelligible things, but by a presence transcending knowledge. When the soul knows something, it loses its unity; it cannot remain simply one because knowledge implies discursive reason and discursive reason implies multiplicity. The soul then misses The One and falls into number and multiplicity. (Essential VI, 4)

Here Plotinus recognizes the primary difficulty man has when it comes to knowing “The One.” Man is only aware of “The One” by a presence that transcends knowledge. To know anything

requires relation, which requires multiplicity. The following is Plotinus' take on the fundamental paradox. For there to be multiplicity, man divides "The One" so he may know its parts in relation to one another. However, by doing so "The One" falls into multiplicity and the parts become infinitely less like the whole.

The next question that arises is 'How do we pursue The One?' Before this can be answered we must understand the role of the Intelligence according to Plotinus, since it is through the Intelligence one may pursue unity with "The One." In short, the Intelligence is a prerequisite of Platonic forms. "The One" is the source of being and the Intelligence is "The One's" perpetual thought. Plotinus sheds further light on the role of the Intelligence:

One must go beyond the Intelligence that, from our point of approach, stands before the supreme principle, providing the mind free access to the knowledge of all because all that can be known is there. It is a vestibule introducing the one into the presence of the Good. Vestibule? Yes, and vestige, too, the trace on the multiple of the Good which itself remains in absolute unity. (V, 9 {5} 2)

The Intelligence is both a vestibule to "The One" and a vestige of "The One." That is to say, the Intelligence is an entry way to "The One" while also being a remnant of "The One." Plotinus is explicitly stating that the Intelligence is the means through which we can pursue unity with "The One."

In order to use the Intelligence to unify oneself with "The One," Plotinus suggests the Intelligence be mimicked, but not in the conventional sense.

The imitative arts- painting, sculpture, dancing, pantomime- are products of this lower realm. The models they mimic are found in the sensate for it is visible shape or motion or symmetry that is copied (V, 9 {5})

Plotinus lays out the traditional examples of imitation that are of things in the sensory world. In Plotinus' reasoning, *symmetry*, proves to be a particularly significant quality that may be

imitated, since he suggests that it is a quality innate in the Intelligence in his following statements.

to proceed from the observing of the symmetry of living things to the symmetry of all life is to exercise a part of that faculty which, even here below, knows and contemplates the perfect symmetry of the intelligible realm. (V, 9 {5})

This statement proves pivotal, since Plotinus is acknowledging a parallel between the sensory world and the intelligible realm. Symmetry, is an observable quality in the sensory realm and a quality of the Intelligence. One's observation of symmetry in a particular living thing can be considered microcosmic, while another's observation of symmetry of all living things may be considered macrocosmic. The imitations of symmetry in the sensory world may seem insignificant; however, Plotinus recognizes that symmetry in the sensory world becomes a means to begin to think like the Intelligence, since the Intelligence thinks only of itself and it is perfectly symmetrical. Intelligence is symmetrical by virtue of reciprocity. The Intelligence thinks of itself and is produced by itself, thereby creating a reciprocal relationship with itself. The Intelligence's reciprocal relationship, gives it a quality of reflexive symmetry. Furthermore, since the Intelligence is both a vestibule and a vestige of the One, it is possible to gain unity with the One through the Intelligence. To begin to think like the Intelligence, one must grasp the symmetry through the sensory realm. Thus, according to Plotinus the first step of unification with "The One" is the recognition of symmetry in the sensory world.

With this sense of the Intelligence in mind, we can begin to further understand the relationship between the Intelligence and "The One." Plotinus writes:

Having become the Intelligence, having entrusted itself to it, committed itself to it, having confided and established itself in it so that by alert concentration the soul may grasp all The Intelligence sees, it will by The Intelligence, contemplate the One without employing the senses, without mingling perception with the activity of The Intelligence. It must

contemplate this purest of objects through the purest of The Intelligence, through that which is supreme in the Intelligence. (Essential VI, 3)

According to Plotinus, through the Intelligence one may contemplate “The One.” After sufficient mimicry of the Intelligence, one may grasp all the Intelligence sees. It is at this point, one may begin to contemplate “The One” since it is only the Intelligence that can perceive “The One.” The Intelligence is all that can contemplate “The One,” since the purest of subjects can only be thought of by the purest of thought. As instruction regarding how to use the Intelligence to contemplate “The One,” Plotinus states:

When then the soul applies itself to the contemplation of such an object and has the impression of extension or shape or mass, it is not The Intelligence that guides its seeing, for it is not the nature of The Intelligence to see such things. From sensation, rather, and from opinion, the associate sensation, comes this activity. From The Intelligence must come the word of what its scope is. It contemplates its priors, its own content, and its issue. Purity and simplicity characterize its issue and, even more, its content and, most of all, its priors or Prior. (Essential VI, 3)

In this statement, the “issue” of the Intelligence is the sensory realm, “its own content” refers to the Intelligence itself, and its “priors or Prior” is “The One.” Purity and simplicity characterize the sensory realm by its symmetry in relationships and, even more, the Intelligence itself by its symmetry in unity and, most of all, “The One.” Thus by understanding that purity and simplicity characterize the sensory realm, we may contemplate its prior namely, “The One.” So one must seek understanding through the simplification of reality. In order to do this, one must contemplate the symmetry of the sensory realm in the pursuit of simplicity.

IV. Contrasts Between Lao Tzu and Plotinus

To begin, there are some clear differences between the two theories. “The way” according to Lao Tzu is similar to “The One” according to Plotinus in that they both concern the

sensory world. Plotinus adds an attribute of divinity to “The One” that “the way” lacks. Furthermore, by dividing up attributes of “The One” he makes what seems to be a sort of hierarchy of divine beings. “The One” is the initial source of being, The Intelligence follows “The One” and Soul follows The Intelligence. “It is by The One that all beings are beings.” (VI, 9 [9]) Though he speaks to the particular attributes of each being, Plotinus persistently reaffirms that these are not separate from one another. “The Intelligence is every one of the beings and not every one of the beings at the same time because each of the beings is a distinct power.” (6) This is a paradoxical statement, since it is suggesting that one thing is something else while at the same time not being that particular something.

Furthermore, the writing styles of Plotinus and Lao Tzu differ greatly. Plotinus’ text lays out an organized argument for his case. He uses traditional sentence and paragraph structure to clarify his thoughts for the reader. Lao Tzu on the other hand, offers a collection of poetic statements that clearly aims in a particular direction, but is also left to a certain degree of interpretation. This method proves very useful given his subject matter. Lao Tzu’s unconventional thought requires an unconventional means of expression. Since the core of his theory suggests that it is wrong to persistently divide in order to understand, he keeps his statements brief and to the point. If Lao Tzu were to provide more explanation than he does, he would have to do so by dividing further in order to provide relation to his theory. By doing so, Lao Tzu would naturally be contradicting his theory, so he does not provide more explanation than what is needed. Unlike Plotinus, Lao Tzu uses many metaphors throughout his text. Most commonly, his metaphors are in reference to nature. For example, speaking in the first person as the Sage, Lao Tzu writes,

*Calm like the sea;
Like a high wind that never ceases.
The multitude all have a purpose. (Book 1, XX)*

By virtue of this description, the sage is rendered indefinable. He is both calm like the sea while also frantic like the high wind. Lao Tzu uses this metaphor and several like it to relate his theory to a common image in the sensory realm. This is also a very helpful means for Lao Tzu to explain his theory without contradicting himself. Rather than actively dividing in order to create relation, by using metaphors such as these Lao Tzu is recognizing natural divisions and relating them.

V. Similarities Between Lao Tzu and Plotinus

Plotinus and Lao Tzu aim to persuade the readers to accept their theories and inspire them to pursue their method of thought. Plotinus pulls the reader into his text by categorizing types of men. He begins broadly, by stating, “*All men from birth onward, live more by sensation than by thought, forced as they are by necessity to give heed to sense impressions.*” According to Plotinus, men are all given a common beginning. Men then become categorized by their disposition. Regarding those who fall under the first category Plotinus writes, “*Some stay in the sensate their whole life long. For them, sense is the beginning and the end of everything.*” These people he refers to are the Epicureans, who only know good and evil as things that are pleasurable to the senses and things that cause the senses pain. Plotinus elaborates further by stating, “*Like big earthy birds are they, prevented by their bulk from rising off the ground even though they have wings.*” Plotinus uses this metaphor to describe the Epicureans. The bulk of the birds represents the weight that holds the Epicureans to the sensory realm and the wings represent their philosophical ability to rise above the sensory realm that they chose not to use. Regarding

the second class of men Plotinus writes, *“Others do lift themselves, a little, above the earth.*

Their higher part transports them out of the pleasurable into the honorable.” Finally, the third class of men is as follows,

“But there is another, a third, class of men—men godlike in the greatness of their strength and the acuity of their perceptions they see clearly the splendors that shine out from on high. Thither, out of the mist and fogs of the earth, they lift themselves.”

Plotinus uses such romanticized language to pull the reader towards this category of men.

Plotinus goes so far as to call these men “godlike,” though he does not refer to god as a primary being in his text. He is clearly trying to persuade those with an understanding of God to admire this third class of people. By referring to the sensory realm of earth as mist and fog, he is suggesting that this third class of people have a sense of clarity that the other two are not privy to.

Now it is clear that readers would naturally consider their own placement in Plotinus’s categories. In their own interest, they would perceive themselves in the third category since Plotinus speaks most highly of these individuals. The readers then attempt to take on the qualities of the individuals in the third category to solidify their position. It is by this means that Plotinus persuades the readers adopt his theory.

While Plotinus’s method engages the reader by providing an inviting text for the readers to insert themselves into, Lao Tzu addresses the readers directly. For example, Lao Tzu writes,

*If you would have a thing shrink,
You must first stretch it;
If you have a thing weakened,
You must first strengthen it;
If you would have a thing laid aside,*

*You must first set it up;
If you would take from a thing,
You must first give to it. (XXXVI)*

Lao Tzu is pointing the word “You” directly at the reader. He is providing insight into exactly how you should perceive tasks while pursuing “the way.”

Furthermore, Plotinus uses his own experience as evidence for persuasion which bears striking similarities to how Lao Tzu uses the Sage as an example to pursue the way.

Plotinus writes,

It has happened often.

Roused into myself from my body- outside everything else and inside myself- my gaze has met a beauty wondrous and great. At such moments I have been certain that mine was the better part, mine the best of lives lived to the fullest, mine identity with the divine. Fixed there firmly, poised above everything in the intellectual that is less than the highest, utter actuality was mine. (Essential, 1)

He is speaking from his own actual experience, which makes the experience seem attainable to the reader. Naturally the reader would want to share this experience since it is a moment of absolute fulfillment which seems like an experience worth having. This is how he persuades his readers to seriously consider his theory: they, too, may have the best of lives lived to the fullest.

In Lao Tzu’s second book, in section thirty-nine there is a particularly significant correlation to Plotinus. The section reads,

*Heaven in virtue of the One is limpid;
Earth in virtue of the One is settled;
Gods in virtue of the One have their potencies;
The Valley in virtue of the One is full;
The myriad creatures in virtue of the One are alive;
Lords and princes in virtue of the One become leaders in the empire.
It is the One that makes these what they are. (Book two, XXXIX)*

“The One” according to Lao Tzu bears a striking resemblance to “the One” according to Plotinus. In Lao Tzu’s eyes, “the One” gives all of the most significant qualities to all things. It is because of “the One” that Heaven is completely clear and free of any darkness. It is by means of The One that the Earth is at peace. “The One” gives the God’s their potency. “The One” bestows life unto the myriad of creatures. “The One” according to Lao Tzu, makes all things what they are and provides their innate qualities. These qualities of “the One” are the very same qualities of production that Plotinus attributes to “The One.” Lao Tzu is affirming Plotinus’ definition of “The One” in that it is the source of existence, while not negating that it is also transcendently everything. For this reason, one may assume that “the One” according to Lao Tzu and “The One” according to Plotinus are one and the same.

But if they both have the same notion of “the One” as the source of existence, why is it that Plotinus seeks to understand “the One” while Lao Tzu simply pursues “the way?” Plotinus reaches out as far as he can towards the source of being and seeks ultimate fulfilment by understanding it so he may identify with it. Plotinus’ nature is consistent with the forementioned description of man according to Aristotle: *“it is man’s nature to reach out for knowledge.”* Plotinus embodies this quality with such vigor that he not only seeks to understand the source of knowledge, but even seeks to unify himself with the source that is “The One”

On the contrary, Lao Tzu has knowledge of “The One” but does not seek unity with it. Lao Tzu opposes the notion that, *“it is man’s nature to reach out for knowledge.”* His primary focus is the pursuit of “the way.” Lao Tzu is not interested in gaining knowledge of “the way,” but seeks to experience it so he may be at peace with existence.

VI. A Model

Let us consider a model as a visual aid to describe the relationship between “The One” and “the way.” Before there is being, there is “The One” which produces being. For the purpose of this model, consider “The One” as a single motionless point, C . From “The One” all comes into being. From the point that represents “The One,” space and all things expand evenly on all sides. The space that is produced represents being in the form of an expanding sphere on the x , y , and z axes. The length r represents the rate of expansion and, therefore, also time. The sphere represents existence that is produced from “The One.” “The way” is the motion of existence of the sphere. Thus, the sphere is composed of indefinitely many parts.

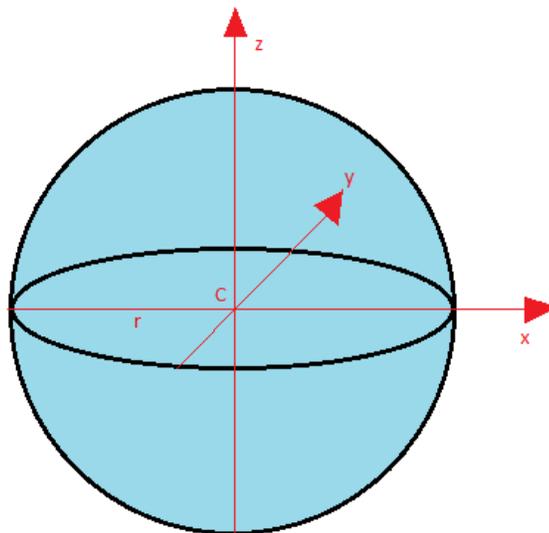


Figure 2

If one considers the modern scientific theory of the origin and production of the universe, namely, the “big bang,” this model has some striking parallels. The “big bang” suggests that a single super particle composed all of the universe’s matter and energy. This particle exploded, unleashing existence as we know it. The super particle correlates to the center of the sphere in the model. The motion and nature of existence, produced by the expansion of the super particle is described in many ways, the study of which is physics. Lao Tzu lumps the laws of physics and all unknown forces and motion together as “the way.”

VII. Conclusion

On the whole, Lao Tzu and Plotinus face a similar difficulty while contemplating existence. For man to know something, it must be in relation to something else. Since it is man’s nature to reach out for knowledge, man resorts to division, which creates more relation, in order to gain access to more knowledge. However, this is not the type of knowledge that Lao Tzu and Plotinus are after. Lao Tzu and Plotinus want to understand the whole rather than its parts. Since, there can be nothing in relation to the whole, any knowledge founded in relation is necessarily knowledge of parts of the whole. Furthermore, Lao Tzu and Plotinus agree that knowledge that is founded in the relation of parts that have been produced by division is even further from knowledge of the whole. The fundamental paradox that Lao Tzu and Plotinus face is that division to create relation is the condition for knowledge, while it is also the condition that renders knowledge of the whole, as the whole, impossible.

Lao Tzu and Plotinus have similar theories on the whole, but focus on different qualities of it. Lao Tzu focuses on “the way,” which can crudely be understood as the motion of existence. Plotinus focuses on “The One” that is the source of being. Understanding and relating these

terms can be very difficult. “The way” by definition cannot be defined. Lao Tzu merely provides a notion of “the way.” By observing examples of contrary relationships that act on each other and depend on one another, one may be acquainted with a notion of “the way.” On the other hand, “The One” according to Plotinus is paradoxically defined as both everything and nothing simultaneously. “The One” is everything transcendentally since it is the source of being, while “The One” is also nothing in that it abides within itself in giving existence to everything. It proves very difficult to relate “the way,” which by definition cannot be defined, and “The One” that can only be defined paradoxically. Never the less, by considering the authors similar means of pursuing their respective subjects, one can observe further parallels between Lao Tzu’s and Plotinus’ theories.

Both Lao Tzu and Plotinus posit that one may begin to pursue “the way,” and “The One” through the sensory realm. In the case of “the way,” Lao Tzu observes that everything is in motion. By observing the active relationships between contrary qualities one may begin to associate oneself with “the way.” To understand “The One,” Plotinus suggests that one must think like the Intelligence which is symmetrical and simple. In order to think like the Intelligence, one must recognize the symmetry and simplicity of the natural world. It is important to recognize that in order to pursue either “the way” or “The One,” a certain amount of relation is, in fact, required. To recognize symmetry, as Plotinus suggests, requires a balanced relationship between two subjects. Similarly, Lao Tzu urges his reader to observe active relationships between contraries. Both philosophers, recognize man’s fundamental means of understanding as relation. It is from this point that they warn the reader that further division in order to create relation becomes a descent into complexity and innumerable subcategories. They suggest that rather than descend through division one should rise through unification, thereby

pursuing simplicity rather than complexity. Both Lao Tzu and Plotinus attribute simplicity, as the fundamental quality, to their subjects. The fundamental difference between their subjects is that “the way” is in constant motion whereas “The One” is motionless.

It would seem that the fundamental difference of motion between “the way” and “The One” would halt any attempt to unify the two theories. However, this difficulty that the issue of motion seems to provide is quickly removed upon recognition that Lao Tzu and Plotinus have a common understanding of “The One.” In book two section XXXIX, Lao Tzu describes “The One” as the source of existence just as Plotinus does. In this section he does not attribute an element of motion to “The One.” Since, “The One” is the source of everything, “The One” is the source of “the way.”

The question is then asked, “If the two philosophers are thinking of the same model, why does Lao Tzu suggest that one should recognize the active relationships between contrary qualities, while Plotinus recommends that one should observe reflective symmetry and simplicity in the world? One would think that if the two are thinking of the same model, that they would have the same means of understanding it.”

To answer this question, one must keep in mind that Lao Tzu and Plotinus are pursuing different parts of the model. Lao Tzu is pursuing the motion of existence while Plotinus is pursuing the source of existence. Since the source of existence is infinitely simple and motionless, Plotinus recommends that one consider relationships that are not contingent on motion, hence, symmetry. Lao Tzu’s subject on the other hand, is in constant motion, so the relationships he recommends be observed are those that are similarly active.

The question as to why Lao Tzu chooses to pursue “the way,” and Plotinus chooses to seek unity with “The One” rather than vice versa is left open. After a long night of discussion and discovery, Lao Tzu and Plotinus leave the bar as friends, comforted by the fact that there are like minded individuals.

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