

THE NOTION OF COMPARING AND THE MEETING OF FRAGMENTS

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Summary

Comparative Literature as an academic discipline has historically been a site for the meeting of fragments of various kinds. Comparative Studies, as it may in its broader conception be called, offers the opportunity of comparing individual instantiations of literature, music, dance, architecture, and other cultural productions, but also the opportunity of comparing these genres one to another. Such comparing in turn offers the opportunity of comparing one culture with another, across space and time. This essay delves into the process of comparing as a human activity, locating its origins in the anatomy and physiology of the human body itself. The act of comparison is discussed as an aspect of the binarism that seems innate and almost essential to humanity. In connection with this, the semiotics of the numbers One, Two, and Three are also discussed with a view toward their significance and their societal implications. Further, the history of the West is here broadly mapped out from ancient times to the postmodern era, to show how the arc of time brings both fragmentation and critical perspective. The inevitable scholarly tendency toward analysis is here balanced against the potential of synthesis as one possible scenario whereby comparative studies might find a viable future in the academy.

1. The One and the Many

Singularity is the ultimate irreducible, always excepting nothingness itself. When we recognize the cohesiveness and integrity of singularity, we tend to appraise this trait positively, and to give it the name 'unity.' Historically, unity has been highly prized as

an aesthetic quality: although there have been notable exceptions, since ancient times unity has been zealously sought, in the verbal arts as much as in the plastic. When we consider the notion of comparing, on the other hand, we must begin with multiplicity, or duality at least. Utter unity — oneness in the grandest, most extreme metaphysical sense — neither requires nor indeed admits of comparison. But much of our daily life, in an ordinary sense, and a great deal as well of our aesthetic energies, are devoted to activities of comparison, to the forming and wielding of mental categories that enable such activities. In order to consider this issue further, we shall find it necessary both to enquire somewhat into the history of philosophy and to contemplate the semiotics of number.

The problem of The One and The Many has been an issue in western thought since the ancient Greeks at least. Available evidence from non-western cultures, such as the *taiji tu* or yin/yang symbol of the Chinese Dao (Figure 1), suggests that the same is true of Asian cultures at least as ancient: the circle divided into two fluid halves, each moving toward and into the other, but each also simultaneously containing the essence of the other at its center, is susceptible of numerous applications, but the most readily apparent interpretation is one in which equal and opposing forces — personal, social, cosmic — operate upon and in equilibrium with one another, constantly equating to and balancing one another, even as they somehow also embody that opposite within themselves.

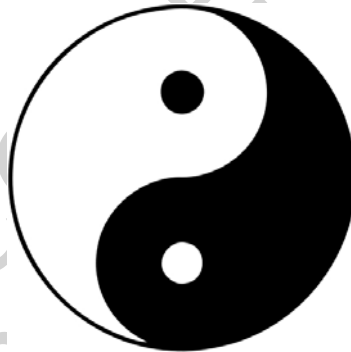


Figure 1: A Traditional Depiction of the *Taiji Tu* or Yin/Yang Symbol

The issue of The One and The Many probably had a specifically somatic applicability from very ancient times for those who concerned themselves with it, whether or not they were conscious of the problem as a philosophical conundrum and its implications. One of the most obvious aspects of human corporeal existence — and one that humans typically begin to acknowledge consciously by the fifth or sixth year of life — is the binary (and bilaterally symmetrical) nature of the human body. Practically speaking, this is mapped out principally in terms of *handedness* — the behavioral asymmetry that privileges the use of one hand (and, incidentally, even one foot, on the same side of the body) over the other. But this fundamental binarism, and the multiplicity that it implies, already problematizes for humans the One/Many problem, long before they are able to extrapolate to the level of theory. It is the unity of the human body that most emphatically summarizes the nature and significance of One. To lose a limb, or any measurable portion of one's body, is to suffer horrific and incalculable loss, a loss that stems as much from a sense of self-fragmentation as from the physical pain itself. And

apart from psychic disorders in which the self is shattered or refracted into a plurality, one also perceives and embraces The Self, and thus oneself, as a unit and a unity on the incorporeal level as well. More than this, one finds in virtually every culture that the attempt to articulate profound ideas about love or divinity elicits metaphors or imagery of unity or unification.

Classical Hebraic religion, like its modern epigones Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, had as its cornerstone the doctrine that their God was single and unique. This finds a fairly early articulation in the 'shema' — the majestic proclamation that follows the Deuteronomic formulation of the Ten Commandments, and that is so often reiterated and recopied (most memorably in the *mezuzah*, which is affixed to the doorpost or worn in a necklace ornament):

Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is One. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the door-frames of your houses and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6.4-9, NIV)

In an ancient Mediterranean world rife with divinities — even without recourse to the Babylonian, Hittite, or Phoenician pantheons one has only to picture the crowded halls of Olympus as conceived by the Greeks and Romans — the notion that there was but one divine being, one master of the universe, one eternal, infinite, and omnipotent spirit that merited and required their abject devotion — was astounding. Indeed it was probably incomprehensible to many ancient Israelites (not to mention the numerous Mediterranean pagans who encountered them), and Moses himself, confronted with the epiphanic burning bush on Mount Horeb (Exodus 3-4), is sufficiently boggled by the idea that he is speaking to *the* God of the universe that he asks for a name — a *nomen sacrum* by which he can identify and specify this god to the Israelites, as a particular divinity in contradistinction from any of the other divinities then worshipped in the fertile crescent:

Moses said to God, 'Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your fathers has sent me to you," and they ask me, "What is his name?" Then what shall I tell them?

God said to Moses, 'I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: "I AM has sent me to you."'

God also said to Moses, 'Say to the Israelites, "The LORD [i.e. YHWH], the God of your fathers — the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob — has sent me to you." This is my name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation.' (Exodus 3.13-15, NIV)

In ancient magic, to know the true name of a spirit was to be able to conjure and adjure it. In cannily refusing to supply such a label, God nonetheless identifies himself with some (possibly causative) form of the verb 'to be,' thereby providing subsequent worshippers with what came to be called the Tetragrammaton, but also (and principally)

underscoring his self-existent uniqueness and singularity. An even more radically unitary theology is to be found, ironically, in the monism underlying classical Hinduism, a religion that would at first appear to be polytheistic par excellence. The pantheon of Hindu gods, beginning with the Vedic period and continuing through the completion of that portion of the *Mahabharata* known as the *Bhagavadgita*, is extraordinarily elaborate, with each of its various divinities responsible (as also in other Indo-European religious systems) for a particular bailiwick within the phenomenal universe (and sometimes in the sphere of daily human life). But Hindu monism, taken to its logical conclusion, disallows any final distinction even between creature and creator: in the most totalizing monism, the entire universe is One. On such an account, the Many of the pantheon are finally but a series of glorious and sublime manifestations of the energetic power of the universe, each of which — like drops of rain falling into the sea — must eventually dissolve indistinguishable into the eternal One.

As with the godhead, so with love, that is most slippery of concepts. It is probably no coincidence, in fact, that love is not infrequently elided or identified with the divine: human love, particularly in its romantic sense, is often conceived and described in terms of unity and/or unification. Again this idea finds a very early articulation in the classical Hebrew scriptures, where the writer of Genesis points to the creation of Eve out of the body of Adam as an aetiology for the union of man and woman: 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united with his wife, and they will become one flesh' (Genesis 2.24). This conceit was echoed and reworked by Paul in his letter to the Ephesians (5.25-33); it has passed irresistibly from middle-eastern culture into western, where it may in any case have arisen independently: it is found in extended and particularly eloquent form in the speech Plato assigns to Aristophanes in his memorable *Symposium* (189C-193E):

And if Hephaistos, tools in hand, were to come and stand next to the two lovers, right when they were lying together, and to ask them, 'What is it that you people want from one another?' — and if, when they were at a loss for how to respond, he should ask again: 'Is this what you want? to be so thoroughly united and unified [*en tōi autōi genesthai hoti malista allēlois*] that night and day you are never separate from one another? If this is what you desire, I am willing to weld you together and to fuse you into a unity [*eis to auto*], so that although you are two, you would become one [*du'ontas hena gegonenai*], and so that as long as you live, as one person, you will share one life in common; and when you die, there in Hades you will share one common death, not two. So think this over. Is this what your hearts desire? Will this suffice for you, should it come to pass?'

We know that not one of them would refuse such an offer, should he hear it, nor appear to want anything else. He would truly suppose that what he had heard was just what he had been yearning for from the start: to join and be fused to his beloved; for the two of them to become one [*ek duoin heis genesthai*]. And here is why: this was our ancient nature; we were once wholes. So 'erōs' is our name for the desire and pursuit of wholeness. (*Symposium* 192D-E, my translation)

Nor is the notion of unifying love limited to occidental cultures: the Tang Dynasty poet (772-846 CE) writes,

... she took out, with emotion, the pledges he had given
And, through his envoy, sent him back a shell box and gold hairpin,
But kept one branch of the hairpin and one side of the box,
Breaking the gold of the hairpin, breaking the shell of the box;
"Our souls belong together," she said, "like this gold and this shell —
Somewhere, sometime, on earth or in heaven, we shall surely meet."
And she sent him, by his messenger, a sentence reminding him
Of vows which had been known only to their two hearts:
"On the seventh day of the Seventh-month, in the Palace of Long Life,
We told each other secretly in the quiet midnight world
That we wished to fly in heaven, two birds with the wings of one,
And to grow together on the earth, two branches of one tree."
(*Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, 'Tang Shi San Bai Shou' 3.1.71, translated by Witter Bynner).

In Presocratic Greek philosophy, thinkers like Heraclitus, Empedocles, and Parmenides experimented with ways to abstract the discussion of the One/Many problem into the realm of the theoretical. Three major questions tended to occupy the energies of the Presocratics: origin, change, and causality. What was the origin (Gk *arkhê*) of the universe? What kind(s) of change operated on this originary material (what German scholars call *Urstoff*) to produce the multifarious universe we experience around us today? And what caused/causes such change(s) in the universe?

Although they tended to be driven along similar avenues of inquiry, their answers, needless to say, were anything but identical. Some of the ideas they were conjuring with were inherited from traditional Greek cosmic lore — the notion, for example, that there are four basic elements (air, earth, fire, and water). These four elemental substances were understood to admit of a number of binary combinations, driven in turn (or at least characterized and categorized) by a pair of dyads: hot and cold; wet and dry. Thus fire = hot + dry; air = hot + wet; water = cold + wet; and earth = cold + dry. And these permutations, in turn, yield further binary oppositions: fire (hot + dry) is the opposite of water (cold + wet); air (hot + wet) is the opposite of earth (cold + dry). Each dyad itself is the result of unifying two related or opposed terms. Note the essential importance of binarism itself in all of this — a topic to which we shall return anon.

Heraclitus posited that the *Urstoff* was fire, in distinction from such thinkers as Thales, who had voted for water, and Anaximenes, who had voted for air. Empedocles represents a major watershed in that he theorized a universe where all four of the originary elements were operated upon by opposing (binary) forces of 'love' and 'strife' — terms not entirely inapplicable, in a metaphoric way at least, to the opposite poles of a magnet (and possibly inspired by empirical observation of highly magnetic lodestones). Parmenides is a notoriously difficult thinker to grasp, partly perhaps because his system appears to depend upon (and perhaps to have been derived from) reflections upon the nature of grammar in general, and of verbal predication in particular. Although such speculations may initially seem jejune or trivial, we begin to note their far-reaching implications for our discussion when we consider that the 'is/is not' dyad is one of the very most basic ways of talking about the universe, or about anything in it; and, moreover, one of the simplest methods of proliferating an initial

unity. If, as (it seems) Parmenides was disallowing the possibility of talking about or even conceiving of non-existence, then received notions of 'origin' (*ex nihilo*) and of change (particularly where annihilation is concerned) must be shelved or jettisoned completely. Whether (as, again, seems to be the case for Parmenides) it is a relatively short step from this position to a disallowance of multiplicity or variety in the universe, is open to contention; but that could be said of most of the apparent assertions of the Presocratics. The important thing here, for our purposes, is that inquiry into the One/Many problem was of major interest to early Greek thinkers. It seems, moreover, not coincidental that this went hand in hand with a departure from traditional Archaic Greek thought — the kind of worldview that could produce a Homer or a Pindar. These Presocratic philosophers, marking as they did the so-called Greek Enlightenment, devoted their attention not only to matters of metaphysics, but also to aspects of the physical world about them as well; in the western tradition at least, they appear to have been completely without precedent in their embracing of a naturalist/rationalist worldview, as also in their concomitant attempts to ground their researches in empirical observation. As such, they were bold pioneers in the attempt to produce a Grand Unifying Theory that would at once explain the origin and nature of the phenomenal universe, and set them free from what they perceived as the shackles of traditional archaizing myths of origin. By virtue of their naturalist/rationalist approach, they also prefigured the thinkers of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment in western Europe.

The roots, then, of our interest in The One and The Many — our sense of Self as a unit and unity, and our use of that as a point of departure for the apperception and evaluation of the world around us — lie deep in the distant past, and very likely in our very biological makeup. When we create, we tend (with some notable exceptions, which we shall discuss below) to strive for unity in the artefact, to search for it in the creations of others, and to value it almost above all other criteria — almost, even, above beauty — in the aesthetic evaluation. This act of creation, of creativity, must be seen as primary, as originary. On its grandest scale — one thinks of Homer, of Shakespeare, of Beethoven — it borders on the demiurgic. As such, it is quintessentially *synthetic* in nature. The act of comparing, by contrast — particularly as practised by the modern or postmodern scholar — tends instead to the *analytic*. When one exchanges synthesis for analysis, one runs a grave risk — just as when one takes a clock apart, one may well come to see how all the gears fit together, but may also be left only with a pile of metal parts. Perhaps the time is ripe, perhaps the time has already come, in which the act of scholarship, in the Humanities most of all, can become (or is even now becoming) an act of synthesis — a process that itself creates, that puts together rather than rends asunder.

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Biographical Sketch

John T. Kirby is Professor of Classics and Comparative Literature at Purdue University, where he founded and for seven years chaired the interdisciplinary Program in Classical Studies, before going on to chair the Program in Comparative Literature for seven years. At Purdue he has been centrally involved in the curricular development and maintenance of both these programs for two decades. One of Purdue's best-known educators, Kirby has been recognized with teaching awards at the departmental, college, university, state, regional, and national levels.

Kirby was a Morehead Scholar at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he took his A.B. *cum laude* in classical Greek in 1977. He went on to earn the M.A. (in Greek) and the Ph.D. (in classical philology) at Chapel Hill, in 1981 and 1985 respectively.

Kirby has published extensively on many aspects of ancient Greek and Roman culture and literature, as well as on twentieth-century Italian literature. He was one of the first scholars to use computer-based database searches in the pursuit of classical philology, and one of the first to produce an academic hypersite for the study of Classics (still online at www.corax.us). Kirby's books include *The Rhetoric of Cicero's Pro Cluentio* (Amsterdam: Gieben 1990), *The Comparative Reader* (New Haven: Chancery Press 1998), *Classical Greek Civilization* (Detroit: Thomson/Gale 2000), *Secret of the Muses Retold* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2000), and *The Roman Republic and Empire* (Detroit: Thomson/Gale 2001).