Why Chinese Buddhist Philosophy?

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In a certain particularly reckless intellectual mood one sometimes gets the urge to make (and even possibly defend) the seemingly outrageous claim that, taking a truly global perspective, the history of the earth has seen the development of only *two* fully developed, long-lived, self-sustaining *written* traditions of speculation concerning the nature of the world and humanity's place within it: the Indo-European and the Sinitic.[1] When in this mood, it seems that however disparate may be the interests and methods of European Continental and analytic philosophy, or rationalism and empiricism, or nominalism and realism, or theology and natural science, and however incongruent this entire tradition may seem with the various Indian religious and philosophical traditions in their many facets, the contrast to the indigenous Sinitic philosophical, sociopolitical, and religious traditions reveals certain points of commonality in all these different aspects of Indo-European speculation that set it starkly apart from the Chinese.

When modern critics inclined to think in this way try to come up with a list of Indo-European commonalities, one thing they usually notice is the interest in some form of absolutist ontology found in these traditions, that is, the strong interest in locating an eternal, unconditional, transcendent, and *determinate* truth, which is univocal, synordinate, and valid in all contexts and free from the vagaries of subjective opinion and impermanence—standing as the reason behind a unidirectional derivation of all other realities. This interest seems closely connected to the deployment of the assumption of an irreversible ontological division between appearance and reality, usually manifesting as a distrust of change and

of finite particular sensory appearances in favor of universal unchanging realities either beyond or within these changing appearances—as their unchanging transcendent sources or as their unchanging immanent laws, or even as an unchanging reality that is neither source nor law but relates to the world of changing appearances only as its ideal negation and refuge, providing a possible escape from that world of impermanent appearances.[2] This same reckless eye would see these as standing out in sharp contrast to what are then perceived as deeply ingrained situationalism, axiocentrism, and this-worldliness in pre-Buddhist indigenous Chinese thought, which, although it is not indifferent to persistent and global principles of a kind, necessarily conceives these in a very different type of relation to the particulars of transient experience—typically, not as prior ground nor as universal principle but as balancing supplement, as an encompassing whole or infinite field giving place to those particulars, or as meaning-giving context constituted not by another dimension of being but by the relations, contrasts, and resonances with other particulars qua other, where neither term in the mutually grounding relation is fully determinate or fully indeterminate.

At least some of this intuition does pan out upon closer and more sober examination. The early Chinese tradition is, in any case, certainly devoid of any doctrine of universals and particulars in either the Platonic or Aristotelian sense, of form and matter, of atomism, or of strict transcendence in the Indo-European manner. While there are relations of one thing enabling or grounding the presence of another thing, and discussions of presences and absences, there seems no clear conceptual ground/grounded *dichotomy* and no being/nonbeing *dichotomy*; while there are hierarchies of importance and range of applicability and decisiveness of the diverse elements in a given situation, there seems to be no clear conceptual appearance/reality *dichotomy* and no active/passive *dichotomy*. The earliest strata of the literate tradition have, in spite of their rich and diverse musings on both man and nature, no creation myth, indeed showing no interest in developing any real speculation about the origin of the world until quite late in the record. Even then, the record never seems to propose a concept of a determinate *arche* or first principle. When some possible (though loose) equivalent of such a principle emerges in philosophical discourse, it is precisely its *indeterminacy,* even its paradoxicality, that qualifies it for this exalted role. When a creation myth is finally recorded, it is about dividing a preexisting totality into the polarity of heaven and earth. The origin of that totality is never questioned—indeed, it is often identified with the indeterminate first reality itself. Relatedly, the tradition's interest in logic is meager in comparison to that found in almost all of the long-lived Indo-European

traditions, and even its cosmological and metaphysical inquiries are not only scarce and deemphasized but also emerge within a context and methodology which make them deeply disanalogous to similar enquiries in Indo-European thought. In sharp contrast to what we find in contemporaneous sources from Greece, India, and the Levant, we discover educated speakers and writers of the full-fledged written tradition, once the preliterate inheritances have been put through critical examination in the sieve of literate discussion, rarely seriously invoking gods of any sort as sources of information about what is good and what is so.[3]

Indulging our reckless mood, we can perhaps attempt a bold swipe at the essence of these differences, in a kind of "essentialist" speculative stroke that is in extreme disfavor these days. As I've discussed elsewhere in print, I am fully on board with the critique of essentialism and particularly the need to be alert to its Orientalist abuses; but in my view, the critique itself too often serves as a pretext for a displaced essentialism transposed to another scope or level of the analysis, thus further entrenching the problem. In fact, the critique demands a more thoroughgoing application and must be applied to the very idea of essences, *whether of universals or of particulars*, rather than using the putatively indisputable essence of particulars to dismiss the generalized essences of universals or types, as is often the case. Whatever can be said about particulars, I would argue, is also dependent upon perspectivally dependent generalizations: insofar as they are determinate at all, they have no more claim to freedom from interpretive spin than larger generalizations do. Within the cul-de-sac of European thought, the emphasis on the historically changing particulars has seemed a possible escape from the overemphasis on unchanging universals and grounds behind particular appearances just noted; but from our current perspective here, it seems instead to be just a by-product of the same, a transposing of the same absolutizing tendency, for these particulars are taken as fully determinate and fully knowable entities that bear their own properties unambiguously within themselves. But whether we try to come to grips with particulars or with universals, something other than uncontroversial apodicity or brute facticity must be adduced to argue for better and worse characterizations of any putative entity, concrete or abstract, particular or universal, rather than granting full facticity to the concrete and zero facticity to the abstract or vice versa. For this reason, this healthy critique of universal essences, like those attributed broadly to Indo-European and Sinitic intellectual cultures, should not land us in the elimination of all comparative claims but a change in the nature of those claims and a concomitant opening of the space for the validity of a diverse multitude of conflicting "essentialist" claims.

In this case, I want to continue this reckless experiment by advancing at least a few steps into grasping what might be peculiar about the thinking that is done in the classical Chinese language. What I want to propose is not a cultural essentialism, certainly not a racial essentialism, and not even a linguistic essentialism, nor for that matter some kind of Neo-Whorfian linguistic determinism but rather a commonsense statistical ergonomics as applied to the process of sense-making in any given language of discourse. This will apply to anyone using a given language as his or her primary mode of thinking and writing philosophically, regardless of ethnicity, geographical location, or historical period. The supposition here is simply that it is reasonable to assume that the structure of any particular language of discourse, its grammatical and rhetorical peculiarities, will make some ideas *easier* to explain, to make-seem-intuitive, to make convincing to oneself and others, and other ideas less so. This does not mean it is impossible to say or think certain ideas in that language or that it is impossible to think an idea for which a given language has no simple word or phrase; it just means that some ideas stand further uphill in the grammatical terrain and require more work to arrive at and sustain, and, thus, that given a large sample size, the statistical clustering will tend to be around the ideas lying relatively further downhill, that are made to seem intuitive by the very way in which coherence and meaning per se are enacted and exchanged in the course of every single moment that this language is used for thinking. There may be other factors contributing to what ideas tend to have the least difficulty circulating in the minds of users of this language, for example, social conditions—including historical changes, class conflicts, logical commitments, theoretical inheritances, religious convictions and experiences, the structures of social status advancement and so on. I do not mean to suggest that these varying social and intellectual conditions are in any knowable way causally connected with the structure of the discourse language shared by the participants in these social arrangements, either as their cause or as their effect. I am content to regard them as completely unrelated, a chance juxtaposition. There *may* be a causal connection, but I would regard any attempt to determine it exactly to be too fraught with epistemological difficulties to be worth pursuing. Instead, I will just assume that no matter what social or other intellectual conditions may supervene upon a community that continues to use the language in question as its primary medium of discourse, each will be but one *more* factor that coexists with the statistical pull of the language itself upon what sorts of propositions are more likely to "work," make sense, or be intuitively coherent. These conditions may in some cases counteract the

structural pulls of the linguistic structures; in other cases, they may intensify them; in still others, they may have no noticeable effect one way or the other. But inasmuch as the structure of the language is most likely the variable that is most stable over time, across very diverse social and political arrangements, we can perhaps still split the difference and try to find what sorts of structural patterns emerge in spite of these changes with the most statistical frequency as a way of tracking the pulls of the language itself. This means that we should not expect to find anything absolutely excluded from any of these systems of thought; there will always be room for geniuses to think against the grain, to push step by step past the intuitions of their surrounding culture and the pull of their own discourse language, perhaps in direct rebellion against it, and build up an alternate way of thinking. My claim is only that (1) this will require more work, a more elaborate and delicate dialectical apparatus, than those claims that lie closer to the base intuitions of the language, and (2) due to the difficulty and counterintuitivity of their claims for users of that language as their primary scope of thinking, these claims will be harder to communicate and make convincing, and so over time we should expect to see these exceptional flashes failing to gain traction and eventually dwindling into the sidelines or even oblivion.

The relevance of this approach to our current problem is forced upon our attention by the fact that if there is anything as glaringly dissimilar as the Indo-European and classical Chinese intellectual cultures, in the manner described above, it is the Indo-European languages and the classical Chinese language, less in terms of the famous writing systems of the two, alphabetic versus ideographic, than in terms of the grammar that operates in the two sets of systems. Though we will only be able to demonstrate correlation and not direct causality, it would seem an amazing coincidence if the utter weirdness of Chinese thought had nothing to do with the utter weirdness of classical Chinese language! At the very least, attention to the latter can help focus our attention on aspects to look for in unraveling the former. In particular I will proceed with the following working hypothesis: determinations that a given grammar makes *obligatory*, that are *required* for sense to be constituted at all, will tend to be regarded as elements of primary ontology: ultimate facts of the matter that any real entity must have to count as real or even as relevant and efficacious and that must be known about a thing to know what that thing is. I will call this the Mandatory Denotes Ultimacy hypothesis (MDU).

What is weird about classical Chinese grammar?

It has no tense—past, present, and future are indicated by adding words such as “in the past” or “yesterday” or “tomorrow” or “in the year when the comet appeared,” without anything else changing in the sentence or

paragraph or story that is thereby placed in the past or future. Without any such time localizer, the tense remains indeterminate, ambiguous, to-be-determined. Tense is not mandatory to sense. By MDU, we might expect it not to be ultimate in a lot of Chinese thought.

It has no morphological distinction of parts of speech. The same word, unchanged, can serve as a noun, a verb, an adjective, or an adverb, depending on context and the deftness of the writer. A self-standing word might *turn out* to denote either an action or an object or a quality. For example, "beauty" and "beautiful" and "to beautify" and "to consider beautiful" and "a beautiful thing" and "a beautiful person" can all be denoted with the same single character, *mei* 美. The distinction between an action and an object and a quality does not seem to be mandatory to sense-making; the decision between them can be held in abeyance as the discourse proceeds, without turning it into nonsense. By MDU, we might expect the distinction between processes and objects and states not to be ultimate in a lot of Chinese thought.

There is no gender. By MDU, we might expect gender not to be an ultimate or irreducible constituent of being in much Chinese thought.

There is no singular-plural distinction. As with tense, a noun may be singular or plural until an additional word, a number perhaps, disambiguates it. The verbs do not help: there are no singular or plural verbs, just as there are no singular or plural nouns. There is no noun-verb agreement in classical Chinese, no change in the form of the words themselves. Again, context is the disambiguator. A word used in isolation may turn out (due to what comes later) to have always denoted a single or a plural referent. One and many are not mandatory features of sense making. By MDU, we might expect the one-many disjunction not to be considered an ultimate ontological fact in a lot of Chinese thought.

Sentences do not require subjects. While it is usually possible to retrieve a subject for an action from nearby context when forced to do so by the requirements of translation taking it as an implicit subject, one quite frequently comes across instances that are highly resistant to this reconfiguration. In any case, the sentence as written and experienced works perfectly well without specifying a subject, and in many cases it has no need to superadd any subject to any action at all. The single word "rain" 雨 would work as a grammatical sentence in many contexts. We would be forced to translate "It rained," but the "it" (like the tense) is added in deference to the requirements of English grammar, not Chinese grammar. By MDU, we might expect the idea that every predicate requires a subject and that every deed requires a doer not to be ultimate in a lot of Chinese thought.

There are no articles, definite or indefinite. "A dog," "the dog," "dogs," and "dog" are all written exactly the same way. By MDU, we might expect

the distinction between definite and indefinite, between a specified range of reference and an open-ended range of reference, not to be ultimate in a lot of Chinese thought.

There are no declensions or conjugations, and before contact with Sanskrit and its grammar, there was no attempt to compile a grammar of how the language worked or to figure out its universal rules of operation. There are indeed discoverable laws to the way the language works and the specific restricted usages of particular particles and structures, but despite what textbooks of grammar attempt to argue, presuming that they can and should assimilate the Chinese case to linguistic standards derived from non-Chinese languages, these do not function in the manner of statute law, where a rule exists as a higher-level authority given in advance but rather in the manner of precedent law, or common law: the necessary and sufficient source of the authority of a particular usage lies in finding a number of successful previous examples on the same level, where the term or phrase was used in that way and succeeded in being understood, in sense making, due to that local context. The triangulation of these usages and their contexts allows generalizations to be made about specific grammatical tendencies—but these are just that, *tendencies*, and they allow exceptions: to get a grammatical exception to fly, all that is necessary is the necessary skill to make the idea intelligible in its local context, an intelligibility that depends as much on that local context as on the larger context of past instances of precedent that constitute the grammatical "law." The idea of the language having rules in the other sense, as preexisting and exceptionless parameters of the very sense-making of the language, does not seem to have been a mandatory feature of even the close philological study of the language. Though this is a slightly skewed case, I would still like to apply MDU and say that we can perhaps expect the idea of transcendent rules not to be ultimate in a lot of Chinese thought.

Since there are no cases, there is no subjunctive case forcing us to distinguish whether a statement is made in the mode of possibility or in the mode of actuality. By MDU, we would expect the possible-actual disjunction not to be considered an ultimate ontological fact in a lot of Chinese thought.

There is no capitalization and no punctuation, no explicit parsings of sentences to separate them from other sentences or to separate clauses from other clauses. As a result of this and the lack of other disambiguating morphological features, the most common challenge faced by readers of classical Chinese texts is *how to parse them*. Taking the same words as bundled in various different ways makes for completely different meanings, not only for the entire sentence but for each of the individual words in

the sentence; a single word may have to be construed as a verb if the sentence is parsed in one way but as a noun if the same sentence is parsed in another. By MDU, this might lead us to expect that neither the idea of a single final way of dividing up a coherent whole, nor the idea that individual parts of a whole have a meaning or identity that remains the same despite the type of whole to which it belongs, and internal clusterings within that whole will be thought to be ultimate ontological entailments in a lot of Chinese thought.

In general, the final court of appeal for what a word means in a sentence is the rest of the sentence, but the final court of appeal for what a sentence means is what other sentences around it mean, and so ad infinitum—all the way back to the entirety of the existing literature, from which the statute "laws" of the grammar are derived, as simply another extension of the same *indeterminacy* of meaning—or rather, since the language *is* experientially coherent and *does* in fact communicate, *of the same copresence of determinacy and indeterminacy*. Meaning does not attach to anything about the morphology of the words inside the sentence but to the context, and it is always further transformable as more context appears. It is a thrilling experience in reading Chinese poetry, for example, to have the meaning of line one dawn only after the parallel second line is read, revealing by triangulation which word must be the noun and which the verb, which an adjective and which an adverb. But this is not true only in poetry; it is also true in what we call philosophical texts in this tradition. Meaning can be constituted *retrospectively* by context. That means one may be reading a sentence without being sure what it means, without it yet cohering into any particular meaning, without feeling that one is involved in reading something meaningless: one is waiting for the meaning to *dawn*. That means that coherence and incoherence are not really mutually exclusive: the same sentence is incoherent the first time around but anticipated as part of an experience of coherence and then discovered to have *always already been* experienced as meaningful, even when it was experienced as not-yet-meaningful. Since context goes on forever, since around every context there is a still larger context, there can in principle never be absolute certainty about what any sentence means: it is always subject to further overturning by subsequent sentences, although the statistical probability of this decreases as one piles up further coherent bits of meaning consistent with a given semantic hypothesis. The best reader of classical Chinese is only ever at best 80 percent sure of what a sentence means first time through and *never* gets to full 100 percent certainty. By MDU, we may expect absolute certainty not to be an ultimate value in much Chinese thought. We can expect context and the possibility of further overturnings; we can expect

comfort with vagueness and ambiguity not as an obstacle to coherence and meaning but as its component; we can expect a dichotomy between clarity and ambiguity, indeed between determinacy and indeterminacy, not to be ultimate in a lot of Chinese thought.

Finally, there is no connective copula and no word derived from the word used to mean "being in general" used to connect subjects to their predicates, whether those predicates are present progressive verbs or adjectives. Most Indo-European languages share the peculiarity that we find in English uses of the word "is" and its alternate forms, which we usually no longer think of as anything strange. That is, the selfsame word, *is,* is used in the following four sentences: (1) "The dog *is.*" (2) "The dog is brown." (3) "The dog is running." (4) "The dog is a kind of animal." There is no word that does this sort of quadruple service in classical Chinese. The identification of what something is, as in statement (4) here, is accomplished by placing the two terms in juxtaposition, adding a nominalizing particle or two to the first term, and then adding *ye* 也 after the second term. Linguists may be pleased to therefore call this *ye* a copula, but in that case it functions in a way that is grammatically unique and like no other verb in the language, and certainly it is never recycled to attach adjectives or gerunds of action to a noun, much less is it used to assert the bare existence of the subject, as in sentence (1). By MDU, we might thus expect that no universal concept of Being will be assumed to underlie and be univocal in all these forms of action and expression, that their qualities will not be imported into their being as their essences, as required for their being as such, or at least that the relationship between an essence and a determinate set of qualities will always be problematic and nonintuitive. We will expect no collapse of essence and existence for any being and for whatever essences there may be to be resistant to reduction to self-standing or nonrelational qualities: all such qualities will tend to remain relational rather than being transposed by the force of the shared "is" verb to the level of inalienable independent existence itself.

And, lo and behold, broadly speaking, much of what we would thus be led to expect by MDU is indeed more or less what we do find. Putting all these together, we would expect to find a tendency in much Chinese thought that experiences coherence and meaning within ambiguity; is highly context-sensitive and prone to multifarious meaning; is subject to constant change of significances without threatening meaningfulness itself; to show one and many as a nonultimate distinction such that it is just fine for something to be in one sense *one* and in another sense *many*, without specifying an ultimate ontological decision between the two; that does not necessitate an ontological gap between the doer of

a deed and the deed done; and without an existence as requiring an essence to instantiate.

There is another huge consequence of this thoroughgoing contextualism that actually grounds this (rather unusual) experience of coherence, of meaningfulness, that is always just a little blurry and uncertain for a reader and thinker of classical Chinese. For one of the most striking features noticed by almost all observers of early Chinese thought is its strange treatment of the categories of Being and Nothing, when equivalents of these abstracted categories do finally emerge (for example, in the *Daodejing*)—to be specific, the absence of the Being/Nothing dichotomy, of the absolute mutual exclusivity of being and nonbeing. Let us call what is lacking here "the Parmenidean distinction," using Parmenides as a marker in accord with the way he was almost universally read, at least, prior to the twentieth century and still is read by most non-Heideggerian classicists: the idea of a total exclusion of Nothing. This idea is paradoxically named only to be excluded from naming, the idea that all that can be validly expressed in language or thought belongs to the realm of one of these and not the other, that an excluded middle pertains to Being and Nothing and there is no third sphere encompassing both, no point of intersection, and no way from the one to the other; and with all this is also the idea that things *either* exist or *do not* exist and further that this either/or is the most basic ontological principle undergirding all others, applying also to particular states of affairs, which either *exist* or *do not,* that is, *are so* or *are not so*. If the Chinese case lacks the Parmenidean distinction, we can expect that the alternative state of an eternal nothingness, the total exclusion of being, simply does not loom. There is no need for the imposition of a creation ex nihilo because there is no nihilo. And this is indeed what we do find, as we will explore further below.

To understand this lack of the Parmenidean distinction, it may be useful to say something first about another linguistic peculiarity of the classical Chinese language, going back to our last linguistic point about the copula and standing in sharp contrast to all Indo-European grammars, a point that is too strikingly relevant to be entirely ignored in this context. Since this is a claim about the rules of the grammar, I may appear to be contradicting my prior claim that the grammar has no strict rules. I am not: what I say here about Chinese grammatical rules applies to the kind of "precedent law" rule already described. That means that what I say here about how particular sentences work is true, *all things being equal,* that is, if there is nothing else in the local context strong enough to override the force of the larger grammatical context. It is possible for every sentence that I say here "must" mean X to mean something different with a skillfully enough contrived context; what is said here about the

grammatical laws refers to how these sentences would work in the absence of any other local context, standing alone with only the general context of the entire history of the language to serve as their disambiguator. To my knowledge, the point to which I want to draw attention here was first pointed out by A. C. Graham in his essay "'Being' in Western Philosophy as Compared with *shi/fei* and *yu/wu* in Chinese Philosophy."[4] Put simply, sentences that assert that something does or does not exist in classical Chinese do not seem to work grammatically in the same way as sentences about any other condition or state. In other words, at first glance the verb "to be" does not seem to work like a normal verb in classical Chinese. Unlike normal verbs, which always follow the noun they describe, this verb *precedes* the noun it describes. If I want to say, "The dog is black," I might say 犬黑, while "black dog" would be the reverse, 黑犬. If I want to say, "The dog walked," it would be 犬行, while "walking dog" would be the reverse, 行犬. "The dog is here," or "the dog remains" would be 犬在. But if I want to say, "The dog exists," or "dogs exist," "there are such things as dogs," or "there is a dog," it would be 有犬. This does not mean "the existent dog," in parallel with the other cases. And while a rhetorical transposition like 犬者有也 might be possible in some strange philosophical contexts ("As for dogs, they are existent things," "as for the dog, it exists,"—a topic-comment structure), a straight 犬有 would read as "The dog has . . ." setting up the expectation for a further predicate: 犬有文 "the dog has markings." If I want to say, "There are no dogs," it would be 無犬. In this case, when indicating something's existence or nonexistence, the verb (the words that when standing alone mean being and nonbeing, or literally "having" and "lacking") precedes the noun. In all other cases, the verb is *after* the noun. In fact, the language follows a strict S-V-O structure—perhaps the strongest of all the "precedent law" rules operating in the language. So what is happening here? According to Graham's analysis, which I accept, there is an *implicit* subject before these verbs, and lacking any other subject from the local context, that subject is "the world" 天下—which indeed we find indifferently added to or subtracted from statements of this kind in early texts.

What is the upshot of this? Evidently, just as we have seen that meanings never appear to reside within particular words standing alone but are always unsteady algorithms of contextual probabilities, the same is true even for verbs indicating existence itself. Even "for X to exist" is not a verb phrase that describes something about a subject, X, but is rather a way of saying that *another subject* possesses or fails to possess X. Asking if X exists is asking if the world has X. But from here we can see precisely why it would not be intuitive for early Chinese thinkers to conceive of a dichotomy between being and nonbeing full stop. For it is

impossible to ask the question, "Does the world exist?" without thereby positing something larger *in which* the world does or does not exist. Context, when thematized as focal content, requires further context, and so ad infinitum. It is impossible, therefore, to ask about the existence of the largest whole, for in doing so, one presupposes a still larger whole. As for Nothing, whether we talk about it as being or as not-being, we are thereby equally really talking about the *more* that has or lacks it. What is this more? Being as such? To answer yes, and to say that Being is what lacks the Nothing, lands us in the Parmenidean version of the paradox. But to talk about Being, too, is already to posit something beyond Being, if there is to be any Being at all. Being can never be named only as Being. Just as with Nothing, which must "be" in order to be Nothing, it is paradoxical: Being to be Being cannot be only Being, cannot be all of Being. The All, if it exists, cannot be the entire all: it must exist in some still unmentioned larger All. The paradoxicality between Being and Nothing is thus *reciprocal:* Nothing (as the as yet unsaid All beyond the stated All) includes both the stated Nothing and the stated Being, and Being, too (as the already stated All), includes both the stated Nothing and the stated all Being. Both are determinate, both are indeterminate; both are the convergence of determinacy and indeterminacy.

In other words, there is no place for the famous Leibniz/Heidegger question, "Why is there something *rather than* nothing?" Any putative Nothing also would be something, and something larger than that nothing would have to be there for that nothing to be in, to be a description of, to be that about which there was nothing to be said. Is this a limitation of early Chinese thinkers, imposed by their impoverished language, which prevents them from even perceiving the possibility of the "question of Being," the "fundamental question of metaphysics"? Or is a unique advantage allowing them to perceive immediately and intuitively that that question of being so stated, in terms of a "Why?," which is decked with an air of profundity and importance, is really a nonquestion, a pseudo-question. That it is no real question at all would, in that case, be something that Indo-European grammars made so counterintuitive that it required the complicated conceptual apparatus of a Spinoza to finally make a case for.[5] Personally I would be very willing to argue for this latter position. But even for someone with the opposite view, the fact of this radical disparity should underline exactly why the encounter between Sinitic and Indo-European traditions is of such paramount importance for thinking through the limits and possibilities of human thought.

Several things should be noted here before proceeding further. First, the above consideration should make it clear that, although my characterization of the typical entailments of Indo-European thinking—subject-

predicate dichotomy, first principles, ultimate substances, single-purpose teleology, first cause theology—does indeed have much in common with what Heidegger called "ontotheological metaphysical thinking," the engagement with Chinese thinking raises questions about whether Heidegger drew the lines in the wrong places and got some of the main things wrong. In particular, on the question of Being just discussed, far from something obscured by ontotheological thinking, the question "Why is there something rather than nothing?" begins to look like a symptom and by-product of the ontotheological and, perhaps, its central entailment. Indeed, Leibniz proposes this question precisely as a way of fighting back against Spinoza's break with—or self-overcoming of—monotheism, as a way of asserting the absolute necessity of an intervention by someone or something to cause being in the nothingness, presupposing thereby their dichotomy and hence the impossibility of Being as Nothing's own production. Even if the latter point comes to be denied in Heidegger, if Nothing on its own is now seen as capable of disclosing Being on its own accord, the dichotomy embedded in the question still persists, now in the form of discloser and disclosed, if not in the cruder form of cause and effect. The drama is repeated when the late Schelling takes Hegel to task over precisely this Spinozistic inheritance (formerly shared by Schelling himself, who was indeed perhaps its most energetic proponent) in the name of "positive philosophy": the need for something additional to intervene in nothingness, as against Hegel's blithe demonstration that Nothing in and of itself could never really exclude its identity to Being, construed as the indeterminateness of the most abstract universal, and that from this converging of their identity and difference, the generation of all categories and all realities followed necessarily. From where I stand, the push for something other than Nothing to provide the somethingness of things in both Leibniz and late Schelling is an example of atavistic monotheist intuitions reasserting themselves in philosophical form, a prime example of a long-running struggle between the self-generating pagan cosmos of Spinoza and Hegel (and of the mainstream Chinese traditions, and of me) and the monotheist cosmos in need of an external agent to breathe life and indeed being into it (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Leibniz, late Schelling). Heidegger takes in an ontotheological Trojan horse when he takes up this question of Being. For it is worth stressing that the mysterious numinosity of being is *diminished,* not enhanced, by this sort of questioning that subjects Being to the necessity of reversion to a ground, of a why, or a reason. The very structure of this question presupposes the very *taming* of the wild mystery of being into the forms of teleology or the principle of sufficient reason as *ultimate ontological requirements*. Being that is as much nonbeing as being, non-

being that is as much being as nonbeing—where even our imagination of a blank cosmos for all eternity is another moment of the groundless inexplicable upsurge of being, inseparable from every other upsurge—this is where the shining forth of Being's disclosure resides, the self-presentation of the strangeness of the presence of all-that-is. It does not reside in asking for its reasons, its purposes, its grounds. This remains so even where, as is made clear in Heidegger's case, the point of this question is not to answer it but to keep it alive as a question that calls all things, especially the questioner, into question. For even if kept alive as a question rather than as the demand for a concrete answer, it is the wrong question. Read in the most charitable way, Heidegger's question "Why is there anything at all instead of nothing?" really means "Why are there *beings* instead of just Being?" And by 1949, in his belated and revisionist introduction[6] to his 1929 lecture "What is Metaphysics?" he has clearly become aware that the "Why?" *seems* to plunge him squarely back into the Leibnizian world of ontotheological thinking. Of course, with exemplary Heideggerian evasiveness, he then insinuates that this is not what he meant at all and that the question must be read in another sense entirely. I am willing to grant a salutary refinement in Heidegger's thinking here, and he is not wrong to suggest that although this phraseology is *highly* likely to lead to the "misunderstanding" in question, there are other ways to construe it and quite interesting ones—in fact ways that will bring us close to some of the key motifs that emerge in Chinese Buddhist thinking. But even that still does not solve the problem of the "instead." For there are *not* beings *instead of* Being, or *instead* of Nothing, as Heidegger well knows. Nor can there be: even in the utmost absence of beings, the mere absence of beings, as a specifiable state that *is,* would itself be a being, and this being would still not be a being *instead of* Being. What Heidegger really means, I suppose, is "Why is there Dasein?" This is precisely because for him there really is no Being without beings and no beings without Dasein. What Heidegger really means to accomplish with this question, as I read it, is a disclosure of the uncanniness of Dasein and with it, in angst, the strangeness of the Being of all beings in their presence with and to Dasein, which show themselves *against* the abyss of the Nothing. The abyss of the Nothing remains for Heidegger *opposed* to beings and in some sense even opposed to the Being of beings. Its identity with that Being is accomplished only in the form of a belonging-together in the specific form of a mutual resistance, as mutual threat. In the original formulation of 1929, and well into the mid-1930s it seems, although the Nothing is manifest as "at one with" all-that-is in the experience of angst, and certainly very clearly not as another entity placed side by side with Being—and although it is made very clear that this

belongs inextricably to the self-presentation of Being—we are told explicitly that this is in the form of the "absolute otherness" revealed thereby as pertaining to all beings: that is, their absolute otherness to the Nothing. To put it charitably, there is a strong tendency to present this as the *only* way in which the Nothing is primary in the self-disclosure of Being at this point. If he means to say that Being is at once the Nothing that threatens all beings as beings, and the very Being of their being beings, it is perhaps the language he is obliged to use that requires such a torturous exposition and one that even so in a thousand places lends itself to misunderstanding: for it is far easier to read Heidegger at this stage as presenting the opposition between the Nothing and beings as the *only* mode and the *only* meaning of their (admittedly also primal and indissoluble) togetherness. This seems to be the case even in later works when Heidegger is newly willing to go a step further and say that Nothing is not merely the Ground or Unground of Being, not merely the primary discloser of Being, but is itself an alternate name, one of the most exalted names, for Being itself: that is, for No-thing, for what is no being. This ought to bring us closer to a single grasp of Being as both the abyss and the Being of all beings. But here, too, this is an oblivion of the ontological difference, the Being that belongs to beings and to which beings belong but precisely by virtue of not being a being, being the abyss of all beings, into which all beings are held out as over the abyss that threatens them as beings, in which but against which they must stand. Of course, Heidegger is wonderfully slippery on all these points, and I dare not assert that my reading here is the only legitimate one: I await correction from committed Heideggerians. But taking this reading for the moment, we would have to say that although Heidegger rightly sees some analogue of this idea in his beloved chapter 11 of the *Daodejing,* this is far from being the entire story of the Being-Nothing relation in the case for the Chinese Buddhists, or for Chinese thinkers in general. There, at least, we do arrive at the position I tried to attribute to Heidegger against the strain of language: Being is both the abyss of beings and the Being of beings. But there is one huge difference even if we grant this charitable reading of Heidegger, already hinted at in the discussion of linguistic peculiarities above. In the Chinese case, we do not need to resort to Being and the ontological difference to reach this double valence of beings—and thus to the danger of construing Being as an empty universal or an indifferent indeterminate field. On the contrary, we may say that here it is not Being that is the abyss and Being of all beings but that *each being is its own abyss and its own Being.* It is beings that are the abyss of themselves and the disclosure of themselves. Each being *is* at once a being and that being's Being—that being's abyss. And here we

have the real heart of the matter. For the real payoff of what discloses itself in this disclosure is expressed in Heidegger's dismantling of the four dichotomies that have come to pertain to Being: Being/Becoming, Being/Seeming, Being/Thinking, and Being/Ought. Whatever one might think about Heidegger's attempt to find an originary nondichotomous relation on all four fronts in the earliest Greek usages of Parmenides and Heraclitus (about which more in a moment), what he arrives at here starts to circle closer to precisely what strikes us so forcefully in the case of the early Chinese tradition, as outlined above: the lack of a dichotomy between being and becoming, reality and appearance, subject and object of experience, and is and ought. Along with these go the lack of the entire universal-particular disjunction and the various expedients needed to bridge it in the Western traditions. As most, if not all, students of early Chinese thought would agree, whether or not they want to buy into the linguistic-statistical explanation offered above, in all these cases we have a continuum where the two ends of the spectrum, while distinguishable, are never divisible and arguably are necessarily always discoverable in one another. In fact, the strict separation is never made. But I have tried to argue above that what really stands at the bottom of these nondichotomous continua is the mother of all nondichotomies: the nondichotomy between presence and absence, Being and Nothing, that is endemic to Chinese thought and that absolutely excludes the asking of the "fundamental question." What we have in Heidegger's question is thus, from the Chinese point of view, a kind of weird hybrid: it feels its way back past the four dichotomies that later characterize the ontotheological misreading of the Greek tradition, in Heidegger's view, but it cannot escape the primal dichotomy: the closest it gets is to the belong-together of Being and the Nothing as a primal alternative that is essential to the self-disclosure of Being as Being in Dasein's question. Here Heidegger is on the brink of (but only the brink of) the primal orientation of Chinese Buddhism.

For there, if the wrong question is "Why is there anything at all instead of nothing?" the right question would perhaps instead be not *why* but *how,* that is, in what sense is it that the nothingness that threatens beings is also not that which is merely always locked in togetherness with them through their mutual struggle but always *also* the ownmost essence of those beings as beings, the Being of those beings which is nonother to the beings themselves (in sharp contrast to the "ontological difference"). Here, too, we have the eternal indivisibility and the eternal contrast of the two; but this now means, pace Heidegger, that it is not just their mutual threat that holds them together but also their achieved indistinguishability such that each entails the other, at once threatened

by and established by the other, which is thus not only its other but its own self, not only its own self but the otherness that is its own self. The question to keep alive, the wonder at Being to keep alive, or rather, ditching Being entirely, the wonder at *each being* to keep alive, is expressed most directly in what I regard as the supreme form of this question, the Tiantai form, *The Inconceivable Wondrous Nature of the Comprehensively Interfused Three Truths* 圓融三諦之妙. These are the Emptying of beings, the Establishing of beings, and each being as Center of all beings, as the identity-as-contrast of their own Emptying and Establishing. For our purposes there is perhaps no more direct statement of this than that of Zhanran (711–782) in his short work, *Shizhong xinyao* 始終心要: 夫三諦者。天然之性德也。中諦者。統一切法。眞諦者。泯一切法。俗諦者。立一切法。舉一即三非前後也。含生本具。非造作之所得也 (T 1915.46.473b12–16). We can provide a perhaps fittingly Heideggerian translation as follows:

> The Three Truths are the uncreated primordial potencies of all beings. Disclosed by the Centrality of each being is the togetherness of all beings, in themselves and in and as that one being; disclosed by the Emptiness of each being is the annihilation of all beings, in themselves and in and as that one being; disclosed by the conventional positing of each being is the establishment of all beings, in themselves and in and as that one being. When any one of these is brought forward, all three are there. None is prior or subsequent to the others. All that has life originally is endowed with them; they are not attained by creation or activity of any kind.

The togetherness disclosed by the dimension of Centrality of any being is here the togetherness, in and as any being, of the annihilation and the establishment of all beings, indeed their actual identity in their very difference, where identity between any two of them is a synonymity that also always breaks into its various alternative senses and meanings in their contrast to each other. But each of these "appearances"—these partial meanings that oppose one another—is inherently endowed with all three, with all the others, so that at once their opposition is no opposition, as each partial expression always finds *itself* also in the other partial expression to which it is opposed as well. They are not merely intrinsically together *and in addition* intrinsically opposed, albeit necessarily and inseparably so, where these remain two distinct facts about their relationship: rather, here in Zhanran's text as generally in Tiantai thinking, their opposition *is* their togetherness, and their togetherness *is* their opposition. Maybe that is what Heidegger means, too. But if so, he is taking a strangely long time to get there.

There can be some legitimate argument here about to what extent this will be drawn out explicitly in other Chinese Buddhist schools. But we cannot help seeing this Tiantai approach as still intimately related to the *lack* of the possibility question "Why beings *instead of* nothing?" as rooted in the primal inseparability of the two—and I would at least make bold to claim that, however differently other Chinese Buddhist schools, or indeed classical Daoist and Confucian thinkers, end up determining the relationship between something and nothing, they will *all strive to present and think it in the most fully nondichotomous form available to them*. What no one in this tradition will ever want to even *appear* to be doing is smuggling something as clearly absurd as a dichotomy between being and nonbeing, such as would be necessary for the question "Why anything at all instead of nothing?" It is truly amazing to note that the question is never asked in Chinese thought, and we have perhaps already excavated some of the reasons why; all the more amazing is the fact that again and again, whenever a thinker even conceives of a sharp disjunction between being and nonbeing—not to say a total dichotomy, but at least a strong contrast—it is only as a position attributed to ideological adversaries, always to be critiqued in the name of a more complete convergence of the two. This happens in the third century with Guo Xiang, who corrects (what he sees as the misinterpretation of) the ancient Daoists by asserting the complete coextensivity of being and nonbeing of Dao, or rather the interchangeability of (1) the nonexistence of Dao, (2) the existence of Dao as "nonexistence," and (3) the self-creation as both existence and nonexistence of all individual things. All *three* of these are synonyms of Guo. It happens again in the tenth century with Zhang Zai, who identifies the primal error of the Buddhists and Daoists as their failure to realize that there are no such things as Being and Nothing as mutually exclusive states, all being instead just forms along a continuum of manifestation and indistinctness of one and the same Qi, itself determined as the harmony-cum-void of supposed Being and Nothing. But in both cases, the charge is unjust: neither the ancient Daoists nor the Chinese Buddhists ever dreamed of dichotomizing Being and Nothing. Indeed, this is to be kept in mind when we turn to Chinese Buddhism: some of its most striking (and strangest) formulations are expressions of this deep-seated nondichotomy between being and nonbeing, and the numinous upsurge of what is as much a question as an answer, where the possible and the actual, the imagined and the discovered, and the existent and the nonexistent are always appearing and cannot be excised from any appearing: the uproarious overabundance of Being, which is never any different from the blankest nothingness. The glorious strangeness of all-that-is is present here not as *Angst*, not even Heidegger's peaceful and

creative *Angst*, but as a blindingly liberating kind of beauty, perhaps even as laughter in the midst of annihilation; for it is not as a mystery about *why* it is there or where it comes from; it is not beings suspended *over* nothing, *against* nothing, as if over an alternative abyss that would destroy them, but beings as the nothing itself, the nothing itself as all beings with no alternative. There could be nothing less than what there is. We imagine that nothingness would be less than what-is, but there we are mistaken: it would be much more. The Nothing in that imagined sense, the Nothing that excludes beings, would have to be stable, determinate, being-excluding—that is way more "beingness" than we have available. To "exclude" is to be, to be is to exclude: a Nothing that excludes beings would no longer really be absolute Nothing. What you see before you is the *absolute minimum possible being, the uttermost evacuation of any addition to the least possible:* the total elimination of all being, of all grounds, of all additions to nothingness looks exactly like *this*. There can be no escaping it into an alternative nothingness, nor preserving of it from an engulfing nothingness: this world of beings right here is all the nothingness we have. No intervention into the nothing is required to provide the world of sights, sounds, smells, and tastes we have right here—on the contrary, an intervention would be necessary to accomplish anything as definite as the being-excluding Nothing. A stable entity like a world-negating blank would be *more being* than what we ave here as the world, which is simply how the least possible being, or the impossibility of being, looks—and how it acts, thinks, eats, drinks, lives, dies. We can perhaps be bold and give the simple answer to Heidegger's question that would be shared by nearly all Chinese thinkers of the premodern period: why is there something *instead of* nothing? Answer: there isn't.[7]

Though the complexity of this matter requires a more extensive treatment than can be given here, I would say the same thing about the tendency among modern writers to view this sort of move as a strike for freedom or, alternately, for contingency of the individual and the particular against the oppressive totalitarianism of necessity and universal unescapable system. The real issue there is the systemicity of the system, its closed determinacy conceived as dichotomous with indeterminacy, not totality of the system—the totality, once purged of its determinacy and systemicity, is infinite and uncloseable. It is the attribution of the dichotomy between necessity and freedom, of individual and universal, or the fraudulent manner of resolving it presented in the mature Hegelian system, that is the real problem in my view. Here, too, we have another instance of the absolutizing of the particular against the universal as a defense against the absolutizing of the universal, not realizing the problem was the absolutizing itself, not the universality or particularity

of what was absolutized. The raw facticity of being is not served either by meaning or by meaninglessness, by necessity or by contingency, by explicability or by inexplicability, when either of the two is absolutized.

The next point: as against Heidegger's claims that nonontotheological thinking is a primal resource of earliest Greek thinking, discoverable in Parmenides and Heraclitus, as against their later misconstruals, and enabled even more by recovering that thinking in German, our approach here is obviously closer to Nietzsche's intuition in *Twilight of the Idols* and elsewhere, that *all* Indo-European subject-predicate grammars are the real engine behind these default intuitions of dichotomies of ground and grounded, of doer and deed, as much in Greek and German as in Latin and French and Sanskrit—that "we are not getting rid of God because we are not getting rid of [this particular] grammar." Again, the most glaring trait of this is the last glaring remnant of the ontotheological, the privileging of the mutual exclusivity of being and nonbeing even in their indivisible togetherness, which manifests in the shipwreck of Heidegger's question in the form of the "Why?" as a question, albeit a wholesomely unanswerable question, about a primal Ground, even if it turns out to be disclosable only as an Unground.

This special nondichotomous handling of the Being/Nothing distinction that we have suggested is encouraged by factors of the grammar of classical Chinese is apparent as a matter of self-aware reflection in the earliest resources of what is sometimes called "philosophical Daoism": for example, in the handling of the terms *wu* 無 and *you* 有 for the first time as self-standing nouns, and flaunting again and again their originary and inseparable relationship, and in some places even their synonymity, in texts like the *Daodejing*. That bears on the question of metaphysics in general and bears interesting fruit in the radical antimetaphysical conclusions of Chinese Buddhism along the lines just delineated. But this particular nondichotomy is an on ramp to other distinctive features of Chinese Buddhist thought: omnicentrism, the infinity of alternate conventional truths, and the paradoxical identity of every particular not merely in its relation to the Ground of Being (*sic*), or to the lack thereof, or to the universal, or to Emptiness, but in its relation to every other particular. That is, while it is certainly possible to say, in the context of the two truths model of some Indian Buddhist śāstric literature of certain schools, "This cup is not a cup," generally understood to mean that conventionally it is a cup but ultimately it is not a cup, it is not possible to say, "This cup is an elephant," even as a conventional truth. Again, there may be, as some recent writers have claimed, an exciting dialetheist possibility for Buddhist metaphysics, which can endorse a certain *very limited* number of contradictions as true, these true contradictory propositions ("the

true nature is no nature," "the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth," etc.) all pertain to the ultimate level of being as such: all reality as a whole is in its nature ultimately contradictory, the ultimate nature of things is paradoxical. However, conventional truth remains one consistent system and untouched: statements like, "That dead cat is also seven living elephants dancing on the end of my staff," or even "This hat is entirely red but entirely blue" do not seem to be argued for in Indian *śāstras*, although ideas of this sort are sometimes suggested, though not explained, in Indian *sūtras*. But certainly in Tiantai and in Chan, and arguably at least in a certain sense in Huayan as well, these statements are quite kosher. I would suggest that this, too, is encouraged by something that happened in the early Daoist tradition and is also closely linked to this nondichotomization of Being and Nothing but in a more intricate form. In fact, I would be bold to say we can pinpoint the very page on which omnicentrism first pokes its head into the world in a more complex text of the Daoist tradition, the second chapter of the *Zhuangzi*. I would make that claim for the following passage:

> There is a beginning. There is a not-yet-beginning-to-be-a-beginning. There is a not-yet-beginning-to-not-yet-begin-to-be-a-beginning. There is Being. There is Nothing. There is a not-yet-beginning-to-be-Nothing. There is a not-yet-beginning-to-not-yet-begin-to-be-Nothing. Suddenly there is Nothing. But I do not-yet know whether "the Being of Nothing" is ultimately Being or Nothing. Now I have said something. But I do not-yet know: has what I have said really said anything? Or has it not really said anything?
>
> Nothing in the world is larger than the tip of a hair in autumn, and Mt. Tai is small. No one lives longer than a dead child, and old Pengzu died an early death. Heaven and earth are born together with me, and the ten thousand things and I are one. But if we are all one, can there be any words? But since I have already declared that we are "one," can there be no words? The one and the word are already two, the two and the original unnamed one are three. Going on like this even a skilled chronicler could not keep up with it, not to mention a lesser man. So even moving from non-existence to existence we already arrive at three—how much more when we move from existence to existence! Rather than moving from anywhere to anywhere, then, let us just go by the rightness of whatever is before us as the present "this."[8]

Note what happens between the first and the second paragraphs here. The first paragraph is addressing the abstract idea of a "beginning" and of

"Being," ending in the undecidability between Being and Nothing, about whether in fact the statement "there is (=the world has) Nothing" actually refers to anything or not. This would seem to be at best an indication of paradoxicality or antinomies applied to the most general level, the universal level, the foundational level. Being per se is a paradoxical concept, inasmuch as it must presuppose a difference from Nothing, and Nothing has to be either a being or a nonbeing, in either case undermining its ability to serve as the contrast to being, so Nothing is paradoxical, too.

But then to our great surprise the second paragraph leaps into what seems a nonsensical conclusion from this: nothing is larger than an autumn hair, nothing is smaller than Mount Tai, and so on. Please note that the word "nothing" reappears in the English translation here, but the word for Nothing, *wu,* does not reappear in the Chinese original—so there is no motivation to leap to the Heideggerian expedient of reading this to mean that the Nothing itself is bigger than the mountain and smaller than the hair, and so on, as an explanation of this leap. The Nothing does not explicitly enter into it at all; these are claims about specific propositions about particulars, which are themselves now claimed to be paradoxical. What is the logic? There are of course many ways interpreters have tried to explain this passage. I will give mine briefly in the footnote to this sentence.[9] But one thing is clear no matter how we might explain the reasoning behind this passage: the move from paradoxicality in general to a kind of anything-goes paradoxicality on the level of any and every particular proposition is immediate and unhesitating. I claim that this is where we first find a huge disjunction from Indo-European traditions that do note some sense in which the unconditional or absolute or universal or ground of being is paradoxical and/or is not a definite being: this paradoxicality is restricted to the absolute realm and indeed often serves to make the conventional world of the understanding even *more* definite, nonnegotiable, nonparadoxical, monolithic. The opposite happens in *Zhuangzi.* I would suggest that this has *something* to do with the way Buddhist texts that broached this sort of issue came to be interpreted in China, even if (as I believe) the Buddhist philosophical materials provided for the Chinese Buddhist thinkers an entirely different and, in many ways, more well-worked-out set of tools by which to make this linkage between the paradoxicality, or the inconceivability, of the absolute, or of being as such, or of nonbeing as such—directly to the paradoxicality of all identities without exception, not merely in the meager sense of "paradoxically X and non-X in general, both cat and non-cat" but also directly "paradoxically both X and Y, both dead cat and live alligator"—not merely by reference to that first "both X and non-X" paradox at the "ground" of things (for example, "Being," or "the Nothing"), which allows for a

reductive *tertium quid* explanation of these paradoxical statements ("a cat is an alligator because cat is non-cat and alligator is non-alligator, in fact both are *really* nothing at all, and therefore by the transitive property . . ."), as I would argue sometimes happens in Huayan deployments of Emptiness or Li 理, but in a more robust sense that is developed on the Tiantai side, with Chan writers split between these usages in every combination and proportion.[10]

The above should suffice to delineate the range of the issue at hand. However, although the starkness of the proposed contrast between Chinese and Indo-European traditions of thinking has long been on the radar of both Western and East Asian thinkers, a balanced and nuanced inquiry into its implications requires such a daunting combination of knowledge and skills that it has rightfully been approached with exceptional caution. Still, this rift in human thinking must be taken seriously and an attempt made to understand its significance. This requires some effort to come to an understanding of each tradition separately and of the possible interfaces between them. To do that, I think, it is necessary first to try to grasp precisely those aspects of the Sinitic tradition that are most counterintuitive, marginalized, and underrepresented within Indo-European traditions, and second, to see what happened when that tradition did come into contact with Indo-European traditions. That is why as thinkers we must give especially close attention to the phenomenon known to us as Chinese Buddhism. For we have one and only one clear-cut, long-lived historical instance of this massive encounter between the two sides of human thinking, one test tube in which (if we accept our somewhat exaggerated but far from groundless characterization of the case given above) the most diverse forms of human speculation yet developed were brought into synergy (so far): Chinese Buddhism.

I said above that we should expect to find exceptions to the mainstream intuitions in any tradition of thought but that they would be overly complex and eventually sidelined or forgotten. Here, too, that is what we do indeed find. On the Chinese side, we have sterling examples of proto-ontotheological speculation, for example, in early Mohism—perhaps an even more single-minded ethical henotheism, if not monotheism, than was as yet developed among either the Greeks or the Hebrews of the same period—which has all the earmarks of the inevitable results (if not the technical conceptual tools and methods) of the Indo-European commonalities I caricatured above: a single-source of value, a single purpose to the world, an ethical and interested single deity in charge of the world, with implications of purposive fashioning of things in the world for the sake of the big plan for mankind. It seems no accident that it is also in this school of thought that we find the first attempts to propose logical and

ethical first principles from which all other propositions and judgments should be deduced and by which they should be judged. All this reeks heavily of the kind of thinking I said we might expect to be intuitive to a thinker in Indo-European languages but that we expected would be quite difficult to sustain for someone who experiences the constitution of meaning and coherence in his language of thought without the need for recourse to any one-way ground/grounded distinction, or the related appearance/reality and being/non-being dichotomies. Yet there it is right in the midst of the earliest Chinese thinking: but, as expected, it fails to gain traction in early China. And after struggling through a few centuries trying to make its complicated counterintuitive case, it dwindles and disappears. We find traces of similar purposive-personal-deity-making-moral-rules sorts of theologies later here and there in semiliterate and middlebrow culture, for example in the *Xiang-er* commentary to the *Laozi,* but again we find these texts marginalized to the point of disappearance in the centuries of continuous literate discourse (and hence in that particular case unknown until fragments of it were rediscovered at Dunhuang in the twentieth century). On the European side, we find outliers who do think against the grain of the ontotheological in my modified sense but only by means of unwieldy and overcomplicated conceptual systems of limited portability: not necessarily Heidegger's beloved Greeks or German poets but rather a few scattered figures like Spinoza (ignored by Heidegger as a "foreign body within philosophy," but, in my view, the first true antiontotheologian in the West, although his presentation required such a complicated apparatus that he is often mistaken, or perhaps he disguised himself, as precisely the arch-ontotheologian); the *early* Spinozistic Schelling and Hegel (both had backslid into ontotheological compromise by 1806, I would argue); perhaps Nietzsche, Heidegger himself, Bataille, Merleau-Ponty, and a few others. However, as expected, the overly complex justifications needed to put forward what were such counterintuitive ideas within the Indo-European systems severely limited the range of influence and longevity of these systems within their home cultures (indeed, in the case of Schelling and Hegel, even limited it to the early parts of their own careers as thinkers, as mentioned).

In addition, in India, so this same story would go, we have another such case: Buddhism. From our present vantage point Buddhism is as much an outlier in its home culture as Mohism is in China and as Spinozism is in Europe: straining against the deepest intuitions of the language game of indigenous discourse and its deep grammar, through a very and complex precarious set of against-the-grain dialectical and pragmatic moves, we have here in the very heart of Indo-European culture a countermovement, challenging the deepest entailments of that grammar: the doer behind

the deed, the first cause, the ground of being, the ultimate principles, the reality behind appearances. Buddhism is among our outliers in various cultures far and away the strongest and most sustainable, developing powerful new weapons to sustain its counterintuitive vision and lasting many centuries before being reabsorbed and submerged back under the waves of what were apparently, in the long run, more intuitive Indo-European ideas.

This, however, again highlights for us the importance of Chinese Buddhism. For here the spore that had strained against the current to maintain itself in its indigenous hostile soil found a habitat that seems almost ideally designed to foster its full flowering. This at any rate is how things often look to a worker in Chinese Buddhist thought: Buddhism in its Indic sources keeps trying to break free of appearance/reality dichotomies, or truth/falsehood dichotomies, or ground/grounded dichotomies, or doer/deed dichotomies. But upon closer examination the framework keeps bringing these back at a higher level; occasionally in śāstric discourse a high note is reached and sustained, on a scaffolding of elaborate dialectical pyrotechnics, to push through what must be highly intuitive claims to a thinker using Indo-European grammar, or, in the wild imaginative speculations of *sūtra* litarture, a further implication of freedom from such dichotomies is proposed and given mythological expression but without theoretical elaboration (for example, the interpenetration of all dharmas and the value paradoxes and the nonstandard temporalities that we sometimes find proposed but not explained or argued for in some Mahāyāna sūtras). It is only in Chinese Buddhism that these aspects of the Buddhist revolution seem to come into full play, unobstructed by countervailing forces back to the "common sense" of the Indo-European grammars. Indeed, it is just these most peculiar aspects of just barely perceivable implications of Buddhist antifoundationalism—reciprocal causality of particulars, symmetrical groundlessness as ground and ground as groundlessness, simultaneous reality and unreality of all possible dharmas, futures flowing into pasts, multiple valences for all possible identities (as opposed to a single nonidentity as ultimate truth and a single conventional identity as conventional truth, for example), and, above all, the understanding of the extinguishment of Nirvana as simultaneously the establishment and upsurge of all dharmas, the nondichotomy of the entangled existence and the liberating nonexistence of all conditional dharmas, extinguishment as being itself—that seem most intuitive to the classical Chinese Buddhist theorists, and it is in their works alone that we find their full elaboration.

To what extent would these grammatical entailments also apply in a Sino-Tibetan language that had not developed its own written tradition

prior to the introduction and adoption of an Indo-European writing system—for example, Tibetan? I don't know. I suspect here, as in the case of the overlay of historical influences, the picture would have to be very complex. To what extent does it apply to thinkers whose primary language of written speculation was classical Chinese but whose first language was not—for example, medieval Korean and Japanese thinkers? I suspect here the case would be quite close to those of Chinese thinkers of the same eras, since it is unlikely that the written language shared the grammar of the Chinese languages spoken by the Chinese thinkers either. How might this have changed with the introduction of innovations into the writing systems in Korea and Japan, moving them closer to the spoken languages and the primacy of phonetic representations? Again, it is a complex case that might repay close case-by-case study. For a thinker like Dōgen, one of the earliest Buddhist thinkers in the Sinosphere to begin departing from using straight classical Chinese for his written works, it would seem that a highly self-aware elaboration of precisely those elements of classical Chinese we have adduced above come to the forefront in his explicit thinking, just as he moves away from using that language for his own exegeses: the Chinese Chan texts and sūtra translations are now for him written in a sacred language that discloses deep truths about reversibility of subjects and predicates and multidirectional time that can be unraveled through intricate manipulations of that language itself. But this is just a guess. I would also suggest that we should expect powerful new difficulties for Chinese Buddhists to understand their own tradition in the wake of the May Fourth movement and the shift away from classical Chinese as the primary language of speculation; modern spoken Chinese, and its written equivalents, do not share anything like the full panoply of the characteristics of the classical language listed above, any more than Japanese and Korean do. It is, I think, a common experience, when trying to explain an exposition in a classical Chinese Buddhist text to a nonreader of classical Chinese, to find oneself faced with an almost impossible uphill battle: what makes perfectly good sense in that source language, what coheres into its own form of sense making, becomes one of those things that requires ridiculously elaborate dialectical scaffolding to make understood in English—and I suspect the same is true in modern Chinese, in Japanese, in Korean, in German, in French, and perhaps also in Sanskrit. Since no modern person, sadly, learns to think primarily in classical Chinese, we are perhaps all in the same boat here.

Here my crazy mood and its crazy speculations end. But one last bit of craziness. One of the most delicious stories in the long annals of colonialism, though it is quite possibly apocryphal, is the tale of the Jesuit missionary who, after spending years trying to teach monotheism

to educated Chinese whose primary language of speculation was literary Chinese, exclaimed that this language was an infernal trick devised in advance by the devil himself precisely to prevent the spread of the Gospel. Indeed! One can imagine the frustration of trying to make the case for the unsurpassable importance of strict monotheism, for worshipping and obeying this one specific god and no other, in a language where "god" *shen* 神 can always also mean "gods" or even "the mysterious spiritlike aspect of any phenomenon," where "lord" (*zhu* 主) can always also mean "lords" or even "the main or controlling factor in some event," where even "the Ruler on High" (*shangdi* 上帝) can always also mean "the rulers on high," or even "whatever high rulers there have ever been or ever will be." And in response, my final bit of craziness for today. May we perhaps imagine a pious Buddhist counterclaim: the classical Chinese language is an *upāya* devised in advance by a bodhisattva, perhaps Avalokiteśvara, to make Buddhism, real Buddhism, finally possible?

We may imagine it, and with pleasure. Buddhism can *only* be properly thought in classical Chinese! The Indians have never understood what they had wrought when they produced Buddhism! But of course this is an overstatement, a normative claim more at home in the lineage claims of the Sinitic schools—relocating the site of Buddhist authority from back there in India to over here in China, as they are wont to do—than in our present discussion. More measuredly, though, we will still make a claim for the singular importance of the study of Chinese Buddhism, not because of its purity but precisely because of its unique degree of hybridity. The development of Chinese Buddhism, in particular the schools that are at once the most thoroughly "Sinicized" and the most seriously imbued with the fruits of Indo-European speculation, in their admittedly quite distinctive Mahāyāna Buddhist form, is the most significant historical instance of a sustained encounter between the two traditions and to be valued precisely because of the stark disparity between these two sources. Chinese Buddhism, from the perspective of the contrasts just adduced, may be viewed as a particularly important tradition within the global history of human thought. For here we have the one truly sustained encounter between these two traditions, their attempt to find a common ground and develop a synthesis that simultaneously satisfies their very dissimilar demands. The earliest attempt at a thoroughgoing Sinitic reworking of the Buddhist tradition is found in the Tiantai school, founded in the fifth century CE. Close on its heels the Chan (Japanese: Zen) school and the Huayan school emerged. All three schools of speculation succeeded in creating elaborate syntheses of indigenous and Buddhist thinking, with varying emphases. While the Chan school sheds much of the scholastic theoretical baggage of Indian Buddhism, or at least streamlines and mar-

ginalizes it, in favor of modes of practice and affect that owe much to indigenous traditions, the Huayan and Tiantai schools remained committed to elaborate theoretical expositions of metaphysical ideas from within the framework of Indian religious categories, using modes of argumentation and praxis derived squarely from Indian Buddhism but in the service of ideals and metaphysical conclusions rooted deeply in the indigenous traditions. It is precisely the fact that the tension between these two strands is highest here that the intellectual labor and the intellectual rewards are among the most stunning to be discovered anywhere. The Indo-European entailments in the Buddhist sources, precisely in this outlier form that is always straining against the intuitive currents of their underlying grammars, are for that reason all the more rigorous and profound in their handling of the root issues that divide the traditions; the form of argumentation and the assumptions behind it in the Indic Buddhist sources presented enormous new challenges to Buddhist interpreters working in classical Chinese, as their own tools veered and undulated at crosscurrents with these textures of thought. Their achievements in forging new syntheses are therefore much more than merely "real Buddhism" or "real Chinese thought"—they are Chinese Buddhism.

It is no secret that in modern Anglophone scholarship it is Indian and Tibetan Buddhist thinkers who receive the most attention from philosophers. But the reason this tends to be so is precisely the reason it should not be so. It is so because these thinkers think and argue with a methodology and a language of argumentation that is, though not identical to European forms of the same, recognizably engaged in the same general *sort* of project, resonant on deep structural levels, sharing assumptions about ultimate ontological and epistemological requirements and entailments. Chinese Buddhist thinkers are doing something else, and it can be less than obvious to Anglophone philosophers of the twenty-first century that this is in any meaningful way the same thing they are themselves doing. But that is precisely why they should be at the top of the agenda for engagement. *We are still in the very early stages of having the slightest idea what is going on in Chinese Buddhist thought.* The vast majority of its texts have not yet appeared, let alone been studied, in any European language. But we know about enough now to know the task and the bounty that lie before us here: that the monumental *sui generis* accomplishment of these thinkers is for the first time spanning the vast chasm between Indo-European and Sinitic thought, their creation of new methods and conceptual technologies for doing so, the breathtaking mushroom cloud of innovations that emerged from this explosive encounter of the two sides of human thought, the sheer quantity and intricacy and newness of the thinking they were forced to

do, are an example and an inspiration for all thinkers, within any field. If philosophy can be at least as concerned with the expansion of the ability to think as with the (perhaps much later) narrowing of the range of what it is defensible or permissible or desirable to think, as I hope it is, nothing could be more salutary to a philosopher and no need more pressing than to spare no effort in trying to understand what they did and how they did it. Let the work begin.

Notes

1. I hasten to add that even in the spirit of this reckless thought experiment, this is in no way meant to disparage the achievements of theological and philosophical works written by thinkers reared in the discourses of Semitic or African or other languages, as occurred after the encounter with Greek or colonial European speculative traditions. On the contrary, as will become clear below, the line of thought developed here would be inclined to pay special attention to these developments, inasmuch as they will be our only examples *besides Chinese Buddhism* of a reappropriation of originally Indo-European texts into non-Indo-European linguistic and conceptual structures. That said, we do want to place special emphasis on Chinese Buddhism as one of the only cases where what precedes the encounter is an intricate and many-centuried *written* tradition of speculation that has had time to develop on its own terms before the encounter with Indo-European ideas. Another might be the writings of Hellenized Jews such as Philo of Alexandria or early Jewish-Christian authors, encountering Greek and Latin traditions from the position of an existing Hebrew literature, or indeed the non-Jewish Greek writers of New Testament and other texts grappling with Hebrew ideas translated into Greek. Many would perhaps say, however, that this Hebrew tradition stands squarely in the world of religion, history, and myth rather than that of any close analogue of philosophy, although these categories are unstable and contested, and of course some of the same people would perhaps deny the name of philosophy for the pre-Buddhist Chinese traditions as well, for better or worse. Anyhow, in all these cases what I want to highlight, first of all, is the degree of divergence in the concerns and methods of these traditions prior to their tangling and the fruitfulness of tracking the ensuring conceptual fireworks.
2. It is worth noting in passing here that, stated at this level of abstraction, these traits can also be found mutatis mutandis in the Hebrew traditions with which the Greek and Latin traditions fatefully tangled—in sharp contrast to the Chinese case with which the Indian traditions tangled, as we shall see.
3. We do of course find the concept of *Tianming,* "the Mandate of Heaven," playing a role of this sort in the earliest prephilosophical sources. But to our

surprise, as soon as the written tradition of intellectual discourse is really up and running, we find this idea thinning out and ceasing to play any decisive role as divine sanction for morality, with one or two exceptions to be discussed later in this essay: exceptions that, however, fail spectacularly to win the day, in sharp contrast to the cases of the other cultural spheres just mentioned. In our current speculative experiment we may regard this as a preliterate inheritance that the written tradition of classical Chinese attempts and fails to make serious use of, for reasons to be guessed at below.

4. Collected in A. C. Graham, *Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 322–359.
5. Some readers of Spinoza may find this claim surprising; a case must be made to substantiate it, which can only be adumbrated here. For as I read him, although Spinoza seems initially to be advocating the most extreme possible dichotomy between existence and nonexistence, just as Parmenides did, in his utter exclusion of nonexistence in any form from his conception of Substance (the alleged lack of negativity that Hegel would later decry in Spinoza), in reality he has accomplished the complete turnaround of the dichotomy, precisely through the strict thinking-through of the theological formula demanding that a perfect being be an essence involving existence, which "cannot be conceived as non-existent." For having also eliminated any distinction between possible and actual, this formula now means we have thought of an existence that exists even if conceived as absent, as negated, which is instantiated even in its own negation and then that there can be no other being. As such, even the most extreme form of nonexistence conceivable is ipso facto also this very existence. Go ahead and conceive of a nonexistence, as nonexistent as you can, as completely excluding and divergent from existence as possible: you are thinking about the necessary existence, Substance itself. Some have claimed this was Parmenides's intention as well. That is difficult to judge, given our fragmentary resources, but in any case the way he was understood led to precisely the opposite result: the fateful absolute dichotomizing of being and nonbeing.
6. First translated into English as "The Way Back Into the Ground of Metaphysics" by Walter Kaufmann in his anthology, *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre* (New York: Meridian, 1956).
7. Heidegger, of course, makes a small to-do of considering the dropping of the "instead of nothing," making a gesture toward the critique that the "Nothing" is a meaningless word. But he finally concludes that only shallow and inauthentic minds think that, so he brings it back in—again, precisely in the context of an *alternative* between something and nothing, between possible and actual. (See Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics,* sections 18–19.) But this is not at all to the point in either case: for the Chinese thinkers in our sights here do not dismiss the dichotomy of nothing and something

because they think "nothing" is a meaningless word, or a contentless universal, nor a mere trick of logic. Rather, the two are seen as mutually entailing and inseparable, mutually generating, indistinguishable, and in the final analysis synonymous. Yet they are not indistinguishable in the manner set forth by Hegel in the *Logic*, that is, as the utmost universal equally devoid of content, at least in the interpretation that Heidegger gives to Hegel. Rather, whether in the Daoist or the Buddhist case, in their various ways, each speaks the other, and thereby speaks the generation and sustaining of *all content; their very mutual positing is itself the Being of all beings.* Does Heidegger arrive at some similar conclusion? Very possibly so. But even to the very end, his exposition does not, in my view, escape a one-sided emphasis on his inherited conception of nothingness *as opposed to* being as the sole form of their togetherness, the glaring remaining ontotheological prejudice from which he never really freed himself.

8. Brook Ziporyn, trans., *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings with Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2009), 15–16, modified.
9. This is, in my view, a continuation, and indeed merely a special case, of the discussion that precedes it in this chapter of *Zhuangzi:* Being and Nothing here are a special case of "this" and "that," an illustration of their inescapability even for the most general case. The logical case has been made earlier, in the "this/that" section of this chapter; this section is an application or illustration of what has been established there. The real point is the last line of the first paragraph quoted: "Has what I have said really said anything? Or has it not said anything?" That is the upshot of the earlier discussion: the impossibility of limiting the referent to any finite sphere in any act of reference, to exclude the opposite of what is claimed in any claim, to intend only what one intends and not also otherwise and the opposite of what one intends whenever one uses a word or for that matter engages in any mental act. That is why the text says a page or so earlier that "heaven and earth are one finger. All things are one horse," which is actually the first occurrence of an omnicentric claim in world literature, as far as I know. The logic there concerned particular referents. But here the same logic is generalized: it is impossible to single out any referent without it *thereby* (by the very fact of singling it out) drifting into another referent, leading not to the conclusion that nothing can be said but to this state of "I don't know whether anything is said or not—it seems as if it is, and as if it's not?" Hence the transition to the instability, the anything goes, for all particulars follows not upon the dependence of those particulars on a concept of Being that has itself now been proved unstable but again simply upon the claim that the referent of the words "small," "large" "Mt. Tai," "autumn hair"—and not just the words but the intended qualities of smallness, largeness, Mt. Tainess, etc. All are in the same boat: impossible to intend without also intending otherwise,

impossible even to consider without considering otherwise. So has anything been intended? Has nothing been intended? Has anything been thought when I thought them? Has nothing been thought? Neither answer is given. But this opens the space for putting these paradoxical statements about particulars on exactly the same footing as paradoxical statements about Being and Nothing and indeed on exactly the same footing as all seemingly nonparadoxical statements. Again, I think the Buddhist writers have other arguments to deploy to make a similar case, thanks to the different conceptual resources imported from the fringes of the Indo-European traditions; but that this transition seemed to be an intuitive step here and not there seems undeniable.

10. For a more detailed exploration of this point, see Ziporyn, *Beyond Oneness and Difference: Li and Coherence in Chinese Buddhist Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013).

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