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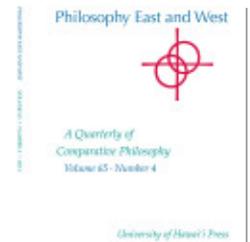
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## **Ambiguity, Wholeness, and Irony: A New Interpretation of Chinese Metaphysics**

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Philosophy East and West, Volume 65, Number 3, July 2015, pp. 949-955  
(Review)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press  
DOI: [10.1353/pew.2015.0079](https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2015.0079)



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## FEATURE REVIEW

### Ambiguity, Wholeness, and Irony: A New Interpretation of Chinese Metaphysics



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*Ironies of Oneness and Difference: Coherence in Early Chinese Thought: Prolegomena to the Study of Li 理*. By Brook Ziporyn. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012. Pp. ix + 323. Hardcover \$85.00, ISBN 978-1-43-844289-1. Paper \$26.95, ISBN 978-1-43-844288-4.

*Beyond Oneness and Difference: Li 理 and Coherence in Chinese Buddhist Thought and Its Antecedents*. By Brook Ziporyn. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013. Pp. xviii + 413. Hardcover \$95.00, ISBN 978-1-43-844817-6. Paper \$27.95, ISBN 978-1-43-844818-3.

Let me begin with a personal observation. It takes some courage to write a review of Brook Ziporyn's new publications. The two tomes, *Ironies of Oneness and Difference* and *Beyond Oneness and Difference*, center on the history of one particular notion, *li* 理, which, according to Ziporyn, denotes "something interestingly strange" (*Beyond*, p. 314). The sheer size of these two densely printed volumes (more than seven hundred pages in total) and their enormous scope (from Classical Chinese thought through to Neo-Confucianism) make any attempt to understand and to evaluate Ziporyn's contribution a daunting task. Therefore, I will confine myself to an overview of the major claims and a few preliminary observations. However, it should be pointed out at the beginning that few books I have read proved to be as stimulating and satisfying (in both purely theoretical and aesthetic terms) as these two volumes on "oneness and difference." Hopefully, this publication will reach more than the proverbial "happy few."

Even a modestly engaged student of Chinese thought will spend some time thinking about the term *li*; but the chances are high that he or she will walk away with a rather cartoonish image (one common misunderstanding among non-Chinese students being that *li* represents a concept in the Aristotelian sense, with a clear definitional structure). In the seventeenth century, the philosopher Leibniz, in his mostly autodidactic attempt to come to grips with Chinese thought, had connected the term *li* to the idea of God as a prime mover.<sup>1</sup> In 1947, the French Sinologist Paul D emieville addressed this issue in a now famous lecture at the Coll ege de France.<sup>2</sup> Some years later (in 1955), the Chinese philosopher Tang Junyi 唐君毅, developed an often

quoted sixfold classification in order to explain the various uses of *li*.<sup>3</sup> Since then, numerous Sinologists have written about this term, but there can be no doubt that Ziporyn's two volumes represent a milestone in this long history of reception.<sup>4</sup>

While engaged in the task of writing these two volumes, Ziporyn's explicit goal was "to formulate and structure a global theory" about Chinese metaphysics as a whole and, more particularly, about *li* (*Ironies*, p. vii). Ideally, such a theory would enable us "to see both the diversity of continuities and discontinuities in the various positions advanced by Chinese thinkers, and to understand the presuppositions that make them possible" (*Ironies*, p. 60). In other words, Ziporyn's inquiry comprises both a *transcendental* dimension (regarding the conditions of possibility of a particular way of thinking) and a *historical* dimension (the textual evidence left behind by individual thinkers). This is a very appealing way of framing the issue; unlike many contemporary Sinologists, who, in their excessive concern with the precise meaning of single words or sentences, risk neglecting the specific mindsets underlying these texts, Ziporyn is able to establish and to go some way toward clarifying the sense of surprise and refreshment that premodern Chinese texts afford their readers.

Many Sinologists translate *li* as "pattern" or "law" and tend to understand it in an objectivist way; for example, Rudolf G. Wagner has claimed that this term, in Wang Bi's 王弼 (226–249) thought, "describes the structured specificity of things."<sup>5</sup> Ziporyn offers us many compelling reasons to think that the real story, in Wang Bi and in other thinkers, is much more complicated. The basic problem seems to be that this term does not simply refer to objective patterns or other entities that could be grasped by a disengaged observer through a purely theoretical inquiry. Instead, any successful inquiry into *li* demands a long process of practical engagement and self-transformation that supposedly leads to the discovery of a new horizon of meaning (and *not* of any kind of entities). Ziporyn offers us an astonishingly broad variety of translation terms that articulate certain aspects of *li* emphasized in the various Chinese schools of thought: "a way of hanging together" (*Ironies*, p. 5), "what must be cohered with to produce further coherences" (*Beyond*, p. 229), "value-laden coherence" (*Beyond*, p. 47), "nonobstruction" (*Beyond*, p. 188), "the Omnipresent" (*Beyond*, p. 48), "co-potentiality" (*Beyond*, p. 328), "interpervasion" (*Beyond*, p. 332), et cetera.

In most cases, he renders *li* simply as "coherence," which is a rather succinct way of summarizing its various aspects (and this term has rightly gained some currency in the recent literature). Through the metaphor of the pendulum (which he has borrowed from the historian Ch'ien Mu 錢穆), Ziporyn succeeds in articulating three deeper aspects of "coherence," namely intelligibility, sustainability, and value: all parts of a given whole necessarily *cohere* in the center (marked by the swinging pendulum), for otherwise the pendulum would not be *sustainable* (thus, coherence is also often associated with stability, harmony, and growth); it is the center that makes the whole pendulum *intelligible*; and insofar as the individual actor is asked to stand at the "center of the circle," he or she is also able to see and to realize the *valuable action* (*Ironies*, pp. 77–84).

The metaphor of the pendulum runs through Ziporyn's volumes like a red thread (inter alia *Ironies*, pp. 99, 126, 244; *Beyond*, pp. 62, 155, 211). Readers used to more conceptual approaches might still find such a metaphor rather unpersuasive. But there can be no doubt that such metaphorical communication was held in high esteem by countless generations of Chinese literati; and I also agree with Ziporyn that the metaphor of the pendulum appropriately conveys the basic mindset and the deeper "metaphysical" commitments of many premodern Chinese thinkers. In his two volumes, Ziporyn constantly rewrites his threefold account of "coherence," with the sort of painful reticence, self-reflectiveness, and destabilizing irony that one might expect not in a scholarly book but rather in a novel written by Henry James or Marcel Proust.<sup>6</sup> This particular writing style actually embodies one of Ziporyn's core beliefs, namely that the deeper concerns of Chinese thinkers can only be grasped through such an ambiguous use of language. Ziporyn thinks that the Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist discourses on *li* ("coherence") are not about how we understand objects in the world, but rather about the question of how we understand our actions, our character, and our dispositions (our practical identity, or what Ziporyn sometimes calls our "value commitment"): "the manner in which [various] items happen to cohere in this particular action, predicated on the particular human desire in question" (*Ironies*, p. 69). Unlike their Western counterparts, Ziporyn argues, Chinese thinkers have never attempted to find a definitive identity for the individual cat (some sort of "catness"); thus, instead of being haunted by the problem of universals and particulars and the difference between appearance and reality, Chinese thinkers conceived of the world as being constantly changing, immanent, undetermined, and "constitutively *ambiguous*" (*Ironies*, p. 7). The idea of *li*, Ziporyn further claims, helped thinkers like Han Fei 韓非, Wang Bi 王弼, Guo Xiang 郭象, Zhiyi 智顓, and many others not to identify things by placing them in a causal network of other things but to disregard the "identity" of individual things, their causes, and purposes. Thus, in Confucian texts, *li* functions as positive, intelligible value and harmony; in Daoist texts as valued "togetherness," which is ironic, provisional, and unintelligible; and, finally, in Buddhist texts as the ending of suffering and the basic continuity between apparently separate things.

In sum, all these thinkers believed that only through a strong commitment to "coherence" (and the ambiguous perspective it offers), are human agents able to create value and to organize, for a larger community, a more harmonious way of seeing the world (*Ironies*, p. 130).

In this review, it is impossible to summarize each of the thirteen chapters (fortunately, the author provides us with a nice overview of his main points; see *Beyond*, pp. 307–319). All in all, I think Ziporyn gets much right about the specific narrative of Chinese thought, and his interpretations of the various texts are often very compelling (although I should add immediately that I only have limited expertise in Chinese Buddhism). However, there might be problems with some of the details, or, to say the least, there seems to be a need for further clarification regarding the broader implications of Ziporyn's book. Let me concentrate on five aspects.

First, more literalist interpreters might worry that Ziporyn's interpretative framework is based on assumptions about the deeper structure of Chinese thought that are not supported sufficiently by textual evidence. For example, it is not easy to understand why *li* is used "non-ironically" in texts like the *Analects* and the *Mencius* (*Ironies*, pp. 89–137), since this term does not appear in the former text at all and, at least according to commentators before the Song dynasty, does not play a prominent role in the latter. This said, I think that his readings of particular passages are indeed often extremely powerful (see, e.g., his analysis of the "wild card" in the *Zhuangzi*, in *Ironies*, pp. 162–183, or of the often misunderstood polarity between *ti* 體 and *yong* 用, in *Beyond*, pp. 149–155). We probably need much more discussion before a final judgment on the details of Ziporyn's interpretations will be possible.

Second, as previously stated, Ziporyn investigates both the "positions" of individual Chinese thinkers and the broader "presuppositions that make them possible." While scholars like A. C. Graham, Roger Ames, Chad Hansen, and François Jullien have developed similar approaches, quite a few scholars (Christoph Harbsmeier, G.E.R. Lloyd, Jean-Paul Reding, and Robert Wardy) have objected that all these approaches rely on the somehow outmoded conviction that "Chinese" thinking is radically different from "our own" thinking.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, the two volumes of "oneness and difference" do not directly engage with such criticism. As I understand him, Ziporyn is not committed to a strong version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (compare *Ironies*, p. 68). However, his account sometimes sounds as if Ancient China was in fact a world apart, "a world of coherence" (*Ironies*, p. 8); and his analysis of the problem of universals (*Ironies*, pp. 19–47), but also his attack on the "'law' of non-contradiction" (*Beyond*, pp. 10–12), seem to rely on a version of linguistic relativism that is not easily defended. Moreover, one might also worry that his concern with philosophical issues like "sameness and difference" possibly overshadows the particular modes of thought of Chinese thinkers who simply might not have been interested in such issues at all. If Ziporyn's project is ultimately aimed at avoiding what he regards as the "impasses" (*Ironies*, p. 47) of "Western" reason, could one not argue that he has still not sufficiently incorporated premodern Chinese concerns into his own inquiry (if ever this is possible or even desirable)?

Third, Ziporyn's theory of Chinese metaphysics represents a *value theory* that stresses human agency and participation; the idea of *li* is said to explain the nature of value and its source, but also the conditions under which human agents can establish their practical identities. For Ziporyn, "human needs, human desires" are "included" in the Chinese worldview (*Ironies*, p. 60), and he once even rather boldly states that "the satisfaction of human desires is the only justification of any position developed by any early Chinese thinker" (*Ironies*, p. 200). One might wonder, however, whether such a characterization is not misleading. At least in later Buddhist and Neo-Confucian texts, human desires are clearly regarded as obstacles to moral cultivation that need to be overcome or, to say the least, to be morally transformed, but *not* satisfied. As especially Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 emphasized, many statements about *li* (in particular in Confucian and Neo-Confucian texts) rather gesture toward an idea of absolute moral value *independent* of any desire.<sup>7</sup>

Fourth, Ziporyn thinks that human agency in premodern China is thought to be embedded in contexts of value that are never static but always negotiable (*Ironies*, pp. 60, 122). He also thinks that Confucianism is about enabling “maximal communication” (*Ironies*, p. 113), and Daoism about “simple awareness of the surface itself” (*Ironies*, p. 182). There is a whiff of postmodernism hovering about such claims; but the worldview of Classical China might in fact be less postmodern than has often been claimed.<sup>9</sup> Admittedly, Chinese thinkers have never thought about the world from the perspective of “a single observer” (*Ironies*, p. 8). And yet, they have been focused on the idea of a *single center* (*Ironies*, p. 80), and although Daoists apparently understood “coherence” as the free interaction of multiple perspectives, they still shared the belief in some sort of holistic unity. Therefore, certain intellectual alternatives were in fact excluded in such a Confucian-Daoist worldview (just think of Wang Chong 王充 or the Mohists). Since this worldview was also deeply intertwined with the political framework of the imperial state, the mere fact that it was sustained over so many centuries does *not* make it legitimate. As especially emphasized by Jiang Guanghui 姜廣輝, the rise of modernity in China was essentially about “abandoning the school of coherence” (*zouchu lixue* 走出理學) and the affirmation of ordinary life.<sup>10</sup> On closer inspection, the premodern Chinese worldview might reveal itself as less open and dynamic than Ziporyn thinks.

Fifth and finally, Ziporyn’s emphasis on ambiguity actually challenges one of the most basic presuppositions of Greek rationalism, but also of our modern science-based worldview, namely: *to be is to be intelligible*. For Chinese thinkers, “to say something ‘exists’ is to say that it is coherently, discernibly, usefully grouped, integrated intelligibly into some whole” (*Beyond*, p. 340); the “whole,” however, is often thought to be non-intelligible and non-accessible to ordinary reason. Ziporyn often sounds as if he actually believes that even the most basic features of human existence are unintelligible—there can only be an infinite number of interpretations and ambiguous identities. But scientists might want to object that almost all questions we are facing today do not relate to questions of practical identity, but rather need to be investigated with appeal to empirical evidence; and mathematicians certainly would point out that mathematical axioms are *not* characterized by ambiguity and interpretability (compare *Ironies*, pp. 24–25). Ziporyn admits that the Chinese worldview “is never defended on objective grounds, and never could be” (*Beyond*, p. 343)—but if this is so, how convincing is such a holistic worldview based on ambiguous identities today?

These questions and criticisms notwithstanding, Ziporyn’s two volumes on “oneness and difference” represent a well-argued and highly sophisticated attempt at understanding Chinese metaphysics *on its own terms*. Although I am rather skeptical about the idea that something like the Bonaventure Hotel, the famous icon of the postmodern age, can be located in third-century Luoyang, I deeply appreciate Ziporyn’s subtle insights into the premodern Chinese worldview, which is, indeed, very different from our own. I recommend these two volumes unconditionally to the reader.

## Notes

Special thanks go to Christian Wenzel and Peter M. Jones for their helpful comments on a draft version of this review.

- 1 – See Franklin Perkins, *Leibniz and China: A Commerce of Light* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 167.
- 2 – See Paul Demiéville, “Langue et littérature chinoises,” *Annuaire du Collège de France* 47 (1947): 151–157.
- 3 – See Tang Junyi 唐君毅, *Zhongguo zhexue yuanlun: Daolun pian* 中國哲學原論：導論篇, Tang Junyi quanji vol. 12 (Taipei: Xuesheng Shuju, 1986), pp. 21–89.
- 4 – There are a few monographs that tackle similar issues, but none of them comes close to Ziporyn’s magnum opus. See in particular Zhang Liwen 張立文, Xu Sunming 徐蓀銘, et al., *Li 理*, *Zhongguo zhexue fanchou jingcui congshu* (Beijing: Renmin Daxue Chubanshe, 1991), and Jana S. Rošker, *Traditional Chinese Philosophy and the Paradigm of Structure (Li 理)* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012).
- 5 – Rudolf G. Wagner, *Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy in China: Wang Bi’s Scholarly Exploration of the Dark (Xuanxue)* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), p. 120.
- 6 – Ziporyn makes no attempt to translate the mindset of Chinese thinkers into the more analytic repertoire of philosophical exposition, which has become popular in the field of Chinese philosophy recently. As I understand him, he believes that the ideal of conceptual clarity in modern philosophy conceals a basic fact about our existence: we can never fully articulate our dependencies on others and on all kinds of random events. Thus, in the “Acknowledgments” of his second volume, Ziporyn expresses his gratitude “to the whole mysterious and unintentional concatenation of forces that has made it on the one hand possible and on the other hand permissible for me to write books such as this at all” (*Beyond*, p. xi). I tend to think that Ziporyn’s particular style brings out quite nicely major concerns in Daoist and Buddhist thought.
- 7 – See, for example, Robert Wardy, *Aristotle in China: Language, Categories and Translation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
- 8 – See, in particular, Mou Zongsan 牟宗三, *Yuanshan lun* 圓善論 (Taipei: Xuesheng Shuju, 1985).
- 9 – Compare David L. Hall, “Modern China and the Postmodern West,” in Eliot Deutsch, ed., *Culture and Modernity: East-West Philosophic Perspectives* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1991), pp. 50–70. For a more critical assessment see Haun Saussy, *Great Walls of Discourse and Other Adventures in Cultural China* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2001),

and Kenichi Mishima, "Über eine vermeintliche Affinität zwischen Heidegger und dem ostasiatischen Denken," in Dietrich Papenfuss and Otto Pöggeler, eds., *Zur philosophischen Aktualität Heideggers*, vol. 3, *Im Spiegel der Welt: Sprache, Übersetzung, Auseinandersetzung* (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 1992), pp. 325–341.

- 10 – See Jiang Guanghui 姜廣輝, *Zouchu lixue: Qingdai sixiang fazhan de neizai lilu* 走出理學—清代思想發展的內在理路 (Shenyang: Liaoning Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 1997). In general, it would have been helpful if Ziporyn had paid closer attention to the political dimension of the various uses of *li*. Scholars like Mizoguchi Yūzō 溝口雄三 or, more recently, Wang Hui 汪暉 have rightly drawn attention to this dimension.