

JEELOO LIU

THE STATUS OF COSMIC PRINCIPLE (*LI*) IN NEO-CONFUCIAN METAPHYSICS

INTRODUCTION

In this article, I attempt to make use of Western metaphysical notions to explicate the cosmological variances in Chinese philosophical thinking, with specific reference to the debates among the Neo-Confucian thinkers. While I do not presume and argue that Chinese philosophers dealt with the same Western issues, I do believe that a comparative study of this nature can point to a new direction of thinking concerning metaphysical pondering in Neo-Confucianism.

This article is divided into three parts. In Part I, I employ Robert Nozick's notion of *natural cosmic state* to analyze the fundamental difference between the Confucian and Daoist cosmologies. Even though this notion of *natural cosmic state* has no comparable match in Chinese philosophy, it may serve as an analytic and explanatory device for our comparative study of Chinese cosmology. In Part II, I employ Nicholas Rescher's distinction between "laws *of* nature" and "laws *for* nature" to analyze the debate on the status of cosmic principle (*li*)^a between Zhou Dunyi^b and Zhu Xi^c on the one hand, and Zhang Zai^d and Wang Fuzhi^e on the other.¹ In Part III, I employ the notion of *supervenience*, as defined by Jaegwon Kim, to argue that in the debate on the status of cosmic principle, it is Zhang Zai and Wang Fuzhi's view that better preserves the causal relevance of cosmic principle in a physicalistic universe.² In light of the three notions borrowed from contemporary Western metaphysics, I hope to offer an analytic *reconstruction* of the age-old debate on the status of cosmic principle (*li*).

I. BACKGROUND: THE NATURAL COSMIC STATE

According to Robert Nozick's explication, a cosmic state *N* is *natural* if it is "in need of no explanation, while all other states are to be

JEELOO LIU, assistant professor, Department of Philosophy, California State University, Fullerton. Specialties: Philosophy of Mind, Philosophy of Language, Metaphysics and Chinese Philosophy. E-mail: jeelooliu@gmail.com.

explained as deviations from *N*, resulting from the action of forces *F* that cause movement away from the natural state.”³ These natural states are asserted as “brute facts”—no explanation is possible for why things are the way they are. For example, in Newton’s worldview, “rest or uniform rectilinear motion is the natural state requiring no explanation,” while for Aristotle, “rest was the natural state, deviations from which were produced by the continual action of impressed forces.”⁴ Some cosmological theories posit a certain state to be the natural state, while others treat all possible states equally. Once some cosmic states are deemed “natural,” they are assigned an ontological and explanatory privilege that other states don’t have. According to Nozick, our common metaphysical question “why is there something rather than nothing” comes from the hidden assumption that *nothingness* is the natural state. Under this assumption, how *nothingness* could have generated *something* needs explanation. If *something* is posited as the natural state, however, then we do not need to ask that question any more. This explanation shows that a natural cosmic state is not only a brute fact in the explanatory sense, but also the initial state in the cosmological sense. Hence, to assume a cosmic state to be the *natural* state, one is placing that cosmic state at the beginning of the universe, as the ultimate origin of all things that developed henceforth.

I argue that ancient Chinese philosophers implicitly assume some cosmic state to be explanatorily privileged as well as ontologically privileged. In their different choices, we can see the fundamental distinction between Confucian metaphysics and Daoist metaphysics. Furthermore, in ancient Chinese metaphysics, the ontologically privileged state stands not just for the initial cosmic state, but also for an *idealized* ultimate cosmic state. In other words, this assumed natural state is not only regarded as the original state of the cosmos, but also as an ideal state to which all future developments should eventually return.

Daoism, especially Laozi^f, takes *non-being* or *nothingness* as the natural state.⁵ To Laozi, this state is simply *Dao*^g. *Dao* exists both as the initial state and as the generation process of the present universe. In *Daodejing*^h, there is no explanation of why there was *Dao* originally, but there are plenty of explanations of how *Dao* generates being. For example, Laozi says, “*Dao* produced the One, the One produced the two. The two produced the three. And the three produced the ten thousand things.”⁶ Even though the exact meaning of this statement is not clear, it at least shows an attempt to explain how *something* came about. If the state of *Being* requires explanation, then it is not a *natural* state in Nozick’s sense. On the other hand, all Laozi’s cosmological explanations end with the state of *non-being*. Laozi says,

“All things in the world come from being, and being comes from non-being.”⁷ He also describes the “primeval beginning of the universe” as some state that is “invisible,” “inaudible,” and “subtle.” This original state of the universe is “infinite and boundless, it cannot be given any name. It reverts to nothingness.”⁸ Laozi depicts the beginning state of the universe as a state that is without form and contains no object. “Nothingness” seems to be the best description of this original state. Laozi sees the original cosmic state as an ideal state to which all future developments should return; hence, *Dao*’s action is often depicted as “reversion,” “return,” or “reduction.” Laozi says, “All things come into being, and I see thereby return. All things flourish, but each one returns to its root.”⁹ In Laozi’s moralistic metaphysics, the ideal way for humans to pursue *Dao* is simply to follow the method of reduction or reversal.¹⁰ This explains why Laozi takes the ideal human condition to be a state of emptiness—free of desires, intent, or even conception. It seems clear that when we employ Nozick’s notion of *natural cosmic state* as our analytic tool, Daoism can be seen as a cosmological theory that takes *nothingness* as the natural cosmic state.

Confucian cosmology, in contrast, takes *full existence* or *Being* as the natural state of the universe. Confucians view the development of the universe as a constant rejuvenation process; they interpret the Way of Heaven (“*tian dao*”ⁱ) as the principle of “daily renewal.” The *Yijing*^j (*Classic of Changes*) gives a general description of the universe as a world that is full of vitality and changes. Its universe contains Heaven and Earth and the myriad things therein. The first hexagram *Qian*^k opens with the praise of the strength of *Qian*: “[*Qian*] works sublime success, furthering through perseverance.”¹¹ The *Commentary* on the text says, “[*Qian*], by positing the beginning, is able to further the world with beauty. Its true greatness lies in the fact that nothing is said about the means by which it furthers.”¹² Creation is accomplished through the force of *Qian*, which is pure *yang*^l, and *Kun*^m, which is pure *yin*ⁿ. The Judgment for the second hexagram *Kun* says, “[*Kun*] brings about sublime success. Furthering through the perseverance of a mare.”¹³ From the first two hexagrams, we see that the *Yijing* takes the creative principles of *Qian* and *Kun* as a given—they do not need further explanation. The third hexagram *Zhun*^o says, “After heaven and earth have come into existence, individual beings develop. It is these individual beings that fill the space between heaven and earth.”¹⁴ Finally, pertaining to the last hexagram *Wei-ji*^p, it is said, “Things cannot be exhausted themselves. Hence there follows, at the end, the hexagram of [*Wei-ji*, which means not yet completed].”¹⁵ The whole sequence of hexagrams in the *Yijing* seems to depict a cosmology full of vitality, energy, motion, transformation, and recycling.

In the *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong*⁴), the Way of Heaven is depicted as real, truthful, and creative. Heaven and Earth together represent the life-enabling and life-accomplishing principle. Existence is taken for granted, and the ideal cosmic state is reached when the universe obtains full existence. The *Doctrine of the Mean* says, “[*Cheng*” (Sincerity) is Heaven’s Way; achieving [*cheng*] is the human way. . . . [*Cheng*] is not only completing oneself but is also the means for completing other living things.”¹⁶ The text further explains *cheng* this way: “Being unceasing, it is long-lasting; lasting long, it becomes manifest. Being manifest, it is far-reaching; reaching far, it becomes broad and deep. Being broad and deep, it becomes lofty and bright. Because it is broad and deep, it is able to contain living things; because it is lofty and bright, it is able to complete living things. . . . The Way of Heaven and Earth can be fully expressed in one sentence: these things being without doubleness, their giving birth to living things is unfathomable. The Way of Heaven and Earth is broad, deep, lofty, bright, far-reaching and long-lasting.”¹⁷ In a nutshell, this view takes the way of heaven and earth to be the creative principle. This creative force is eternal and all-encompassing. The whole world is being generated and regenerated perpetually. It could not possibly have been derived from a prior state of non-being or nothingness.

Neo-Confucian thinkers take the natural cosmic state to be a state of existence as well. Zhou Dunyi, in his *Penetrating the Book [of Changes]* (*Tongshu*⁸), quotes from the *Yijing*: “Great is the *Qian*, the originator! All things obtain their beginning from it.”¹⁸ In the same passage, he also quotes the *Yijing*’s statement that “the successive movement of *yin* and *yang* constitute the Way [*Dao*]. What issues from the Way is good.”¹⁹ This demonstrates Zhou’s agreement with the *Yijing* that cosmic development from its original state is “Good.” In other words, the original state and the succeeding state are not opposites; the ongoing generation of life (or *Being*) is not seen as a degeneration of the original state. In the eleventh fascicle of *Penetrating the Book [of Changes]*, Zhou remarks about the production of myriad things by heaven: “Heaven produces the ten thousand things through *yang* and brings them to completion through *yin*. To produce is humanity, and to bring to completion is righteousness. . . . As the Way of Heaven operates, all things are in harmony.”²⁰ In *The Exposition of the Taiji Diagram* (*Taiji tushuo*¹) Zhou Dunyi also says, “The Great Ultimate (*Taiji*¹¹) through movement generates *yang*. When its activity reaches its limit, it becomes tranquil (*jing*¹²). Through tranquility the Great Ultimate generates *yin*.”²¹ After *yin* and *yang* generate the myriad things, “the myriad things produce and reproduce, resulting in an unending transformation.”²² From this description, we see that Zhou would take the natural state to be the Great Ultimate

(*Taiji*) itself, which is prior to, and the cause of, the movement of *qi*^w and the division between *yin* and *yang*. The generation of the two modes of *qi*, *yang* and *yin*, is then seen as the first derivation from this natural state. Even though Zhou Dunyi has often been interpreted as a Daoist, his cosmology is fundamentally Confucian, with *Being* as its natural state. Furthermore, in Zhou's cosmology, the natural state of *Being* is not just a state of *some existence* (*something*), but a state of *full existence* (*Being*). In this cosmic picture, the natural state of the cosmos is in itself complete, fully instantiated and maximally developed. No further addition is required since it is already an ideal state. In this sense, it is "the Great Ultimate."

Zhu Xi also considers the natural cosmic state to be the Great Ultimate (*Taiji*) itself, but he views the Great Ultimate differently from Zhou Dunyi. Whereas Zhou's *Taiji* is both an initial state of *qi* and the totality of the universe, Zhu Xi's *Taiji* is a non-physical, abstract, and transcendent realm of cosmic principle (*li*). Zhu Xi says, "The Great Ultimate is similar to the top of a house or the zenith of the sky, beyond which point there is no more."²³ Furthermore, the Great Ultimate "has neither spatial restriction nor physical form or body."²⁴ However, it is different from Laozi's nothingness or non-being. According to Zhu, "The Great Ultimate is merely the principle of heaven and earth and the myriad things. With respect to heaven and earth, there is the Great Ultimate in them. With respect to myriad things, there is the Great Ultimate in each and every one of them. Before heaven and earth existed, there was assuredly this principle."²⁵ In other words, Zhu thinks that from time immemorial, even before heaven, earth, and the myriad things came into existence, there had always been the principle of heaven, earth, and the myriad things. This eternal universal principle constitutes the Great Ultimate in Zhu Xi's cosmology.

According to Zhang Zai, the natural state of the cosmos is "the Great Harmony" (*Taihe*^x). Zhang says, "The Great Harmony is called the Way [*Dao*]. It embraces the nature which underlies all counter processes of floating and sinking, rising and falling, and motion and rest. It is the origin of the process of fusion and intermingling, of overcoming and being overcome, and of expansion and contraction. At the commencement, these processes are incipient, subtle, obscure, easy and simple, but at the end they are extensive, great, strong, and firm."²⁶ Zhang also calls this state "the Great Vacuity (*Taixu*^y)."²⁷ Even though the term has the connotation of "the void," Zhang does not view the natural state as a void or a state of nothingness. To him, the Great Vacuity is nothing but *qi* itself; it is simply one of the multiple states of *qi*. He says, "The Great Vacuity has no physical form. It is the original substance of [*qi*]."²⁷ According to Zhang, "If it is argued

that [*qi*] is produced from the Vacuity, then . . . such an argument would fall into the naturalism of [Laozi] who claimed that being comes from non-being and failed to understand the eternal principle of the undifferentiated unity of being and non-being.”²⁸ We can see that Zhang did not endorse the view that the world was created *out of* nothingness. The eternally existing matter of the universe is *qi*, and the natural state of *qi* is the Great Vacuity. As Siu-chi Huang points out, “Non-being for the [Daoists] is prior to, and the origin of, being, whereas for [Zhang Zai] it is neither prior to, nor the origin of, being, but is equal to being in essence, and different from being only in the process of change.”²⁹ Zhang Zai’s ontology is monistic.³⁰ He says, “When it is understood that Vacuity, Emptiness, is nothing but [cosmic] force, then something and nothing, the hidden and the manifest, spirit and external transformation, and human nature and destiny, are all one and not a duality.”³¹ By integrating something and nothing or being and non-being, Zhang explicitly opposes the view of Laozi. From his combining the hidden and the manifest, we see that Zhang Zai would also have opposed Zhu Xi’s treating principle as the substance behind the function of *qi*.³²

While Zhang Zai attributes the natural state of the universe to what he calls “the Great Vacuity,” Wang Fuzhi, who may be deemed his philosophical successor, attributes the natural state to the actual material world of myriad concrete things. Wang carries Zhang Zai’s monism one step further, and argues that the universe is *One* not just in its constitutive elements but also in its ontological order. Wang says, “When we talk about substance and function, we cannot separate the two.”³³ Therefore, it is wrong of Zhang Zai to assume that there is another state of being for *qi* that is separate from, and logically prior to, the existence of material objects. It is also wrong of Zhu Xi to treat principle as *the* substance and *qi* as *the* function. Wang thinks that principle and *qi* can serve as each other’s substance or function. There is thus no substance that stands behind reality. He says, “The world consists only of concrete things (*qi*’s).”³⁴ Reality is full of concrete things in their potential and actualized states—it is a universe of full existence. Wang says, “If one discarded these and sought for that which existed before concrete things, even if he spanned past and present, went through all the myriad transformations, and investigated Heaven, Earth, man, and things to the utmost, he would not be able to give it a name. How much less could he find its reality!”³⁵ It is clear that Wang Fuzhi is here criticizing Laozi for thinking that there could be an initial state of non-being.

Even though the aforementioned Neo-Confucian thinkers differ in their interpretations of the natural cosmic state, they share their denial of the possibility of having nothingness or non-being as the

initial cosmic state, or as the natural cosmic state that requires no further explanation. In light of this common assumption of the natural cosmic state, we may now examine their debate on the status of cosmic principle in this natural state of *Being*.

II. THE DEBATE ON THE STATUS OF COSMIC PRINCIPLE (*Li*) IN NEO-CONFUCIAN COSMOLOGY

In this section, I examine the debate on the status of cosmic principle (*li*) between Zhou Dunyi and Zhu Xi on the one hand, and Zhang Zai and Wang Fuzhi on the other hand. The consensus among the Neo-Confucian thinkers is that *qi* is what constitutes material form; *qi* is what makes material objects possible. But there is considerable disagreement as regards their views on whether there is something over and above *qi*. Cosmic principle is the principle governing the operation of *qi*. One way to conceptualize the connection between cosmic principle and *qi* is to view cosmic principle as the *a priori*, deterministic law of the operation of *qi*. In this interpretation, cosmic principle is prescriptive, rather than descriptive, of the operation of *qi*. Another way to understand cosmic principle is to see it as a stable, recurrent pattern exemplified in *qi* itself. According to this understanding, cosmic principle is not over and above *qi*; it is post-developmental of various *actualized* states of *qi*. In other words, *qi* embodies actual compositional law and generates causality. Cosmic principle, on the other hand, has no real causal power but is determined once states of *qi* are set.

Even though Zhou Dunyi does not elaborate on the relation between cosmic principle and *qi*, his comments on the Great Ultimate show that he endorses a hierarchical world view and a pre-ordered universe. Following Zhou Dunyi, Zhu Xi's view on the connection between *li* and *qi* belongs to the first camp. Zhu Xi does not take these cosmic laws or patterns to *predate* the world; however, he takes them to be transcendent to the material world. Zhang Zai and Wang Fuzhi's view can be interpreted as belonging to the second camp. In their view, cosmic laws or cosmic patterns do not have any ontologically higher status. These laws or patterns are developed along with the development of the material world.

In his attempt to answer the riddle of existence—why is there something rather than nothing?—Nicholas Rescher comes up with the idea of “protolaw” as a prescriptive form of law of nature. Rescher's view is that existence does not necessarily precede essence, since the existence of the world might be antecedently constrained by laws. He calls this kind of law “law *for* nature,” in contrast to stan-

dard “law of nature.” Rescher explains, “The protolaws . . . do not represent the behavioral dispositions of existents, but rather set the *pre-conditions* to which something must conform if it is to become an existent at all. Such laws are not immanent in things but transcend their particular nature. They are “laws of nature” alright, but in the rather special way of being laws *for* nature—laws that set preconditions upon the realizability of possibilities. Such possibility-restrictive principles have an ontological footing that is independent of (because “prior to”) existing things.”³⁶ Using Rescher’s terminology, we can say that cosmic principle in the first (Zhou-Zhu) view would be “laws FOR nature,” while cosmic principle in the second view (Zhang-Wang) would be “laws OF nature.” The former treats cosmic principle as a “protolaw” that “can be conceptualized as representing conditions FOR existence rather than conditions OF existents.” The latter treats it as “entirely inherent in the make-up of the actual.”³⁷

According to Zhu Xi, cosmic principle and *qi* are physically inseparable and yet ontologically distinguishable. Even though Zhu often emphasizes the co-existence and inseparability of cosmic principle and *qi*, he treats them as distinct ontological categories. Zhu is therefore a dualist. As he puts it, “What are called [cosmic] principle and [cosmic] force are certainly two different entities. But considered from the standpoint of things, the two entities are merged one with the other and cannot be separated with each in a different place. However, this does not destroy the fact that the two entities are each an entity in itself.”³⁸ Zhu places cosmic principle “above the realm of corporality” and *qi* “within the realm of corporality.”³⁹ Furthermore, when pressed to answer whether cosmic principle or *qi* exists first, he put the former ontologically prior to the latter. As Zhu contends, if we must trace their origin, then “we are obliged to say that [cosmic] principle is prior.”⁴⁰ In particular, when it comes to individual existence, Zhu clearly states that individual principle precedes particular existence. For example, he says, “Principle has never been separated from [*qi*]. However, principle ‘exists before physical form [and is therefore without it]’ whereas [*qi*] ‘exists after physical form [and is therefore with it].’ Hence when spoken of as being before or after physical form, is there not the difference of priority and posteriority?”⁴¹ Zhu also claims, “When considered from the standpoint of principle, before things existed, their principles of being had already existed. Only their principles existed, however, but not yet the things themselves.”⁴² In Zhu’s picture, the universal cosmic principle, when embodied in each particular thing, constitutes the thing’s *nature*. It is what determines the thing’s essential properties. The universal *qi*, on the other hand, constitutes the *form* of the thing.⁴³ It enables the thing’s actual existence and future development. Since individual

principle (nature) governs particularized *qi* (form), essence determines existence. Both on the universal level and in particular instantiations, Zhu Xi takes principle to be the law *for qi* as well as *for* individual existence.

Zhang Zai's interpretation of the connection between cosmic principle and *qi* is clearly that principle is the law *of qi*, not the law *for qi*. For Zhang, cosmic principle is simply the necessary tendency in *qi*. He says, "The Great Vacuity of necessity consists of *qi*. *Qi* of necessity integrates to become the myriad things. Things of necessity disintegrate and return to the Great Vacuity. Appearance and disappearance following this cycle are a matter of necessity."⁴⁴ In his view, *qi* itself is an ordered force; that is to say, it operates with regularity and pattern. *Qi* cannot but condense to form material objects; material objects cannot but disintegrate back to the rarefied form of *qi*. This is the natural development of *qi*, and this natural, and necessary, development of *qi*, is simply its principle. As explained earlier, in Zhang Zai's monistic worldview, there are no multiple ontological layers between non-being and being. Now we see that there is no hierarchy in the distribution of cosmic principle and *qi* either.

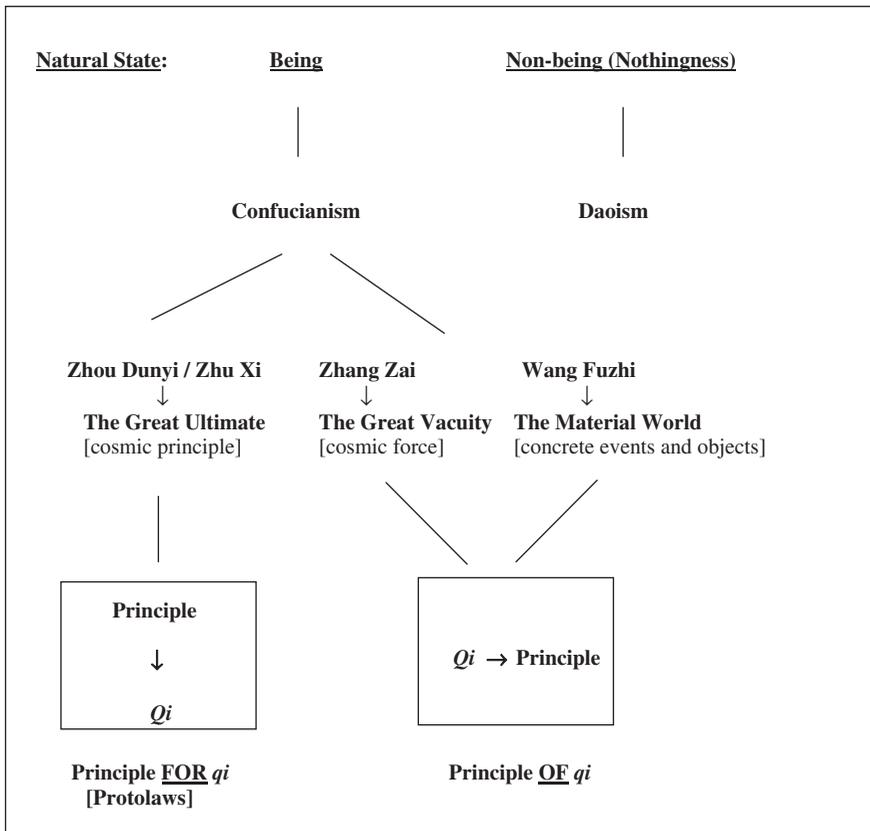
Continuing Zhang Zai's line of thinking, Wang Fuzhi also emphasizes that cosmic principle is inherent in *qi*. Principle is simply *the principle of qi*; it is the order inherent in *qi* itself. In his interpretation, principle does not have any transcendent status; it is neither temporally, nor logically, prior to *qi*. Wang says, "Principle is simply the principle of *qi*. The way [*qi*] *ought to be* is principle itself. Principle is not prior and [*qi*] is not posterior."⁴⁵ He also argues, "The details and order of [cosmic] force is principle that is visible. Therefore the first time there is any principle is when it is seen in [cosmic] force. After principles have thus been found, they of course appear to become tendencies. We see principle only in the necessary aspect of tendencies."⁴⁶ From these statements, we see that for Wang, cosmic principle is nothing but the necessary tendencies of the *qi* itself. He agrees with Zhang Zai that the operation of *qi* itself is not random or chaotic. *Qi* itself has an internal order, which is what both philosophers regard as principle.

Extending this interpretation that treats cosmic principle as the law of *qi*, Wang Fuzhi further views particular principles as laws *of* particular things. He explains that without the initial existence of a concrete thing, its particular principle would not have existed. "Before bows and arrows existed, there was no Way [*Dao*] of archery. Before chariots and horses existed, there was no Way to drive them. . . . Thus there is no Way of the father before there is a son, there is no Way of the elder brother before there is a younger brother, and there are many potential ways which are not existent."⁴⁷ This clearly shows that

for Wang, it is not that principle needs concrete things in order to “manifest itself”; it is rather that there would not have been a principle for the concrete thing if that particular thing had not come into existence. Principle for Wang, whether it is the universal cosmic principle or the particular principle of a concrete thing, is not a “precondition” for existence. It is simply the “law of nature.”

To sum up, for Zhu Xi, and possibly for Zhou Dunyi as well, the totality of the universe exemplifies a universal cosmic order, which is *li*. This cosmic principle governs everything’s placement and function. It subsists abstractly; hence, it needs to rely on *qi* and physical form to be manifest. But it is not simply the principle of *qi*; rather, it is the principle for *qi*. Even though cosmic principle is not temporally prior to the physical world, it subsists on a higher ontological plane than the physical world itself. For Zhang Zai as well as for Wang Fuzhi, on the other hand, cosmic principle is nothing but the principle of *qi*. There is no hierarchy in the relation between cosmic principle (*li*) and cosmic force (*qi*) or concrete things (*qi*).

Here is a simple diagram illustrating the division:



III. HOW TO CONTINUE THE DEBATE: DOES PRINCIPLE (*LI*) SUPERVENE ON *QI*?

If my conceptual analysis of the debate among Neo-Confucians on the status of cosmic principle within the realm of *qi* is acceptable, then we may see a way to further pursue this debate using some recent tools of philosophical inquiry; namely, we can ask whether the relation between principle (*li*) and *qi* is such that principle (*li*) *supervenes* on *qi*.

“Supervenience” is generally defined as the dependence, as well as the determination, relation between two sets of properties. One set of properties is termed the supervening properties, while the other set is called the supervened base properties. If property A supervenes on property B, then the instantiation of B determines the instantiation of A, such that anything that has property B will necessarily have property A. This notion has been useful in many fields in preserving the causal relevance of higher-level macro-properties, such as mental properties, ethical properties, aesthetic properties, and so on. In a physicalistic worldview, higher-level macro-properties are seen as *metaphysical danglers* in that it is by virtue of lower-level physical properties that all causation takes place in the universe. However, if we can establish a supervenience relation between higher-level properties and physical properties, then these higher-level properties can derive causal relevance by virtue of their determination relation with physical properties. This kind of causal relevance constitutes what Jaegwon Kim calls “supervenient causation.”⁴⁸ The basic idea is that higher-level properties that supervene on the base properties are themselves causally inert, but their supervened based properties are causally potent. We say that these higher-level properties are causally relevant *via* their supervened base properties.

Generally speaking, all of the Neo-Confucian thinkers take it to be the case that particular things have particular principles (*li*)—the particular principle is simply the way that particular thing ought to be. As Cheng Yi^{aa} puts it, “As there are things, there must be their specific principles. One thing necessarily has one principle.”⁴⁹ Zhu Xi says also, “There is only one principle. As it is applied to man, however, there is in each individual a particular principle.”⁵⁰ According to this view, different things will have different particular principles, even though all particular principles seem to be integrated into one universal principle. At the same time, a consensus among the Neo-Confucian thinkers is that particular things partake of *qi* in varying degrees of quality (pure or turbid, lucid or opaque, light or dense, and so forth) as well as in different combinations of *yin* and *yang*. Variances among individual things are extensive not only in the manifes-

tation of cosmic principle (*li*), but also in the distribution of *qi*. If we apply the terminology of *supervenience* to the relation between cosmic principle (*li*) and *qi*, we could treat *x*'s *having or exemplifying principle* as one set of properties, and *x*'s *being constituted by qi* as the other set of properties. We now have a rough first understanding of the supervenience of *li* on *qi* as follows:

Li-Qi Supervenience: Things identical in the make-up of *qi* will share the same principle (*li*).⁵¹

There are two pertinent ways to understand the more specific logical structure of the supervenience relation involved here. On the one hand, the relation could be construed as a *global* relation, a relation that holds between two different *worlds*— w^1 and w^2 —that are actualized by *qi*. If cosmic principle supervenes on *qi* globally, then if world w^2 is identical to world w^1 in its actualization of *qi*, w^2 would obey or exemplify the same cosmic principle that w^1 does. That is, where w^1 , w^2 are worlds, we have:

Li-Qi Global Supervenience: For any world w^1 and any world w^2 , if w^1 and w^2 are *qi*-indiscernible, then they are *li*-indiscernible.

According to this formulation, for example, if there is another world that has exactly the same distribution of *qi* as ours does, then that world will be governed by the same cosmic principle exemplified in our world.

Alternatively, we can understand the supervenience of *li* on *qi* as a *local* relation, a relation that holds between two things in the same world. For example, a bamboo tree in the Far East and a bamboo tree in the Far West will have the same principle in virtue of their having the same constitution of *qi*. We can further understand local supervenience to be restricted by global supervenience, in the sense that two particular things could be identical in their particular partaking of *qi* only when they are situated in worlds identical in *qi*.

We may articulate the local supervenience of *li* on *qi* as follows:

Li-Qi Local Supervenience: For any possible world w^i and for objects *x* and *y* in w^i , if *y* is identical to *x*'s make-up of *qi*, the principle (*li*) of *y* will be identical to the principle (*li*) of *x*.

With this mechanism in mind, we can now see first that the views of both Zhang Zai and Wang Fuzhi imply that *Li* supervenes globally on *qi*. They both understand cosmic principle as the law of nature or the way of *qi*. In particular, both of them take principle to be the order of the interchange between *yin* and *yang*. Zhang Zai attributes all changes in the universe to the operations of *yin* and *yang*. Since *yin* and *yang* perpetually work against each other, *qi* necessarily comes together to form material objects while material objects necessarily

disintegrate into vacuous cosmic force itself. This necessary tendency of *qi* is cosmic principle (*li*). Wang Fuzhi also takes the principle of *qi* to be the inevitable constant reversal between *yin* and *yang*. After the development of *qi* advances to a certain stage, its further development must take a certain direction. This necessary tendency is formed *after* the actual instantiation of *qi*. If cosmic principle is understood as simply the pattern of the distribution and development of *qi*, then the form of supervenience we could define between principle and *qi* must be *global* supervenience. Locally, if two particular things have the same instantiation of *qi*, then they will also have the same principle (*li*).

If principle is simply the post-developmental pattern of *qi*, then it is *determined by qi*; it does not determine *qi*. Once the operation of *yin* and *yang* has advanced to a certain stage, the principle is necessarily there. Even though we do not need to reduce cosmic principle to a purely physical or material level, it is nonetheless nothing *over and above* the physical level. Since cosmic principle could not be different in any other way once *qi* has manifested a certain pattern, any two things identical in their constitution of *qi* must be identical in their cosmic principle. Therefore, under this theory, cosmic principle (*li*) supervenes on cosmic force (*qi*).

In Zhu Xi's interpretation, cosmic principle depends on cosmic force for its manifestation, yet it is *not* determined by cosmic force. Zhu Xi understands "principle" to be the order *for* the operation of *qi* as well as *for* the production of the whole universe. In Chung-ying Cheng's explanation, Zhu Xi's notion of *principle* refers to the "well-placedness" of the whole cosmos. Cheng says, "*Li* . . . refers to the intelligibility and rationality of things in the world. It can be further explained as the *well-placedness* of things in the world. It is therefore a term implying external patterning and internal organization and obviously should be understood as presupposing an organic unity of reality."⁵² This cosmic order has nowhere to be instantiated except on the level of *qi* and physical form (concrete things). However, it is supposed to determine, rather than be determined by, the physical level of *qi*. Therefore, under this view, cosmic principle does *not* supervene on *qi*.

If cosmic principle supervenes on *qi* in the sense that it is *determined by qi*,⁵³ then it can derive causal relevance through its necessary connection with *qi*, since *qi* is the one that does the real work to produce all things in the universe. This kind of causal relevance constitutes "supervenient causation" as defined earlier. Principle in Zhu Xi's interpretation, on the other hand, superimposes order onto *qi*, and yet it is causally impotent in itself. As Zhu himself acknowledges, "*Qi* is capable of consolidating and producing things, but *Li* has no

feeling and will, no calculation, no creation and production. . . . *Li* is only a world of purity and openness, traceless and it is incapable of creating and thing-making.”⁵⁴ In this way, Zhu’s cosmic principle becomes a “*meta*-physical dangler.” If it is a metaphysical dangler, then it is not necessarily a part of the physical world. In Zhu Xi’s view, cosmic principle would have existed even if the physical world had never come into existence, and it would continue to exist well after the physical world has ceased to exist. Between Zhu’s principle (*li*) and *qi*, there is an unbridgeable gap. This view is incompatible with physicalism. If, given the closure principle of the physical, all causation is done at the physical level, then this view makes cosmic principle (*li*) causally inert. If cosmic principle plays no causal role in our physical world, then it cannot be said to “govern” the physical world. Ultimately, Zhu Xi’s theory fails to give a coherent explanation of the causal role of cosmic principle (*li*), or its determining power over the operation of *qi*.

CONCLUSION

In this article we have seen that the supervenience relation, *if it exists between principle and qi*, could only hold when principle is viewed as the principle *of qi*. In other words, supervenience could only hold between principle and *qi* under the view espoused by Zhang Zai and Wang Fuzhi. I therefore conclude that in this debate, it is Zhang and Wang who bestow a substantive status on cosmic principle and preserve its causal relevance.

The explanation for the nature of cosmic principle (*li*), and the analysis of its connection with cosmic force (*qi*) or individual things, has been one of the major topics in Neo-Confucianism. But the debates, couched in traditional Chinese philosophical terms, are often removed from the concerns and vocabularies of contemporary philosophers. Here, by employing concepts and terminologies in Western metaphysics, I seek to reconstruct the original issues and ideas so that we may continue the old Neo-Confucian debate in a fresh direction and thereby yield new insights.

CALIFORNIA STATE FULLERTON
Fullerton, California

ENDNOTES

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1. Antonio S. Cua points out that the word *li* has been commonly translated as “principle,” “pattern,” or “reason,” but each translation has its own difficulties. See Antonio S. Cua, “Reason and Principle in Chinese Philosophy: An Interpretation of ‘*li*,’” in Eliot Deutsch, ed. *A Companion to World Philosophies* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishing, 1997), 201. In the context of neo-Confucianism, this word is most often associated with “Heaven” and “*qi*”. It takes on an ontological import. Here I shall use either “principle” or “cosmic principle” as my translation of *li* when used in the ontological sense. The word “*qi*”, on the other hand, is most often translated as “material force.” I think the word “material” could be misleading. In this article, I shall use “cosmic force” as the translation for *qi*, even though I shall often use the word “*qi*” itself, too.
2. The basic assumption of physicalism is that every object and event in our world is a physical object and a physical event in the sense that there is nothing that is not governed by physical laws. Even if there is so far no physicalistic explanation offered for the operation of cosmic force (*qi*), such explanation is theoretically possible.
3. Robert Nozick, “Why Is There Something Rather than Nothing?” in *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 1981) 121.
4. *Ibid.*
5. According to Siu-chi Huang, there are two senses of non-being in the Greek usage. One is non-being “which negates being and is the opposite pole of it”; the other is the non-being “which can enter into some sort of relation with being and therefore does not flatly negate it.” See Siu-Chi Huang, “The Concept of *T’ai Chi* [Supreme Ultimate] in Sung Neo-Confucian Philosophy,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 1 (1974): 252. Huang thinks that the Daoist notion of *non-being* can be explained in the second sense, “since it is the origin of being, hence the ultimate reality.” (*Ibid.*) I think the difference between these two notions of *non-being* could be explicated in terms of the difference between anti-realism and realism. The Buddhist notion of non-being, or emptiness, is a denial of the reality of the phenomenal world; the Daoist notion of non-being or nothingness, on the other hand, does not imply such anti-realism.
6. Wing-tsit Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, 4th ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 160.
7. Chan, “Chapter 40: *Daodejing*,” in *Sourcebook*, 160. Different translations could render this interpretation suspect. Here I choose the translation that at least matches the original Chinese text. That Laozi believes that being comes from non-being is also the standard interpretation among Neo-Confucians.
8. Chan, “Chapter 14: *Daodejing*,” in *Sourcebook*, 146.
9. Chan, Chapter 16 in *Sourcebook*, 147.
10. The virtue of “return” is a key ethical notion in the *Laozi*. Laozi says, “The pursuit of learning is to increase day after day. The pursuit of [*Dao*] is to decrease day after day. It is to decrease and further decrease until one reaches the point of taking no action.” See Chan, Chapter 48 in *Sourcebook*, 162.
11. Richard Wilhelm & Cary F. Baynes, trans. *The I Ching: Book of Changes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), 4.
12. *Ibid.*, 377.
13. *Ibid.*, 386.
14. *Ibid.*, 398.
15. *Ibid.*, 714, brackets mine.
16. Wm. Theodore de Bary & Irene Bloom, eds., *Sources of Chinese Tradition: From Earliest Times to 1600*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 1:338–9.
17. de Bary and Bloom, Chapter 26 in *Sources*, 339.
18. Chan, Chapter 1 in in *Sourcebook*, 465.
19. *Ibid.*, 466.
20. *Ibid.*, 470.
21. *Ibid.*, 463.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*, 641.
24. *Ibid.*, 639.

25. *Ibid.*, 638.
26. *Ibid.*, 500.
27. *Ibid.*, 501.
28. *Ibid.*, 502.
29. Huang, 253.
30. Siu-Chi Huang calls it “monist realism.” See Huang, 258.
31. De Bary and Bloom, *Sources*, 685.
32. Zhang Zai predated Zhu Xi by about one hundred years. The revelation of their philosophical disagreement would have to wait until Zhang Zai’s spiritual successor, Wang Fuzhi, came along to attack Zhu Xi from his philosophical perspective.
33. Wang Fuzhi, *Du Sishudaquan shuo* vol. 7 (Taipei: He-lo Publishing Company, 1974). My translation.
34. Chan, *Sourcebook*, 694.
35. *Ibid.*, 695.
36. Nicholas Rescher, “On Explaining Existence,” in *Metaphysics: Contemporary Readings*, Steven D. Hales, ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1999), 7–25, 19.
37. *Ibid.*
38. Chan, *Sourcebook*, 637.
39. Hansheng Chiu’s translation. See Hansheng Chiu, “Zhu Xi’s Doctrine of Principle,” in Wing-tsit Chan, ed., *Chu Hsi and Neo-Confucianism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986), 116–137; 117.
40. *Ibid.*
41. Chan, *Sourcebook*, 634.
42. *Ibid.* 637.
43. Stanislaus Lokuang says that in this respect Zhu Xi was following Cheng Yi, who “advocates that the myriad things are composed of principle and [cosmic] force. Principle forms the nature of the thing and [cosmic] force forms the form of the thing.” See Stanislaus Lokuang, “Chu Hsi’s Theory of Metaphysical Structure,” in Wing-tsit Chan, ed., *Chu Hsi and Neo-Confucianism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986), 58–78; 64.
44. Chan, *Sourcebook*, 501.
45. Wang Fuzhi, *Du Sishu daquan shuo*, Vol. 10. My translation.
46. *Ibid.*, 698.
47. *Ibid.*, 695.
48. In the context of “macro-properties” (F, G) versus “micro-properties,” $m(F)$, $m(G)$, Kim’s definition of “supervenient causation” is this: “x’s having F supervenes on x’s having $m(F)$, y’s having G supervenes on y’s having $m(G)$, where $m(F)$ and $m(G)$ are microproperties relative to F and G, and there is an appropriate causal connection between x’s having $m(F)$ and y’s having $m(G)$.” See Jaegwon Kim, “Epiphenomenal and Supervenient Causation,” in *Supervenience and Mind: Selected Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 260.
49. Quoted in Wing-tsit Chan, “The Evolution of the Neo-Confucian *Li* as Principle,” *Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies*, 4 (1964): 123–49, 139.
50. Quoted in Wing-tsit Chan, “The Evolution,” 141.
51. There are many other formulations of the basic notion of *supervenience*. This formulation comes from Jaegwon Kim, who also defines “supervenience” as “Necessarily, for any property F in A, if any objects x has F, then there exists a property G in B such that x has G, and necessarily anything having G has F.” See Kim, 260.
52. Chung-ying Cheng, “Categories of Creativity in Whitehead and Neo-Confucianism,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 6 (1979): 262.
53. According to Jaegwon Kim, when one set of properties supervenes on another set of properties, “the relation between two families of properties is that the supervenient properties are in some sense *determined by*, or *dependent on*, the properties on which they supervene.” See Kim, 260.
54. Quoted in Chung-ying Cheng, “Ultimate Origin, Ultimate Reality, and the Human Condition: Leibniz, Whitehead, and Zhu Xi,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 29.1 (2002): 108.

CHINESE GLOSSARY

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| a. li | 理 | o. Zhun | 屯 |
| b. Zhou Dunyi | 周敦頤 | p. Wei-ji | 未濟 |
| c. Zhu Xi | 朱熹 | q. Zhongyung | 中庸 |
| d. Zhang Zai | 張載 | r. cheng | 誠 |
| e. Wang Fuzhi | 王夫之 | s. Tongshu | 通書 |
| f. Laozi | 老子 | t. Taiji tushuo | 太極圖說 |
| g. Dao | 道 | u. Taiji | 太極 |
| h. Daodejing | 道德經 | v. jing | 靜 |
| i. Tian dao | 天道 | w. qi | 氣 |
| j. Yijing | 易經 | x. Taihe | 太和 |
| k. Qian | 乾 | y. Taixu | 太虛 |
| l. yang | 陽 | z. qi | 器 |
| m. Kun | 坤 | aa. Cheng Yi | 程頤 |
| n. yin | 陰 | | |

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