

ONE

ESSENCES, UNIVERSALS, AND OMNIPRESENCE

Absolute Sameness and Difference

What do Chinese thinkers mean when they make those assertions we translate in the form of “*This is that*”—for example, “this is a horse,” or “human nature is good,” or “the nameless is the beginning of Heaven and Earth”? We quickly get into trouble if, applying familiar models of particular entities that non-negotiably possess certain properties and not others, we assume that they mean “it is really and ultimately the truth about this object here that it is a horse and not a non-horse,” or “it is the real and definite fact about this item in the world, human nature, that it is good and not non-good,” or “that entity which is the nameless is such that it is the beginning of Heaven and Earth, rather than not being the beginning of Heaven and Earth.” We get into trouble, that is, if we take these statements to be assertions about *essences*, or unchanging definitive determinations of “what it is to be this thing,” putatively valid in all contexts. Equally, though, it is clear that these assertions do not mean, “I am arbitrarily projecting horseness, goodness, or beginningness onto an indeterminate blank,” nor, “horseness, goodness, beginning are purely mental constructs,” or “purely human social constructs.” What then do they mean?

One relatively simple way to zero in on the difficulty here would have to do with the status of language, and hence of every possible proposition. Are the ultimate facts about the world adequately definable in sentences made of words? If we don’t think so, we will not regard our statements that “X is Y” as meaning to assert that X is really and exclusively Y, full stop. We would have to regard the purpose of making verbal statements to be

something other than saying how things really are.¹ And indeed, it has been suggested that the defining moves in Chinese speculation work on a very different model, where words are part of, say, an exemplary skill-practice, meant to guide behavior in such a way as to alter perception and evaluation, rather than to describe what is really so or what is really good.²

This may seem, by Occam's Razor, to be the best way to understand some of the strange things that come to occur in the history of Chinese thought. After all, it is not just that China had no Plato. It also had no Parmenides, and no Parmenidean assertion that "being" and "thought" must coincide, that the thinkable and the real would have to be one and the same. This is arguably the most basic assumption of the entire Western philosophical tradition, the implications of which the latter has grappled to think through, and the limitations of which it has fought to overcome at every stage of its subsequent development. It is this assertion that of course underwrites first and foremost the entire Platonic project most pervasively.

This point about the status and role of language in Chinese thought is important, but it doesn't really solve all of our problems. For one thing, the denial of the final definitional and descriptive adequacy of language does lead to certain inevitable problems and contradictions, the avoidance of which has been one of the main reasons for adhering to the assumption of linguistic adequacy in the West. In addition, we have to ask what language is doing if it's not supposed to be telling us facts about things, and whether it can really do so while excluding any claim to at least one adequate reference to something purported to be definitively so. We must assume that there are many ways to answer this question, and many uses of language. For even within the confines of the non-ultimate-reality qualification, the linguistic expressions of Chinese philosophy are not the simple reiteration of the insistence that "words do not express objective realities." They make many claims, many different claims and counterclaims, in linguistic form, and indeed many that are found nowhere else in the annals of human thinking, which are not reducible simply to this one act of bracketing. Even if construed as tentative directives for action, they arguably involve cognitive commitments that frame their efficacy, which perhaps produce as many quandaries about the relation of language to reality as they avoid. And this is certainly acknowledged by those who have done most to highlight the problems of unqualified attribution of truth claims to Chinese thinkers. Hall and Ames, for example, acknowledge that the indifference to the question of truth of verbal assertions in the strict sense does not mean that these statements are unrelated to "facticity," the difference being that this facticity is not embedded in a framework requiring a notion of the *necessity* of conclusions from premises, which in turn involves some reference to "final principles" and "atomic facts."³ I am much in agreement. The question then becomes how we are to understand this kind of "facticity."

Another simple way to deal with this facet of Chinese thought would be to note that it tends to assume a “process orientation,” rather than a “substance orientation.” That is, ultimate facts are regarded as temporal processes rather than static entities. This ensures a certain mismatch with declarative sentences that affirm things to be *fixedly* one way or the other, neglecting their transformation into opposite characteristics. This could also be described as a dialectical view of reality. In this sense, for example, Zhuangzi’s statement that is sometimes translated “the Perfect man has no self” (至人無己 *zhiren wu ji* 2/1/21–22) can best interpreted by simply adding an implicit “fixed” to the sentence: “The Perfect Man has no *fixed* self.” The negation is of fixity, not of presence or existence of a “self” in the broader sense. This too instantly renders many of the puzzling statements found in the tradition intelligible.

But here as well many new problems arise. Are words and terms also processes, or do they somehow fall outside the general ontological claim about process? Couldn’t the words themselves participate in the process that by hypothesis pertains to everything existing? In that case, there would seem to be no need for an unbridgeable mismatch between them. And whence do words then even *seem* to attribute something like stability or constancy? Is constancy really excluded by a process orientation, or just otherwise conceived? And does a term such as “process” itself perhaps involve us in problems of self-reference, exempting itself from the process nature of all other entities? Is it “always true” that things are really processes? In the Chinese tradition that most explicitly thematizes the notion of process—the *Zhouyi* and its commentaries—we find the stock trope, going back at least to Zheng Xuan (127–200), that 易 *yi* has three meanings: easy, changing, and *unchanging*. If we are tempted to interpret the last of these, as many modern Chinese interpreters do, to mean that there are unchangeable “principles” or “laws” of change, or that the fact that all things always change is itself an unchanging principle or law, we seem to be on the brink of a two-tier metaphysics of unchanging laws (or at least one “law”: change) and their changing instantiations, which can easily link hands with the Western philosophical traditions with which we are already familiar. Be that as it may, it is clear that we cannot discount *some* sense of “unchanging” playing a role in this tradition. But is this exactly what “unchanging” means here, given that it is presented as an alternate *meaning* of the word meaning “changing”? The sense of “unchanging” prevents the meaning of the term *change* from being *the same* at all times: it *changes*, as it were, the meaning of change; the concept “change” itself is precisely *not unchanging*. What sort of change is it that also *means* “not change,” its own opposite, its own “change”? What sort of “unchanging” also means “change”?

I do think that there is a pervasive distrust of the ultimate adequacy of language to the nature of reality in the Chinese tradition, and also that

process orientations are closer to what Chinese thinkers tend to have in mind than substance ontologies and vocabularies. Indeed, I think these conclusions are by now rather uncontroversial. These points can be brought together in a more sweeping ontological comparison, made most lucidly by Li Chengyang, who notes, in his discussion of Aristotle's ontological stance, presented plausibly as underlying much of the Western philosophical tradition's approach to this matter, the assumption of a *single primary being* (or "*substance*") for any really existent entity; though any entity can perhaps be described in a number of ways, in accordance with various relations or predicates, the truth about it is an understanding of its single, unambiguous, definable essence, its primary being, which has a privileged and ordinary relation to all its other predicates. Li contrasts the assumptions of Chinese ontology as manifested in Zhuangzi's failure to single out any of the many alternate ways of relating to or describing something—an ox, for example—as primary, foundational, or ultimately *most real*.⁴ Though I think Li makes things a bit too easy by choosing the most obvious contrast to Aristotle—Zhuangzi, no less—this approach does cut the Gordian knot and get to the heart of the matter. The contrast here is not primarily to fluidity or pragmatics (though these can be quickly derived from this point), but to the question of *ontological ambiguity*. Li's insight here is, in my view, closer to the real issue as I'd like to approach it in this work. What comes under scrutiny here is the assumption that there must be a *single truth about what something ultimately is*. From here it is a short step to asking whether *existing means being ultimately and definitively the same as or different from something else*. The question is the *definitiveness of specifiable identity per se*.

But simply asserting and accepting these provisos are on my view too summary a way out of confronting what is most fascinating and worth our while in Chinese thought. It may be possible to dig a bit farther. Rather than taking this "easy way out" right from the beginning, then, this book and its sequel will try to take the "hardest way out," focusing our attention on a term that comes to mean, among other things, precisely "intelligibility": 理. For Li is in most cases precisely *something to be cognized*, and something that is *capable of being discerned*. If there is any term that would correspond to what is knowable about the world, or where human cognition can accord definitively with what is really the case, it would seem to be 理. Indeed, if we were looking for a candidate in traditional Chinese vocabulary to mean something like "Truth" in the fully audacious philosophical sense, it would probably be 理.⁵ For precisely this reason, an understanding of this term can help us understand why the concept of "Truth" in the traditional Western philosophical sense, involving necessity of premise-conclusion relations, ultimate foundations on principles and atomic facts, is of so little relevance in Chinese thought. An examination of how this term develops, and the

vicissitudes of its usages, will help give us a more complete understanding of the relation between human knowledge and the realities of the world in Chinese thought.

We will do this first, in this book, by investigating the “prehistory” of Li, the notions of coherence that develop in Confucius and Mencius on the one hand and in the ideas collected in the *Laozi* and the Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi* on the other, as well as some compromises between these two views emerging in late Warring States texts. The main thrust of this story will depend on the emergence of two distinct notions of “coherence,” the relation between which may be described as the dominant theme in much subsequent Chinese thought. The focus on “coherence” can be quite simply translated into the language of the just-considered provisos. Like Hansen and others, I think the criterion used to judge the validity of all statements made in ancient Chinese texts is aimed not at being “true” but at being “acceptable” (可 *ke*), and that this pragmatic criterion is meant socially and ethically, explaining why semantically opposite statements about the same topic might both be “acceptable,” that is, useful in doing something in some particular intersubjective situation. Two opposite statements about what this thing is, for example, might both be “acceptable,” in that the making of these two statements might be ethically important in their own situations. Perhaps it cannot be “true” that this thing is both X and non-X, but it can be “acceptable” to say that it is X or to say that it is non-X. What I want to add to this picture by bringing in the larger question of “coherence” is that “to be acceptable to say” is itself a type of cohering, between a situation and an ethical goal and an action; and that this pragmatism does then open up a particular way of talking about what things “are,” but one that *folds in* this pragmatic relation of coherence to words, identities, and human actors. But why is this interesting, why should we choose to focus our attention on precisely this question, among all the questions that might arise in reading early Chinese texts? To understand this, we must take a look at the default assumptions that are arguably built into our commonsense assumptions about sameness and difference, about oneness and diversity, as derived from the distinctive inheritance of the Western philosophical traditions.

ESSENCES, UNIVERSALS, CATEGORIES, IDEAS:
SIMPLE LOCATION AND THE DISJUNCTION OF SAME AND
DIFFERENT IN MAINSTREAM WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

The default mode of handling the question of sameness and difference in the Greco-European philosophical tradition seems inevitably to draw upon some variant of the problem of essences or universals. In the present context, it is important to note that the distinction between “individual essences” and

“universal essences” is irrelevant. To the extent that an individual essence—for example, “what it is to be *this cup*,” as opposed to “what it is to be *A CUP generally*”—is assumed to persist through the many moments during which this particular cup may exist, and indeed through its various aspects as an unchanged “this-cupness,” we have a “universal” with a certain range of application. If we take seriously the question of time, of the difference between one moment and the next, the difference between an individual essence and a universal is merely one of extent: individual essences are merely universals with a relatively limited extent. Similarly, the difference between the Platonic and the Aristotelian understanding of essences becomes irrelevant (as does, for our purposes, the distinction between “conceptualism” and “realism”). Whether it is what Schopenhauer preferred to see as the *unitas ante rem* of the truly metaphysical Platonic Idea (and realism in general) or the *unitas post rem* of the intellectually derived concept (and nominalism), we have here a way of finding a sameness within a multiplicity, but at the same time of conceptually separating out the sameness from the multiplicity. In one way or another, a “sameness” is discovered permeating a number of diverse instances. It should be noted right here at the outset that in its original Greek form this way of thinking is perhaps anything but an attempt to make a simple and doctrinaire sameness and difference perfectly separate; on the contrary, it is a way of highlighting precisely how complex the relation and intermixture of sameness and difference is. We might consider briefly the role of mathematics in the earliest Greek conceptions of knowledge as embodying an intuition about precisely this problem. For the mathematical model, first foregrounded by the Pythagoreans, provides the most direct template for the Platonic revolution in epistemology. The very idea of apodictic knowledge, knowledge that is always and everywhere true, is modeled on mathematical knowledge, whence derives the Platonic notion of Forms, the Aristotelian investigation into essences, and finally the wholesale separation of sameness and difference into radically distinct categories. But this very same mathematical impulse also provided a potential undermining of a static conception of the same versus the different. As a simple example, consider an elementary (though notorious) bit of arithmetic: the equation $5 + 7 = 12$. What does this “equal” sign signify here? Not that what stands on either side of it are one and the same thing. For then the sign would say nothing, would do no work at all. Manifestly, “ $5 + 7$ ” is something quite different from “12.” After all, $4 + 8$ is also 12, and 4 is not 5, nor is 8 7. But the equal sign asserts that, in spite of being different, they are also in some sense the same. More precisely, same and different do not apply to this relation. “Equal to” means a sublation of the categories of same and different: it tells us that these are not ultimate, nonnegotiable categories of ontology, that they do not tell us what things definitively are.

Equivalences between ratios illustrate the same point perhaps even more forcefully. Yet “equal to” can also be construed as asserting the ultimacy of a real sameness. There is an inherent slippage or ambiguity in the foundations of mathematics with respect to this question.⁶ Obviously, I have not chosen this equation randomly: it points forward to the Kantian problem of synthetic versus analytic judgments. It should be obvious that there too the very alternative between these two types of judgment rests entirely on an assumption about the relation of sameness and differences: Does the predicate say something “different” from what is allowed in the subject, or does it merely repeat “the same” information? The particular way in which this problem of sameness and difference is addressed in the foundational moves of European ontology and epistemology produces, perhaps almost as a by-product, a set of conceptual tools that come to enforce a view of the world that takes sameness and difference as clear-cut ultimate facts. The invention of the idea of universals pervading particular instances is both an acknowledgment of the problem encountered in any attempt to divide the world neatly into samenesses and differences, and a way of containing and defusing the potential problems that come with this division. Multiple diverse characteristics or identities are noticed at one and the same location. There is an interpenetration of different characteristics found in each selfsame thing, and one and the same unchanged universal contains many diverse things. To thematize such points is to thematize a kind of interpenetration of same and different. This interpenetration, however, is subordinated to a more basic metaphysical commitment to keeping sameness and difference absolutely distinct. To give some sense of how we are conceiving this issue, let us very briefly sketch how this seems to have taken place.

It would perhaps be no exaggeration to say that the problem of the relation between the Universal and the Particular, in one of its many forms, is the central character in the drama of classical Occidental philosophy, running from the Socratic interest in definition, to the Platonic doctrine of Forms, the Aristotelian notion of essences and natural kinds, through the medieval debates between nominalists and realists, the Humean critique of induction, the Kantian response, and so on. But what is a Universal anyway, and why is it so important? And how is it that this problem seems so much less central to the classical tradition in Chinese philosophy?

Of course, human beings do not need a *theory* about how to understand sameness and difference—set theory, mereology, or a theory of universals—to apply what are later called universals, or even, more modestly, generalizations, in their practical everyday life. Indeed, a sort of Santayana-esque “animal faith” in reiterability, consistency, predictability, and so on are encoded in the simplest rudiments of sentient behavior. Pavlovian responses to stimuli involve an instinctive and unproblematic judgment about what

counts as “same” and “different” with respect to the practical needs of the animal in question. In learning to identify signs of danger or promises of nutriment, an animal classifies and divides into groups. These classifications are, of course, fallible; what smells delicious—roughly similar to previous instances of nourishment—may turn out, in this instance, to be poisonous. It would not be difficult to derive the philosophical question about universals from the increasingly frequent disconfirmation experiences of this kind that perhaps come with increasing complexity and alterations of the environment in which the human animal, negotiating not only material but also social and linguistic signs, must survive. But in any case, it must be clarified that when we speak here about the importance of the problem of universals, we certainly do not mean that without having perfected some such theory, no such connections or classifications can or will be made. On the contrary, their practical application always precedes the explicit raising of this question to philosophical speculation; the latter, indeed, is dependent on just this procedure to even ask the question about this procedure. But this does not diminish the importance of the various ways in which differing cultures come to conceive of this procedure in which they had always already been engaged. For the humble fact of rough-and-ready classifying can be understood in a wide variety of ways, integrated into very different worldviews, which in turn can come to impact upon how this procedure of classifying is itself applied and handled when presented with new situations, with the inevitable experience of disconfirmation, and with the nonempirical speculative outgrowths of both confirmations and surprises that experience brings. Metaphysics both grows from attempts to make sense of this activity, and in turn comes to influence how this activity is subsequently deployed.

The problem taken up here has been on the theoretical radar at least since Lucien Lévy-Bruhl tried to distinguish “primitive mentality” from rational thought by singling out the typology of “collective representations” operative in them. Lévy-Bruhl lumps together all forms of thinking that strike him as qualitatively different from modern Western “logical” thought, including Chinese thought, and calls them “prelogical,” assuming that whatever is unlike logical thought as he conceives it operates by means of a more or less similar set of procedures. The framing of *both* categories, in fact, give us insight into certain features of modern *Western* thought; the characterization of non-Western thought reveals by negation what is excluded in logical thinking as Lévy-Bruhl conceives it, what its premises make impossible. Prelogical thought does indeed make classifications, generalizations, and abstractions, according to Lévy-Bruhl, but neither the generalizations nor the abstractions so made resemble logical “concepts.” Indeed, almost the first thing he says about this, the most striking puzzle of all, is that “the opposition between the one and the many, the same and

another, and so forth, does not impose upon this mentality the necessity of affirming one of the terms if the other be denied, or vice versa.”⁷ Rather, they follow what he calls “the law of participation,” which “busies itself with collective representations so interwoven as to give the impression of a community in which members would continually act and react upon each other by virtue of their mystic qualities, participating in, or excluding each other.” A set of apparently disparate objects are linked and grouped together on the basis of a mystic affinity that allows them to act upon one another with special efficacy, and the name of the group names this totality of linked items. The members of this group are joined by actual though unseen interaction among real beings: they have a relationship to one another, in the most concrete sense. They *relate* to each other, actively. Unlike logical concepts, the classification is simply the name of this whole group of relating beings. It “does not . . . become compacted in a concept which is more comprehensive than that of the object[s] it embraces.”⁸ The objects simply fit together through their actions upon one another, and the totality of these things as fitting together and acting upon one another in this way is what is named by the generalization. Typically, the name given to the group as a whole will be the name of one of its most prominent members, namely, one that is encountered especially frequently or one that is construed to have an unusually great power of influence.

In contrast, “logical thought classifies by means of the very operations which form its concepts. These sum up the work of analysis and synthesis which establishes species and genera, and thus arranges entities according to the increasing generality of the characteristics observed in them.”⁹ Lévy-Bruhl is claiming that logical concepts of universality have two defining characteristics: (1) they mirror in structure the very mental operation of abstraction by which they are subjectively derived, and (2) they exceed the list of objects by which they are instantiated. The first point means that we arrive at the notion of a classification by means of a process of grouping and abstraction, making use of a criterion by which to recognize members of a given class. That *criterion itself* becomes the name of the essence being instantiated.

Suppose I have two transparent liquids. One is sulfuric acid, the other is water. I distinguish them by means of criteria: all the liquid that has the chemical composition H_2O and quenches human thirst is “water,” all the liquid that has the chemical composition H_2SO_4 and burns through human flesh is “sulfuric acid.” This criterion itself names the essence of the two substances: water *is* the clear liquid that quenches thirst and has the composition H_2O ; sulfuric acid *is* the clear liquid that burns through flesh and has the composition H_2SO_4 . What the thing *is* is synonymous with *what distinguishes it from other things*. When I name that thing, the name I give

it is not one that is warranted by the entire thing, but only the aspects of it that are different from other things. Whatever is shared is necessarily left unnamed at this level. What is shared is popped up to a higher level, or a more fundamental level: it has logical priority, and brings with it an implication of causal grounding, and the apodictic sense of necessity and unilateral (transcendent) dependence: whatever is true of a member of this species is necessarily also true of all members of this genus, but not vice versa.

If I have an object composed of properties X and Y, where X is shared with others and Y is not, the *name* of the object will be Y, rather than XY. X will have a logical priority to Y. We will be inclined to think that Y depends on X, but X does not depend on Y. X-ness will be identified as X only at the higher level of X versus Z in the compound XZ, where Z is shared and X is unshared. Z will have a logical priority to X. The genus that includes these species, which identifies what is shared among instances, actually refers to a redirected difference: how this sameness differs from other samenesses, the genus represented as what is left out of the differentia of the subordinated species. These two substances belong to the same genus—clear liquids—because of the criterion I use to identify them as such: their transparency and liquidity at room temperature, and so on. These shared characteristics too are part of the essence of each substance, and their *sameness*, their *belonging to one class*, or their *being parts of one whole* are determined by the sharing of those characteristics that allow us to judge them to be parts of this class. But these characteristics themselves, these distinguishing marks, also consist only of what distinguish them from other characteristics: opacity, solidity, and so on. The same process must continue, pushing sameness up always to one order of higher inclusiveness and logical priority than the difference, where the difference alone provides actual content or putative identities.

So if Lévy-Bruhl is correct that the relations between various essences, the inclusion of species within genera, follows the same structure as that between these procedures of classification themselves, we may note a crucial *asymmetry* between sameness and difference, a systematic *level-incommensurability of difference and sameness* even in the identification of putative sameness, *because the procedure of identifying either sameness or difference depends on an act of judgment, which is the making of a distinction*. This can be seen equally as a privileging of difference (sole provider of content) or a structurally necessary subordination of difference to sameness (sameness therefore identifiable in the skewed, at-a-distance view of its higher-order category; sameness can only be seen *from below*). I literally have no way to identify the sameness without relegating it to a higher, more inclusive level (or, what amounts to the same thing, a lower, more fundamental level)—a logically prior level. The point here is that the sameness and difference are

always, necessarily and structurally, consigned to different ontological levels. A mammal is an animal that bears live young and breastfeeds them. All mammals are therefore animals, and whatever characterizes animals must therefore characterize mammals. But the reverse is not the case. In a specific mammal, the characteristic of (say) live birth (the differentia) and of, say, oxygen respiration (a shared trait among all animals), are both immediately present, and equally integral to its concrete existence. But in a symbolic and conceptual system that attributes being to things in a way that is isomorphic to its procedure for categorizing them (“rational thought”), the “animality” *cannot* be ontologically commensurate, on the same level, as the “mammalarity.” Respiration cannot be on the same ontological level as capacity for live birth; respiration is prior and more fundamental; all live-birthers respire, but not all respirators live-birth. This allows us to infer apodictically of a live-birther that it respirates. In this case, this unproblematically maps on to the levels of ontological dependence: only *because* something respirates can it live-birth. If respiration is removed, live birth cannot persist. And this is concretely and empirically true: the function of “giving life birth” does in fact depend on the function of respiration, but not (in an already living animal) vice versa.

However, consider the water/sulfuric acid case. By the same logic, we should put “translucent and liquid at room temperature” in the same role as “respiration,” and “having the chemical composition H_2SO_4 ” in the role of giving live birth. All H_2SO_4 is transparent and liquid at room temperature, but not everything that is transparent and liquid at room temperature is H_2SO_4 . We can conclude of any H_2SO_4 that it will be liquid at room temperature. But in fact being H_2SO_4 is not ontologically dependent on being translucent and liquid at room temperature; just the contrary is the case, the dependence relation goes the other way. The co-present and mutually pervasive “translucence, etc.” and “chemical composition H_2SO_4 ” are now in the opposite causal relation; logical priority is still given to one rather than the other, in a unilateral relationship, but runs in the other direction. But in fact the genus is still inclusive of the species.

Logical thought, of course, has developed ways to deal with the complexities of causality and its complicated relation to strict logical priority, generating various approaches to tidying up the sometimes unwieldy relation between the empirical and the logical. Note that the exact same structure applies even if I am considering only individual substances, where the individual thing as a whole assumes the logically prior role of “same” universal (“this piece of chalk”) and its various specific properties assume the role of subsumed differences (“its smoothness, its whiteness, etc.”). What is shared in this smoothness and this whiteness is their belonging to this piece of chalk, which itself therefore assumes a logically prior position, even though

the chalk is where the white is and where the smooth is. What matters here is the way in which the systematic asymmetry of the classificatory system necessarily generates the concept of transcendent logical priority, even for two properties that are empirically co-present and mutually pervasive in a given context. What a thing is, what makes it identifiable and definable, and what allows us to group it with other instances of the “same” essence, is its difference from other things. What we name when we name what something is is what is different about it. But note that the “sameness” is necessarily pushed up to a higher, more inclusive level of generality. “Clear liquid” has to become a higher-order category than “sulfuric acid” and “water,” and this “sameness” of the transparent liquids gets its identity from the differentia operating at this higher level, rather than at the first level. This is odder than we normally notice. Imagine that sulfuric acid and water were the *only* two types of transparent liquid in the universe. This quart of water is both a transparent liquid and has the chemical composition H_2O . Neither of these two qualities subsumes the other; each is equally pervasive in the entire volume of the liquid. But the classificatory system of sameness and difference will have to regard “transparent liquid” as the more general genus that *includes* within it the species “ H_2O ”; any same-level identity drops out of the system entirely, while the shared sameness with another substance—sulfuric acid—is the only identity that can be assigned for what is shared among these liquids. The same-different criteria embedded in the act of classifying via differentia enforces a *one-way and univocal hierarchy of subsumption*.

The implicit ontology here is rooted in the act of making a decision about how to classify things. It is not just that the need to make such a decision is rooted in the practical orientation of active beings, who must apply a dichotomous “either/or” scheme to their actions (Do I eat this or not? Is this poison or not?), with no middle ground. It might be argued that this mode of classification leads to the objectification or ontologization of the pragmatic either/or necessary for decision making—and importantly, of one particular viewpoint for decision making, with its own *single* set of desiderata—into a nonnegotiable ontological reality. The cognitive act of distinguishing qualities is the basis of identifying, and this act of identification is translated directly into the ontological fact of identity, which is then regarded as the basis for attributing sameness among instances so distinguished. We can already see a further result of a system where identities are regarded as precisely isomorphic with the act of identifying them: the unity of thought and being is built into the system, precisely because the system of differentiae preloads it into its very definition of what something “is.” What exists is what I can identify, and what I can identify is what I can differentiate. That is, precisely because the pragmatic is folded into the ontological, the pragmatic is effaced; it no longer sticks out against the

ontological, because they match exactly. Thought and being are one, because the very criterion of being is the criterion of thought. Ironically enough, precisely the exact isomorphism of the practical cognition and the ontological is what conceals the role of the practical cognition in the ontological. Cognition is separated out from ontology precisely by being identified with it: the identity of cognitive structure with ontological structure is precisely what effaces the relationship between practical cognition and ontology, rendering subjectivity and objectivity ontologically incommensurable.

We can now see the intrinsic connection between Lévy-Bruhl's two characteristics of logical thought. His second point means that this essence stands above the set of things that instantiate it. The essence "having the chemical structure H_2O " is not just a name for all things that have this structure, considered as a total set. The distinction between the criterion itself and that to which it is applied translates into the Socratic definition of the thing, the Platonic form of the thing, the Aristotelian distinction between "the thing which is X" and "that the thing is X," between existence and essence. The essence *transcends* its instantiations, and could be applied to an infinite number of instances. It remains *unchanged* by the size of the set of its instantiations. While privileging *difference* as the criterion for classification, it simultaneously produces a by-product of *sameness*.

Taking Lévy-Bruhl's ideas about primitive participatory collectives as more revealing of the constructing of an ideal "other" to the self-defined ideal type of logical thought than of anything to do with the mental life of non-European cultures, we can perhaps use these attempts to imagine a general foil for "Reason" as indications of the kind of impasse faced by the same-different paradox in the face of its other. The primitive participatory collections are, in Lévy-Bruhl's understanding, names for a particular whole set of items, joined by an unusually strong bond of action and reaction, which is not transcended by the abstracted title that names it, and which is structured as a whole with various parts rather than as the relation of the processes of analysis and synthesis that produced the groupings.

Let's assume that all clear liquids have a special relationship with a particular mountain, which is also mysteriously related to a particular bird, such that being on friendly terms with one of these members disposes the other members of the alliance to treat one well. The criterion for inclusion in this group is the recognition of this reciprocity between its members. This is not the noting of a single characteristic that is the same in each of member of this group, in contradistinction to a characteristic noted in another group. X is a member of the group because of the characteristic "having a close relationship of mutual recognition with Y." Y is a member of the group because of a different characteristic, namely, "having a close relationship of mutual recognition with X." Further, if the group consists

only of these two members, X and Y, then there is no further essence, without changing, that could apply indiscriminately to a newly discovered member, Z. It would not have the same criterion for membership as X and Y. Rather, it would require a new one: a special relationship with X and Y, which would differ from the criterion of membership of X and Y (having a special relationship with Y and Z, or with X and Z, respectively). We see here that no transcendent selfsame essence applies to all members of this group. There is no room here for an unchanging, abstract system of samenesses and differences. It is this that gives such groupings a decidedly “ad hoc” appearance when compared to logical taxonomies.

If I decide to name the group after one of its members—calling the whole that includes the mountain, the clear liquids, and the woodpecker by the name “woodpecker,” I have chosen a part to represent the whole. This part might be chosen due to its especially great efficacy in affecting the other members, or its direct relation to all other members (its status as a central hub of their relations), or perhaps its historical connection or temporal precedence in coming to the attention of my tribe. The members of this whole may in some cases share a characteristic, either structural or functional, a similarity in appearance or activity or habitat, but this will be one among many features that indicate membership in this whole, which can easily combine with alternate markers. This similarity is not the *criterion* for membership, but rather an expression of a kind of relationship between these members. Much less is it the defining essence that is the *same* in all members, that makes them what they are, that constitutes their being and their participation in this universal. Lévi-Bruhl seems to glimpse a tantalizing possibility here: a kind of grouping that is not *entirely* beholden to same-different categories. But lacking any positive conception to put in their place, he finds no principle of organization here other than purely contingent ad hoc relations. What a “relation” might be outside the confines of same-different ideas is not a question that can come up here: “participation” remains a catchall category for something that is “different” from same-different logics, but it does not seem to get us very far in approaching what this participation might actually be like.

The distinction Lévy-Bruhl notices here corresponds roughly to what logicians call the difference between class-logic and mereology. The former is the relation between sets and their members, applying to attributes (e.g., “redness”) and their instantiations (red objects). The latter is the relation between wholes and parts. Stephan Körner notes two of the crucial differences between these two kinds of classification as follows: “First, in class-logic one distinguishes between a class and the class having the aforementioned class as its only member. No such distinction is made between a whole and this whole considered as a part of itself. In the former case we

are presented with two classes, in the latter with only one whole. Second, the logical impossibility of instantiating internally inconsistent attributes leads to the natural assumption of empty classes, whereas the assumption of empty wholes would, to say the least, be unnatural.”¹⁰

We can see how this mirrors Lévy-Bruhl’s two characteristics of logical thinking. These apparently subtle distinctions have enormous consequences. Since a class may have only one member or no members at all, it can be the same in all cases, and can be unaffected when its instantiations change. It is an abstract form, a criterion of judgment, to be applied to whatever cases might appear, or not to be applied if no cases appear. It forms a realm of relations unto itself, relations of pure sameness and difference, profoundly unlike the way in which its actual instantiations may relate to one another. To state my position directly: it is a matrix of *sameness and difference*, rather than *coherence*. And while Lévy-Bruhl is undoubtedly naïve, Eurocentric, rightly discredited if taken at face value, and ultimately uncomprehending in the face of the ethnic other, by reading him in reverse we do get a clue to where we might look, within our own conceptual tools, for our problem in understanding the alternate modes of organization that confront us in seemingly nonlogical systems, even when they are elaborate and rigorously systematic: we may need to start our thinking from mereology rather than class-logic. This is precisely what Chad Hansen has suggested in his justly famous mass-noun hypothesis of ancient Chinese semantics, and its implicit “scope” metaphysics,¹¹ from which I draw obvious inspiration here, and about which more below. But of course a mereology developed in the absence of a parallel class-logic, as in classical Chinese culture, will differ profoundly from a mereology developed alongside of the growth of class-logics. It is from the latter that we get the distinctively Occidental idea of “universals.” Our question will be what we get from the former, and in particular, how to conceive of the role of the mereologist who identifies these parts and wholes in the absence of a class-logic to underwrite his relationship to their relationships.

The problem of universals in Occidental thought has implications for ethics, for epistemology, and for metaphysics, and indeed none of these issues has traditionally been approached without some reference to this question, whether positively or negatively. Alfred North Whitehead, whose account of the history of Western metaphysics I follow closely here, has famously remarked that all of Western philosophy can be construed as a series of footnotes to Plato. Since Kant, it has been asserted that some sort of transcendental grounding (nonempirically-derived Ideas, categories, laws) was necessary to make real knowledge possible at all—real knowledge here defined as apodictic knowledge, knowledge that is both necessary and universal, as was then assumed to be the ideal for scientific knowledge.

The origin of this ideal for knowledge was certainly directly related to the concern with mathematical knowledge, which is nonempirical but transcendental, and thus universal and necessary.¹² Whitehead has fingered as the central dogma of post-Enlightenment thought what he calls “the doctrine of simple location,” which he defines as the notion that “material can be said to be *here* in space and *here* in time, or *here* in space-time, in a perfectly definite sense which does not require for its explanation any reference to other regions of space-time.”¹³ But this doctrine, he points out, makes induction, and hence the possibility of any generalization or prediction about the future, impossible, as Hume had proved. Whitehead’s own solution is to reduce the claims of induction—it need not imply universal validity, only validity within a particular “community” of occasions, a particular cosmic epoch—while admitting that this presupposes a metaphysical commitment, which he proceeds to elaborate in the rest of his work.¹⁴ But the apodictic nature of even these more modest inductions seems to be sacrificed in making this move. For how indeed can we know what constitutes the limits of the relevant community of occasions for each case of induction? We find ourselves back in the infinite regress that hounds the problem of induction.

On this picture, we may view the doctrine of transcendental universals or, alternately, transcendental categories, as a necessary correlative to the doctrine of simple location of units of matter. The universals serve as a sort of halfway house to rejoin the units of matter that have been severed from one another. Simple location makes relation of any kind in space and time (the latter meaning both continuity and change over time) unintelligible and inconceivable. Universals and transcendental categories can in this sense be seen as a stopgap to refurbish—as it were, artificially and “from above”—the relatedness that was drained out by simple location.

Whitehead views simple location as a special feature of pre-twentieth-century science and philosophy, assuming sole dominance since the Enlightenment, but with roots going back to early Greek thinking. He describes the central difficulty brought about by this mode of thought as deriving from three premises:

- (i) The acceptance of the “substance-quality” concept as expressing the ultimate ontological principle. (ii) The acceptance of Aristotle’s definition of a primary substance, as always a subject and never a predicate. (iii) The assumption that the experient subject is a primary substance. The first premise states that the final metaphysical fact is always to be expressed as a quality inhering in a substance. The second premise divides qualities and primary substances into two mutually exclusive classes. The two premises together are the foundation of the traditional distinction between universals and

particulars. . . . The term “universal” is unfortunate . . . for it seems to deny, and in fact was meant to deny, that the actual entities also fall within the scope of the principle of relativity (i.e., really enter into the constitution of other particular actual entities). . . . [This view] led to the collapse of Descartes’ many substances into Spinoza’s one substance; to Leibniz’s windowless monads with their pre-established harmony; to the skeptical reduction of Hume’s philosophy The point is that the current view of universals and particulars inevitably leads to the epistemological position stated by Descartes . . . [in which] it is assumed that . . . the Ego . . . is a particular, characterized only by universals. Thus his impressions—to use Hume’s word—are characterizations by universals. Thus there is no perception of a particular actual entity. He arrives at the belief in the actual entity by “the faculty of judgment.” But on this theory he has absolutely no analogy upon which to found any such inference with the faintest shred of probability. . . . [thus leading to absolute skepticism and “the solipsism of the present moment”].¹⁵

The problem is that the dogma of the subject-predicate form, as expanded into the absolute dichotomy between substances and the qualities that inhere in them, severs the primary substances from one another in a way that can only reestablish a connection by means of the doctrine of real, abstract universals. The particular substances are devoid of relation and devoid of quality, and these must be imported in again by reference to the universals. Because the perceiving subject also comes to be seen as a primary substance, this makes inference, and hence all knowledge, unintelligible, and finally severs subjective experience completely from the external world, leading to skepticism and solipsism.

We might also say that the subject-predicate dogma leads us straight toward some doctrine of essences, either as real-kinds, as categories that genuinely and univocally apply to the world so as to form a single consistent system, as universals or as Forms or Ideas. As soon as we have essences of *any* of these types posited in contradistinction to that of which they are the essence, you have a reality-appearance ontology of some kind, where the former is static and the latter is changing. The dog stays the same dog whether he is standing or sitting or walking, whether he is a puppy or a decrepit fleabag. His “identity” stays the same in spite of whatever changes he might undergo. Indeed, “dogness” stays the same whether it is this dog or that dog, now or in a thousand years. Dogness is unchanging, while the particular dogs, or the particular posture and behavior of a dog, change from moment to moment. This dogness is never seen or experienced by the senses. It may be that some empirical characteristics of the dog—having

four feet or a particular anatomical structure, or a relation to a particular breeding line, for example—are chosen out as its essence. Then the assertion is that as long as these particular characteristics don't change, he remains the same dog, no matter what else changes. But the split between the empirical and the nonempirical, the former being transient and the latter unchanging, remains as sharp even if these particular empirical marks are identified as the essence. For it remains the case that these characteristics are not always apparent—you may not always be able to see all four legs of the dog, and certainly not all his anatomical structure or his genealogy. These have to be assumed to persist exactly as they are even when no one is experiencing them.

Unless we have some doctrine of essences, and a nonempirical world of reality in however attenuated a form, no persistent identity is thinkable. For it appears to be a psychological rule that no part of experience can be perfectly static to the exclusion of change. All experience presents itself in the form of temporal happenings, and depends on contrasts between awareness and non-awareness; a thought even of "the eternal," as a thought, must be preceded by the lack of such a thought to be registered as such. Even the last two sentences I have written here cannot be understood literally without some appeal to a doctrine of essences—for I have just said "all" experience is such and such and that there is a "rule" of psychology. There exist "laws" or "principles" nonapparent, hidden, but reliable. But where are they hidden? As long as I assume simple location in any form (even the simple location of "identities" or essences in "conceptual space," so that each one is just where and what it is), I will need a nonempirical world of some kind to support these essences, and some doctrine of unchanging universals therein to bridge the gap between individual instances, ensuring their "sameness."

But what is especially astute in Whitehead's diagnosis above is that even the sense that there is something problematic about linking individual moments of experience or facts, since, in reality, they are absolutely isolated and need some sort of extra linkage from outside, is itself an outgrowth of the same questionable assumptions. This seems to be an assumption made by modern people as soon as they come to notice the ways in which sameness and continuity are linked to questionable doctrines about transempirical universals and essences. It is assumed that, since the universals don't exist, what does exist are simply located individual entities, absolutely isolated from one another in time, space, and identity. But simple location and transcendental essences go together. The idea of pure difference falls with the same stroke as pure sameness. The real question before us, then, is not how actually separate entities come to be connected in the absence of any intelligible realm of universals or real natural kinds, but rather whether

there is an alternative to both these assumptions, that is, of genuine separation of individual entities and genuine relinking of them through universal predicates.¹⁶

SAME AND DIFFERENT IN FORM AND MATTER

If we had to dig out a few of the ruling metaphors behind the early Greek development of theories of universals and particulars, form and matter, potentiality and actuality, and so on, we would perhaps first think of the Pythagorean emphasis on number and ratio inherited by Plato,¹⁷ and the images of *mimesis*, *imposing form on passive indeterminate matter*, and *building something*, found in both late Plato (e.g., most clearly in the *Timeaus*) and, more centrally, in Aristotle's metaphysics. Already in the Platonic theory of Ideas as presented in the *Republic*, we are offered the notion of *copying* as a way of understanding the participation of universal ideas in particular things. With Aristotle, we find ourselves again and again confronted by examples of making a statue out of bronze, imprinting a signet ring into wax, building a house, and so on. How do "same" and "different" play out in terms of these basic orientations? In all these cases, we have "the same thing" (original to be copied, shape of figure to be sculpted, signet, house-shape) imposed into formless matter. It can be imposed an unlimited number of times, and will always remain the same. Repetition, or occurrence in a different context, imprinted into a different bit of matter, does not change what it is, its essence, in the least.

But it would be erroneous to suppose that the Form/Idea/Universal side of the equation thus stands for pure sameness, while Matter stands for pure difference. In fact, it is Forms that differentiate things, limit them off from the continuity of formless matter. This formless matter is itself, strictly speaking, neither one nor many, neither same nor different; it is not "actually" anything at all, being pure potentiality. A Form both unifies a set of instantiations into a group defined by their identical essence and separates that set from all other such sets. All dogs are members of the species Dog because they share the same essence, the Form of Dogness. The Form of Dogness is different from the Form of Catness. All statues of Hermes have the same Hermes-shape imposed upon them, and this is what makes them part of the group "Hermes statues" rather than another group. This is a way of managing and organizing relations of sameness and difference. Catness and Dogness are "the same" in that they are both subsumed under the larger genus "Animal," and share this essence of Animality. They are "different" in that Catness is not Dogness nor Dogness Catness except in terms of this single essence of Animality they have in common. There is a single

answer to the question about what is the same and what different about any two possible items, all of which are organized into a system that charts in a single vision what is really the same and what is different about them. A Form is a way of defining both sameness and difference, and of doing so in such a way as to keep them absolutely distinct and moreover, as we saw above, necessarily asymmetrical so as to literally “subordinate” (put in a lower order) difference to sameness.

But this approach to the problem brings us directly into the question of the Universal of universals, which finds an echo confined to similar contours even in Kant’s question of the relation between the conditioned and the unconditioned. The diverse Forms, essences, Universals, and so on are generally organized into a taxonomy of species and genus, like an upside-down tree, branching downward, so that smaller categories are subsumed into larger ones. Catness and Dogness are both subsumed under Animality, and this is understood as grouping them together by means of a second-order sameness, the essence of Animality that they both, identically, share. This subsumption works in only one direction. Pushing this system all the way to the top, we come to the highest category, which is to subsume all the others, indicating what all essences share as essences, the Form of all Forms.

But if universals are what unify particular separate determinate entities, allowing them all to bear the same name and the same necessary properties, what unifies the set “universals” so we call them all by the same name, that is, what qualifies them to be called “universals”? We seem to have an infinite regress here. With the separation of the world into a bunch of distinct types or essences, we have the problem of their interaction and mutual influence. This is the problem of the connection between the universal universal as pure unconditionality (what must apply in all conditions, at all times and places, without exception) and the mutual conditioning of the specific universals; are the latter still truly unconditional? Connection between particulars is solved *within* each type by the doctrine of universals, but this creates the same problem in spades for the relation between these universals themselves, these essentialized “Ideas.” Some such concern had led to the Platonic notion of the Good as the universal of universals, the Neoplatonic doctrine of Hypostases, the Kantian transcendental unity of apperception, Whiteheadian Creativity and God, and so on. All these are putative ways of maintaining a plurality of genuine universals that are both determinate and unconditioned. At the same time, we have the leftover and troublesome category of formless matter, pure potentiality, which is strictly speaking neither the same nor different from anything else, in that it fails to be anything actual at all. Here we confront the problem of the Omnipresent.