Original Paper

The Conceptualization of *One* and *Many* in Chinese and Western Philosophy

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Abstract

The relationship between "one" and "many" constitutes a fundamental philosophical problem, probing the dynamics between unity and plurality, the indivisible and the divisible, and the whole and its parts. This paper provides a comparative analysis of the conceptualization and development of this dialectic within Chinese and Western philosophical traditions. It commences by tracing the evolution of the "one-many" framework in Western thought, from its classical formulations in ancient Greek philosophy to its modern interpretations. The focus then shifts to Chinese philosophy, examining the distinct articulations and applications of this concept within the frameworks of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Through a critical comparative lens, the paper highlights both convergent and divergent approaches to understanding the interplay between unity and multiplicity, elucidating the underlying epistemological and metaphysical assumptions that characterize each tradition. Finally, the discussion assesses the contemporary relevance of the "one and many" paradigm, exploring its enduring implications for addressing interdisciplinary and global challenges in philosophy and beyond. This study aims to foster a deeper cross-cultural dialogue by systematically mapping the complex terrain of this perennial philosophical inquiry.

Keywords

One, Many, Chinese Philosophy, Western Philosophy

1. Introduction

The dialectic of "one and many" stands as a perennial and foundational inquiry within the history of philosophy, probing the ontological, epistemological, and metaphysical relations between unity and plurality, simplicity and complexity, and the whole and its parts. In Western philosophy, this theme can

be traced from its foundational appearance in pre-Socratic thought, where thinkers such as Parmenides and Heraclitus framed the problem of the one and the many in distinct and opposing terms. This conceptual lineage extends through Plato's theory of Forms and Aristotle's metaphysics, continues into medieval theological debates, and undergoes significant reinterpretation within modern rationalist, empiricist, and German idealist systems. Throughout this evolution, the "one-many" framework has consistently served as a structural axis for Western speculation about the nature of reality, knowledge, and value.

Concurrently, Chinese philosophical traditions have developed sophisticated, often implicit, frameworks for understanding the relationship between unity and multiplicity, emphasizing dynamism, interdependence, and harmony. In Confucianism, the relationship manifests in the interplay between the singular, all-pervading ethical principle of Ren and its diverse, context-sensitive expression through social norms and roles. Daoist philosophy, most notably in the Daodejing, articulates a cosmogonic and ontological interdependence between the undifferentiated, ineffable Dao and the ten thousand things that emanate from it. Buddhism, particularly in its Sinicized forms such as Huayan and Chan, advances profound doctrines of non-duality and interpenetration, arguing for the mutual containment of the one and the many (all individual phenomena).

Despite the centrality of this dialectic to both intellectual traditions, comprehensive comparative studies that systematically juxtapose their conceptual structures remain limited. Scholarly work has often proceeded along separate cultural tracks, with analyses of the "one and many" in Western metaphysics rarely engaging substantively with correlative East Asian conceptual models, and vice versa. This lack of sustained cross-traditional dialogue represents a significant gap, as a comparative approach is essential for uncovering the underlying metaphysical assumptions and epistemological orientations that distinctively shape each tradition. Moreover, in an era defined by global interconnectivity and profound cultural-philosophical pluralism, revisiting this core dialectic offers critical intellectual resources. It provides a framework for addressing contemporary interdisciplinary challenges—from systems thinking and ecological ethics to theories of social cohesion and global governance—all of which grapple with reconciling unity with diversity.

This study positions itself to address this scholarly gap. Its objective is to provide a structured, comparative analysis of the "one and many" paradigm across the major epochs of Western philosophy and the foundational systems of Chinese thought. By doing so, it aims not only to elucidate the unique philosophical pathways each tradition has forged but also to construct a platform for meaningful conceptual dialogue. Through highlighting points of convergence and divergence, the paper ultimately seeks to demonstrate the enduring relevance and applicability of this ancient philosophical inquiry to modern and future-oriented discourse.

The paper begins with a brief introduction of the concept of one and many in Western philosophy, tracing its evolution from ancient Greek philosophy to modern Western thought. It then turns to Chinese philosophy, examining how the concept of "one and many" has been conceptualized and

applied in Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. It also compares and contrasts the Western and Chinese perspectives, highlighting both similarities and differences in their understanding and application of the concept of one and many. Finally, the paper discusses the contemporary relevance and implications of the concept of one and many for philosophy and beyond.

2. The Concept of One and Many in Chinese Philosophy

2.1 Taoism

Daoist culture constitutes an indigenous philosophical tradition of the Chinese nation, through which generations have cultivated and conceptualized rational modes of thought. It most profoundly encapsulates the primordial cognitive patterns characteristic of the Chinese civilization, representing a distinctive hallmark of Chinese culture and ranking among its most valuable and enduring intellectual essences. Undeniably, Daoist culture has played a pivotal role in shaping the five millennia of Chinese historical and civilizational development. Daoist philosophy demonstrates affinities with dialectical materialism and serves as a foundational source of rational thinking within Chinese intellectual history.

The notion of all-around human development refers to the harmonious, free, and comprehensive cultivation and perfection of each individual in dimensions such as personality, morality, and capability. This concept stands in contrast to partial or distorted forms of human development. Karl Marx introduced this idea while formulating historical materialism and subsequently reiterated the objective of "all-round and free development" in Das Kapital and other economic writings (Loreta, 2000).

Daoist thought emphasizes "governance through non-action (wuwei)." The philosophical core of the Daodejing resides in the concept of "Dao." While the Dao is fundamentally non-active, it embodies inherent principles that regulate the operation of all phenomena in the cosmos, all of which adhere to these natural patterns (Zhuqi, 2025). When extended to statecraft, "governance through non-action" implies administering through institutional frameworks, interpretable as the codified principles derived from the Dao—which regulate the conduct of both rulers and subjects, all of whom comply with legal and normative systems." Governance through non-action" does not denote passivity or inaction; rather, it advocates minimal intervention and aligns with the idea that "non-action" signifies acting in accordance with natural order rather than imposing arbitrary or excessive measures.

Taoism takes "Tao" as the core, emphasizing that "Tao" is the origin and destination of all things in the universe. In the view of Taoism, "one" is "Tao", the most primitive and basic existence in the universe, which is invisible and silent, but contains all the information and possibilities in the universe. And "many" is the derivation and embodiment of "Tao" and the concrete form and manifestation of everything in the universe. Taoism believes that there is a close relationship and mutual transformation between "one" and "many", that is, "One gives birth to Two. Two gives birth to Three. Three gives birth to all things." This thought embodies the principle of the formation of the universe in Taoist philosophy, and also reveals the universal law of interdependence and mutual transformation of everything in the universe. In Taoist philosophy, "one" also embodies the characteristics of wholeness,

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universality and irregularity. As the root of all things in the universe, it has transcendence and absoluteness, and is the highest principle and truth in the universe. And "many" is the concrete manifestation of "one" at different levels, and the extension and expansion of "one" in different fields. Taoism emphasizes that only through the understanding and understanding of "one" can we truly grasp the truth and essence of the universe, so as to realize the unity and integration of individuals and the universe.

2.2 Confucianism

Confucianism, the way of life propagated by Confucius in the 6th-5th century BCE and followed by the Chinese people for more than two millennia. Although transformed over time, it is still the substance of learning, the source of values, and the social code of the Chinese. Its influence has also extended to other countries, particularly Korea, Japan, and Vietnam (Dardess, 1983).

Confucianism takes "benevolence" as the core, emphasizing the harmonious relationship between people and the establishment of moral norms. In the view of Confucianism, "one" is "benevolence", which is the basis and premise of mutual care and respect between people. And "many" refers to many individuals and complex relationships in human society, which need to form an orderly social and interpersonal network under the guidance of "one". Confucianism believes that there is a relationship between "one" and "many", which is the idea of "harmony without diversity". This idea emphasizes the importance of building unity and harmony while maintaining diversity and difference in society and interpersonal relationships. In Confucian philosophy, "one" also embodies the characteristics of wholeness, universality and internal relevance. As the fundamental principle of moral code and life value, it has universality and transcendence, and is the highest criterion to guide people's behavior and thinking. And "many" is the concrete manifestation of "one" in different individuals and fields, and the extension and expansion of "one" in different aspects. Confucianism emphasizes that only through the understanding and practice of "one" can we truly realize the harmonious unity and common development of individuals and society.

The following is the typical manifestation of one and many in Confucian philosophy.

①Gentlemen seek harmony but not uniformity.

The saying means a gentleman can stick to his own ideas while adhere to the common code. He doesn't agree with others on everything. One here refers to Common Code and Moral Standard and many refers to Different Thoughts and Behaviors of people.

②Doctrine of the mean

The saying means people should seek balance between the two ends of things. One refers to balance while many refers to the way to achieve balance.

③Unity of man and nature.

The saying means man and nature are a harmonious and unified whole. People should conform to nature and integrate into nature. Here, one is the Overall State of Unity. Many is Everything in Nature.

④Rites and music

In Confucian philosophy, rites and music are two important concepts. Rites represent the norms and order of the society and embody the unity of the whole. Music, on the other hand, represents people's emotional and aesthetic pursuit, reflecting the diversity of individuals. One is Rites which refers to Social Order at that age. Many is Music which refers to People's different pursuits.

To conclude, In Confucian philosophy, the relationship between "one" and "many" is fundamentally ethical and social rather than metaphysical. Here, "one" represents a unifying moral principle—exemplified by ren (benevolence)—that serves as the foundation for social harmony and normative order. The "many" signifies the diverse expressions, individuals, and particular contexts within society. Confucianism does not see "one" as suppressing the "many," but rather as providing the multiple possibilities for "many" to attain its meaning.

2.3 Buddhism

Buddhism, religion and philosophy that developed from the teachings of the Buddha (Sanskrit: "Awakened One"), a teacher who lived in northern India between the mid-6th and mid-4th centuries BCE. Spreading from India to Central and Southeast Asia, China, Korea, and Japan, Buddhism has played a central role in the spiritual, cultural, and social life of Asia, and, beginning in the 20th century, it spread to the (Werner, 2000).

3. Buddhism takes "emptiness" as its core, emphasizing the transcendence and transcendence of all Dharma (things and phenomena). According to Buddhism, "one" is "emptiness", the ultimate truth and essence that transcends all Dharma. And "many" refers to numerous things and phenomena in the universe, which are the concrete manifestation and embodiment of "emptiness". Buddhism believes that there is a mutual transformation and interdependence between "one" and "many", that is, the idea that "one is more, and more is one". This thought reveals that the essence of all things and phenomena in the universe is emptiness, and there is no absolute boundary and distinction between them, and only through the understanding and understanding of "emptiness" can we truly transcend the constraints and restrictions of all laws. In Buddhist philosophy, "one" also embodies the characteristics of wholeness, universality and transcendence. As the ultimate truth and essence that surpasses all laws, it has universality and absoluteness, and is the highest criterion to guide people's practice and enlightenment. And "many" is the concrete manifestation and embodiment of "one" in different fields and levels, and the extension and expansion of "one" in different aspects. Buddhism emphasizes that only through the realization and practice of "one" can one truly achieve personal transcendence and enlightenment, and thus reach the realm of Nirvana and Buddhahood.

3. The Concept of One and Many in Western Philosophy

3.1 Plato's Theory

Plato was one of the two most important philosophers of Ancient Greece, along with Aristotle. He lived in Athens during the 5th century BCE. Between Plato, Aristotle and some of the earlier philosophers

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(so-called Pre-Socratic philosophers) like Parmenides and Heraclitus, the Greeks developed philosophy in a form which is still recognizable to philosophers today.

In Plato's philosophy, the concept of "One" is closely related to his idea of Forms or Ideas. He believes that there is a Real World above the physical world, the World of Forms or Ideas. The real world is perfect, infinite, eternal, and contains the idea or essence of all things while the physical world is only a reflection or shadow of the real world. The Form or Idea is real, constant, and universal. Only the idea is the real existence, and the material world is only the imperfect symbol of the idea. Plato believed that the physical world we perceive through our senses is a mere shadow of the true, eternal, and unchanging realm of Forms. These Forms, such as Beauty, Justice, or Goodness, represent the ultimate and perfect essence of each concept. They exist independently of the physical world and are accessible only through reason and contemplation.

In this context, the "One" represents the universal, abstract, and eternal Forms that underlie the diverse and changing phenomena of the "Many" in the sensible world. For Plato, the sensible world is full of imperfect and changing instances of the Forms, which he saw as shadows or reflections of the true Forms. The task of philosophy, according to Plato, is to ascend from the world of appearances to the world of Forms, from the "Many" to the "One."

3.2 Aristotle's Theory

Aristotle, a student of Plato, offered a different perspective on the relationship between the "One" and the "Many." Unlike Plato, who emphasized the primacy of universal Forms, Aristotle focused on the particular substances and their essential properties (Schellhammer, 2024).

For Aristotle, the "One" is not an abstract and separate realm but is immanent in the individual substances of the world. Each individual substance, such as a particular horse or a tree, has its own unique essence or form that makes it what it is. These individual forms, while sharing certain universal characteristics, are distinct from each other, constituting the "Many."

Aristotle's emphasis on the particular and the concrete led him to develop a systematic classification of substances based on their essential properties. His approach integrated the universal and the particular, the "One" and the "Many," within the framework of individual substances and their natural kinds.

3.3 Hegel's Dialectics

Hegel's dialectics provide a dynamic understanding of the relationship between the "One" and the "Many." Hegel viewed reality as a process of constant change and development, driven by the dialectical interaction between opposing forces.

In Hegel's philosophy, the "One" represents the universal principle or concept that underlies a particular stage of development. However, this universal principle is not static but evolves through a dialectical process of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis (Fuk, 2006). The "Many" emerge as particular manifestations or instances of the universal principle, each reflecting a specific aspect or moment in its development.

Hegel's dialectics emphasize the unity of opposites and the continuous transformation of the "One" into

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the "Many" and vice versa. This dynamic interaction leads to a higher level of synthesis, where the universal and the particular are reconciled in a new, more comprehensive unity.

The following is the typical manifestation of one and many in Hegel's dialectics.

①Unity of Opposites

Unity of Opposites symbolizes that contradiction is the driving force of the development of all things. For example, night and day, life and death, good and evil, they are opposite but they are interdependent, and promote the development of things.

In the principle of unity of opposites, "one" represents the interdependent and interconnecting aspects of the two contradictory parties, that is, the identity of contradiction. This identity is embodied in the fact that both sides of the contradiction depend on each other and transform each other under certain conditions, forming a unified whole. "Many" refers to diversity, difference or individuality. It emphasizes the difference and difference between things and is the driving force and source of development of things. In the principle of unity of opposites, "many" represents the mutual exclusion and negation of the two sides of the contradiction, that is, the struggle of the contradiction. This kind of struggle promotes the constant change and development of things, resulting in new contradictions and differences. The "one" and "many" in the principle of unity of opposites are complementary, they depend on each other, penetrate each other, and transform each other under certain conditions. Without one, there is no more, and without many, there is no one. In the process of the development of things, "one" and "many" interact and restrict each other, and push things forward constantly.

②Qualitative Change and Quantitative Change

Quantitative change refers to the change in the quantity of things, while qualitative change refers to the change in the quality of things. Quantitative change changes the state and properties of things to a certain extent, but does not change the essence of things. Qualitative change is to change the essence of things, which marks the transformation of things from one quality state to another quality state.

In the process of qualitative change and quantitative change, "one" represents the qualitative unity and quantitative accumulation stage of things in a certain stage or aspect, and "many" represents the diversity of things in quantity and qualitative change. They depend on each other, transform each other, and promote the development of things together (Benna,2025) .

③Negation of Negation

Negation of negation emphasizes the constant transcendence and evolution of the things, each negation is the negation of the previous stage, and at the same time maintains the achievements and progress of the previous stage. In the principle of negation of negation, "one" and "many" respectively represent the starting point and the negation stage of the development of things, and they depend on and transform each other to promote the development of things together.

4. The Comparison between Chinese and Western philosophy

4.1 Similarity

The dialectic of "one and many" has been a cornerstone of philosophical inquiry in both Chinese and Western traditions, reflecting the fundamental human endeavor to comprehend the relationship between the universal and the particular, unity and diversity. While these philosophical lineages approach the concept from distinct epistemological and metaphysical foundations, they converge in recognizing its critical importance for understanding reality. Both traditions fundamentally reject a purely fragmented or purely monolithic worldview, instead affirming an intrinsic connection between the "one" and the "many." This shared recognition manifests in their common pursuit of discerning a unifying principle or order, whether termed Dao, Li, or the Form within the multiplicity of phenomenal experience. Philosophically, this establishes a parallel task: an intellectual and spiritual ascent from the world of manifold appearances toward an apprehension of an underlying unity that grants the world coherence and meaning.

4.2 Difference

The divergence between Chinese and Western philosophical treatments of the "one and many" lies not merely in emphasis but in foundational paradigms, revealing contrasting metaphysical priorities and epistemological paths. The primary ontological difference centers on the relationship's nature. In the mainstream Chinese tradition, exemplified by Daoism and Neo-Confucianism, the relationship is generative and processual. The "one" is an immanent, dynamic source from which the "many" organically emerge and into which they ultimately return. This is a model of internal unfolding. Conversely, in the dominant classical Western tradition, epitomized by Plato, the relationship is paradigmatic and hierarchical (Nemeth, 2025). The "one" exists as a perfect, transcendent archetype, and the "many" are its imperfect, derivative copies. This establishes a model of external imitation or participation.

This ontological contrast leads to divergent conceptions of the "one" itself. In Chinese thought, the "one" is characteristically dynamic, holistic, and process-oriented, intimately tied to natural transformation and the cultivation of harmony. It is knowable through embodied practice, intuitive insight, and alignment with cosmic patterns. In Western thought, the "one" is predominantly static, essential, and substance-oriented, representing an immutable essence or logical principle. It is apprehended primarily through rational abstraction, analytical deduction, and intellectual contemplation.

Consequently, the aims of philosophical inquiry differ markedly. Chinese philosophy typically seeks harmonious integration, where the "one" orchestrates the "many" into a balanced, context-sensitive whole while preserving diversity, as in the ideal of "harmony without uniformity". Western philosophy traditionally pursues logical unification, aiming to subsume the "many" under universal laws, definitions, or causal explanations provided by the "one," emphasizing clarity, certainty, and systematic coherence.

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