



“Cosmogony and Grasping ‘the One’ in Classical Chinese Philosophy”

Date: 7 November 2014 (Friday)
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Venue: Conference Room 2, To Yuen Building



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Abstract

Against the backdrop of texts transmitted from the Pre-Qin Period, the Laozi (Daodejing) has appeared unique and almost foreign, introducing radically new concerns, terms, and ideals. The archeological discoveries of the past several decades, though, have unearthed other texts that share a theoretical and discursive context with the Laozi: the Taiyi shengshui 太一生水 (Great One Generates Water), Heng xian 恆先 (Constancy First), and Fanwu liuxing 凡物流形 (All Things Flow into Form). These texts cannot be taken as representing a single “school,” but the commonalities between them show that the Laozi was just one of several positions competing within a shared set of concerns and assumptions. Together, these texts represent a radical departure from the philosophies of the Ru (Confucians) or the Mohists, constituting what we might call “the cosmogonic turn” in Chinese Philosophy. The goal of this talk is to examine what assumptions these texts share but also to determine the locus of their main disputes. In particular, there seems to have been a split between those who took the ultimate to be graspable as the “one” and those who thought the ultimate transcended even the “one,” existing as non-being (wu 無) and labeled as the “way” (dao 道). While this was a debate about metaphysics, the stakes were primarily practical and political – is the ultimate graspable in a way that allows us to derive social and political values, or is it ungraspable in a way that undermines any positing of stable values?

All are welcome.