**DEITY AND DAIMON**

***The Dialectic of Sufficiency and Fecundity***

In *The Great Chain of Being*, Arthur O. Lovejoy announces:

*The God of Aristotle had almost nothing in common with the God of the Sermon on the Mount – though by one of the strangest and most momentous paradoxes in Western history, the philosophical theology of Christendom identified them, and defined the chief end of man as the imitation of both. (p. 5)*

Lovejoy speaks of “paradox,” but he treats the conundrum as a contradiction. He says later: it is not possible for humans to imitate such a contradictory deity: Aristotelian self-sufficient perfection vs. creative, overflowing fecundity. I wish to challenge his conclusion. Lovejoy conflates paradox and contradiction; I want to distinguish them as importantly different. Although Lovejoy often uses the word “dialectic” in the ironic, Platonic, Taoist, dynamic sense I embrace, I wish to take “dialectical thinking” further, into Pythagorean, Upanishadic, holistic tension.

Lovejoy argues that, while it might be possible for God to embody contradictory attributes, it is not logically possible for humans to “imitate” or embody such dissonance. I argue, instead, that Asian philosophy shows it is quite possible; indeed: necessary on the enlightenment journey. Radhakrishnan’s commentary on *The Bhagavad Gita* utilizes the notion of *tyaga* – “desireless action” – to illustrate this option. *The Gita* exhibits Arjuna’s gradual evolution from linear, either/or thinking (the matrix of his confusion *vis a vis* Krishna’s teaching) to, at last, the dialectical thinking necessary for enlightened action. The Taoist equivalent is *wei-wu-wei*: doing not-doing. Eckhart’s *Gelassenheit*. Buddha’s “detached compassion.”

Lovejoy thinks “desireless action” is a contradiction in terms. Buddhism and Taoism show it is the key to enlightened living.

At the heart of the human dilemma, says Lovejoy – framing the debate in terms of medieval theology – lies the difficulty in reconciling Aristotle’s Unmoved Mover with the God of The Sermon on the Mount.

After noting that “a self-contradiction does not cease to be meaningless by seeming sublime” (p. 31), Lovejoy observes:

*The most notable … fact about [Plato’s] historic influence is that he did* ***not*** *merely give to European otherworldliness its characteristic form and phraseology …, but [he] also gave the characteristic form and phraseology … to precisely the contrary tendency – to a peculiarly exuberant kind of this-worldliness. For his own philosophy no sooner reaches its climax in what we may call the otherworldy direction than it reverses its course. … The self-same God who was the Goal of all desire must also be the Source of the creatures that desire it. (p. 45)*

*The concept of Self-Sufficing Perfection [Plato’s* Agathon*, Aristotle’s “Unmoved Mover”], by a bold logical inversion, was – without losing any of its original implications – converted into the concept of a Self-Transcending Fecundity [Plato’s Demiurge, the God of The Sermon on The Mount]. A timeless and incorporeal One became the logical ground as well as the dynamic source of the existence of a temporal and material and extremely multiple and variegated universe. (p. 49)*

The two aspects of divinity – Sufficiency and Fecundity, Unity and Diversity, Detachment and Desire, Deity and Daimon: the yin and yang of the whole – are named by Meister Eckhart: “Godhead” and “God.”

Lovejoy continues:

*The God in whom man was … to find his own fulfillment was … not one God but two. He was the Idea of the Good, but he was also the Idea of Goodness …. The one was an apotheosis of unity, self-sufficiency, and quietude, the other of diversity, self-transcendence, and fecundity. … The one God was the goal of the [Platonic] ‘way up,’ … to the immutable Perfection in which alone it could find rest. The other God was the source and the informing energy of that descending [Platonic] process by which being flows through all the levels of possibility down to the lowest. (p. 82-83)*

*The notion of the coincidentia oppositorum, of the meeting of extremes in the Absolute, was an essential part of nearly all medieval theology, as it had been for Neoplatonism …. (p. 83)*

Lovejoy now gives voice to the existential dilemma:

*It might appear easy to affirm of the divine nature what to us must seem incompatible metaphysical predicates; but it was impossible to reconcile in human practice what to us must seem incompatible notions of value. There was no way in which the flight from the Many to the One, the quest of a perfection defined wholly in terms of contrast with the created world, could be effectually harmonized with the imitation of a Goodness that delights in diversity and manifests itself in the emanation of the Many out of the One. The one program demanded a withdrawal from all “attachments to creatures” and culminated in the ecstatic contemplation of the indivisible Divine Essence; the other, if it had been formulated, would have summoned men to participate, in some finite measure, in the creative passion of God, to collaborate consciously in the processes by which the diversity of things, the fullness of the universe, is achieved. … It would have placed the active life above the contemplative; and it would, perhaps, have conceived of the activity of the creative artist … as the mode of human life most like the divine. (p. 83-84)*

Lovejoy now articulates the conundrum concisely:

*The ‘way up’ alone was the direction in which man was to look for the good, even though the God who had from all eternity perfectly possessed the good … found, so to say, his chief good in the ‘way down’ …. The consummation toward which all finite things yearn, and towards which men were to strive consciously, was to return to and remain in the unity which yet did not, and by its essence could not, remain within itself. (p. 84)*

Lovejoy here expresses the tension in Platonic philosophy between *The Phaedo* and *The Symposium*. The former sees the body as a tomb, from which the soul must flee; the latter sees the body as a temple, through which the soul must express its creativity, giving birth to beauty and virtue.

The contrasting strands in Plato’s philosophy – the way up vs. the way down; detachment vs. creativity; contemplation vs. action – find their fullest tension, says Lovejoy, in the Christian *fusion* of Aristotle’s Unmoved Mover with the God of The Sermon on the Mount. The troubled nature of this fusion is mirrored in the human condition, the human task: to imitate, embody, exemplify, so far as possible, the divine. But how does one imitate a contradiction? Lovejoy says it is not possible.

I say it is both possible and necessary, as evidenced in Eckhart and Asian thought. Lovejoy’s apparent “contradiction” is rather more like a paradox: yin and yang in the holistic pulse of the Tao’s exquisite, disequilibrium.

Heraclitus understood this, as did Pythagoras, Empedocles and Plato. Kierkegaard says: “Paradox is the passion of thought; and a thinker without paradox is like a lover without passion – a mediocre fellow.”

Nietzsche too, lover of Heraclitus and Emerson, asserts that *Untergang*, “going under,” is the key to *Ubergang*, “going over.” He says one will never understand the meaning of *Ubermensch* without first apprehending this zen-like dynamic.

*Tyaga*, “desireless action” – the “equipoise” of Hindu *sattva*, Buddhist *upeksha*, Taoist *wu-wei* – is a life of service attuned to the heartbeat of *elan vital*: the dialectic of Deity and Daimon, the holistic interplay of Sufficiency and Fecundity.

Stefan Schindler

All quotations from Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being; A Study of the History of an Idea*; Harvard University Press; 1936 & 1964. (The William James Lectures on Philosophy and Psychology; Harvard University; 1933.)