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Zhang/One and Many

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Introduction

“ONE AND MANY” AS AN ONTOLOGICAL PROBLEM

Why does this book compare Ge Hong (AD 284–344?) with Plato (428–347 BC)?¹ Reasons of personal intellectual history are involved. When I encountered Platonism in the field of Christian systematic theology, I admired its persistent search for inner coherence of truths and was deeply impressed by its transcendentalism and its unshakable influence on two streams of Western thought, philosophy and theology. Although I resonated with its idealism, over the years it became increasingly clear to me that this intellectual tradition imposed on me a demand that restricts the development of my own thought rooted in Chinese tradition. In contrast, Daoism has provided me with the free space that I was looking for in the formation of my intellectual identity. I first encountered Ge Hong when I attended a seminar at Harvard University in 1998. Since then I have felt that I was coming home to something that had unconsciously shaped my thought yet had not been properly named. Eagerness to come to terms with Daoism and Ge Hong’s religious philosophy in particular has become the inner drive for the current study.

In an intellectual journey, to reconcile past learning and present passion is just as important as creating a future life out of life experiences. The book is not just an academic exercise to reconcile an existential gulf between two cultures, but is also an effort to turn inner cultural experience into insight to bridge the two. Historically Plato and Ge Hong never met. In the modern world of pluralism, to create a dialogue between the two represents a way through which a Western philosophy and an Eastern religion can meet face to face. The ancient debate on “the one and the many” still proves relevant in today’s challenge of globalization; a comparative study of the two traditions will explore the underlying issues of unity and plurality.

Those who have read Plato—one of the most influential thinkers in the

West—and Ge Hong—a less known Daoist thinker in China—may question whether there is anything that can be seriously compared between the two. The short answer is yes. The longer answer is in this book. Admittedly, not only do their systems of thought differ in content, but also their influence on later schools gave rise to two independently evolved traditions: Greek philosophy and Chinese Daoism. These traditions can be seen as two rivers that derive from two separate sources, travel through different cultural and historical landscapes, and discharge waters into different parts of the earth. We cannot assume that they will never meet. As the interpreter, the ocean is a free space to exchange answers, but the deriving questions are akin. Plato and Ge Hong lived on the same earth under the same heaven and shared concerns about the world. Where they really differ is in their thoughts for framing and articulating what reality is at the most fundamental level, or in Chinese what is Dao.

This branch of metaphysics is called ontology. Although we have yet to come to terms with how Daoist ontology differs remarkably from the Parmenidean-Platonic being, one can name general schematic differences on how the most fundamental reality is categorized. For Plato, realities are plural ideas—the immaterial causes according to which physical things are made. For Ge Hong, the ultimate reality is Dao, and the world is relational to Dao. From Dao the myriad things derive, and to Dao realities will return. The former is causal, whereas the latter is relational. This ontological difference underlines two contrary worldviews. To accept the difference, however, does not imply that two systems are incomparable. We must reject the assumption that similarity is the basis for dialogue. Rather, the contrary is the starting point of comparison.

I have selected the topic “one and many” as the starting point for comparison. The OM (as I abbreviate “one and many” from here onward) debate first appeared among pre-Socratic philosophers when they disputed irreducible reality as either one or many universals within the framework of cosmogony. Similarly, early the Daoist philosophers Laozi and Zhuangzi also posited Dao (one) and Nature (many) in cosmogonical terms. Philosophies were born out of these contexts. On the one hand, humans began to name what irreducible reality (or realities) *is*, and, on the other hand, they developed tools to explain what reality (or realities) *does*. After Parmenides Greek ontology adopted the language of being as the basic unit of reality and formal logic as the method of inquiry. Later it was Plato who systematically developed the language of being and argued that truth was transcendental and immaterial, but the knowledge about realities ought to be logically demonstrable with pure thoughts.

In Daoism, “one and many” has always been a philosophical question.

However, it is never framed in the logical antitheses “one not many” and “many not one.” Presented in the form of cosmogony, Laozi famously puts the OM argument into only thirteen characters: “Dao begets one, one begets two, two begets three, and three begets the ten thousand things” (*Laozi* 42).² Ge Hong followed the early tradition and said, “That which is Dark (Xuan 玄) is the primordial ancestor of Nature and the Great Forebear of the myriad different [things]” (*Inner Chapters* 1).³ Compared with the Greek OM debate, which mainly takes the form of logic, the Daoist OM represented by Ge Hong is presented in the form of poetry. But beyond the difference of genres, there is philosophy. The OM argument is analogically put as a genealogical unfolding of life from one ancestor to many progeny.

My interest in the one and the many was not directly conceived through philosophy, but through theology. Instead of through the “one becoming many,” my interest was inspired by the reverse thinking—how many may become one.

I first encountered the OM problem was when I worked on my master’s thesis on apocalypticism. I argued that the end is the reversal of the beginning. Instead of the generation of the many, apocalypticism is the consummation of the many and the hope associated with the many becoming one. Under the supervision of Mark Heim at Andover Newton Theological School, I began to identify the Daoist nature of this reversal and to locate my intellectual voice within the scheme of religious pluralism. Looking into the field of comparative studies, I was both inspired and unsatisfied. Modern intellectual males have produced many theories about “the one above the many.” Postmodern goddesses wish to have plural systems of “the many without the one.” Why does it have to be “either/or”? Why cannot we have “both-and”?

In another seminar with Frederic Lawrence at Boston College, I studied the OM problem in the doctrine of the Trinity. Although patristic theologians had dealt with the logical antitheses “one is not three” and “three are not one,” the OM problem had never been resolved in dialogues with Greek philosophies, in particular with neo-Platonism. The problem was nailed down by a succession of church councils on doctrinal bases and accepted by faith. Unlike the mere pluralism celebrated by postmodernism, the Trinity states that unity and plurality must be both affirmed. This “both-and” thought is similar to the mutuality of Dao and Nature. Nature spontaneously unfolds out of the self-generating Dao. The unity of Dao neither has independent reality without the plurality of Nature, nor can the many of Nature exist without the oneness of Dao. Unity and plurality can either be both affirmed or simultaneously denied. With this intuition I

attended another seminar on transcendence and immanence with Robert Neville at Boston University. The paradox of transcendence and immanence is fundamentally OM in kind. Reality at the ultimate level, such as God or being-it-self, cannot enjoy absolute transcendence without its immanence in plurality.

Looking back, the topic was conceived in the so-called Boston circle with distinctive theological interest. Writing this book is my response to the modern debate about unity and plurality. I am greatly indebted to my former teacher Robert Neville at Boston University. However, the book is a response to his theory that creation *ex nihilo* is the answer to the OM problem.⁴ Contrary to Neville's argument, which operates at an abstract level of metaphysics, I take the existential position in Daoism and dialogue with Plato with a narrative emphasis. The second formative idea comes from Jürgen Moltmann. During my third visit to him in Tübingen in 2003, I was impressed by his humility in his reading of *Laozi* and scholarly openness toward Daoism in general. Moltmann argues that the creation was not a single event in the beginning of time, resulting in the finished product called the world, but rather an ongoing process still in the making.⁵ This concept of evolutionary creation has had an influence on my interpretation of Ge Hong's cosmogony. However, unlike his linear evolution, which bears the imprint of Hegelian teleology, I endorse the concept of cyclical changes in Daoist alchemy. Therefore, the world and its becoming are cyclical rather than linear. Unlike the traditional view of an unchanging God, influenced by the Platonic unchanging being-it-self, I have come to see a self-changing Dao *from nothing into being* as the inner core of Nature and its becoming.

Why has the project taken the form of philosophy rather than theology? As the research progressed, quickly I realized the OM issue that I conceived in theology was deeply philosophical. When philosophical language is used to articulate the issue of unity and diversity, the issue is proven to be far more resilient than what philosophical tools are designed to handle. In Western metaphysics, the OM debate gravitates toward the ancient problem of logic exclusion between one and many, and involves various metaphysical concepts that were invented in the attempt to solve the problem. But coming from a Daoist perspective, the core issue can be named differently. The one and the many is not a logical problem, nor a metaphysical problem. It is an ontological problem.

According to a modern definition in English, "ontology, understood as a branch of metaphysics, is the science of being in general, embracing such issues as the nature of existence and the categorical structure of reality."⁶ But the very term "ontology" translated into Chinese as *benti*

本體⁷ was absent in the period between Laozi and Ge Hong. In Daoism, ontology is directly associated with Dao 道 and its Nature (*ziran* 自然). In more philosophical language, it inquires into the core of reality and its manifestations, the oneness of the mother Dao and its manyness in the world. To argue the one and the many as an ontological problem, therefore, requires an investigation of the historical contexts in which the OM discussions were conducted in two separate traditions.

The one and the many has varied appearances. They include the pre-Socratic debate on monism and pluralism, Daoist cosmogony from one Dao to ten thousand things, the Jewish-Christian doctrine of creation, and the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. These discussions can be viewed as different approaches to and debated answers for the OM problem. But the core of the problem is not the logical contrary between one and many or the metaphysical schemas on monism and pluralism, materialism and immaterialism. Rather it has to do with how reality is conceived in the first place.

Plato rejects ontological monism as argued by pre-Socratic materialists including Thales (water), Anaximander (earth), Anaximenes (air), and Heraclitus (fire). Instead, he borrows Parmenides' unchangeable One, turns Parmenidean Being into a Pythagorean pluralism with mathematical essences, and proposes immaterial, unchangeable, and transcendental ideas. The categorization of reality as Forms directly results in the problematic dualism with superior ideas over inferior objects and, just like Parmenides, Plato creates the ontological difference between Being and Becoming.

Unlike the Greek search for an unchangeable ontological something, Daoist ontology takes a very different path by arguing that reality in the most fundamental form is formless, in fact nothing. Ge Hong belonged to this tradition and developed a religious philosophy that reverses cosmogony into soteriology; to attain immortality means to return to the formlessness of Dao. The core reality is not the Parmenidean-Platonic unchanging being, but the changing not-being together with its self-realization into being. Contrary to Plato's intellectualism, Ge Hong's instrumental alchemy represents a natural philosophy with distinctive empiricism, the aim of which is to understand the one in and through its works in the many.

Can the propositional difference between being and not-being be used to set up a meaningful dialogue between two thinkers? It can. But three hermeneutical barriers must be overcome: language, history, and comparative method. They impose layers of misunderstanding upon Ge Hong and his tradition.

ON LANGUAGE

Plato's works have been translated into English by many generations of textual scholars, whereas among the surviving works of Ge Hong only two are available in English, the *Inner Chapters of the Master Embracing Simplicity* (*Baopuzi neipian* 抱撲子內篇) and the *Biographies of Immortals* (*Shenxian zhuan* 神仙傳).⁸ Hence reading Plato is relatively straightforward, whereas reading Ge Hong is far more challenging. Because translation involves interpretation and interpretations vary, I do not rely on the published English translations, but translate directly from the original texts. Throughout this book, all English translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated. I generally follow the principle that the Chinese text of key quotations appears in the notes. This principle applies to all text from Ge Hong's *Inner Chapters* (*IC*) and some text from other key sources, such as *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*.

Unlike modern Chinese and English, classical Chinese is highly allusive. The rich meanings of classical texts tend to be concealed in poetic and metaphorical language. In translation an interpreter is confronted with the immediate difficulty of finding adequate English words to give expression to ancient terminology. The connotation and denotation of some concepts, such as Dao 道, Qi 氣, and Xuan 玄, are an immediate difficulty, since these terms have no direct English equivalents. Thus they are treated as technical terms, just as Platonic Forms and sensibles, Reason and Necessity. Some terms are translated into English: *wuwei* 無為, indeterminate action; *ziran* 自然, Nature; *you* 有, something (being); and *wu* 無, nothingness (not-being). But each of these terms is discussed explicitly in comparative contexts. On top of the conceptual difficulties, there is another one related to various genres of Daoist texts. For instance, alchemical texts are not meant to be easily intelligible, but written in code to protect secret practices from people whose interests are fixed on mundane goals. To translate alchemical texts involves decoding and textual reconstruction.⁹

In the text to follow, large sections from *Inner Chapters* are translated with philosophical overtones. Certainly this is not the usual practice in Sinology, which prefers literal rather than interpretative translation. But as Sinologists are aware, the translation of *Laozi* has resulted in numerous English editions; scholarship still cannot reach a conclusive standard. This is simply because translation involves interpretation. Since my project does not claim to be a pure textual study, but a comparative one, two methods are applied: textual and contextual. Both methods are simultaneously applied to Ge Hong's poetic language.

ON HISTORY

Ge Hong and Plato belonged to antiquity, and it would be wrong to assume modern readers are familiar with classical writings. The historical distance is often dealt with by a contextual method and historical criticism. The contextual tends to bring the past into the present, whereas the historical reconstructs the past into which modern readers enter. Both methods have weaknesses. On the one hand, contextualization can read the present into the past. Modern Platonic scholarship often willingly or unconsciously reads the dramatic dialogues of Plato through the lenses of analytic philosophy, as if Plato had woven together his thought out of a single stream of rigorous logic. Likewise, the “history of science” interpretation of alchemy by and large treats alchemy as proto-chemistry, as if chemistry were the only legitimate child of alchemy. On the other hand, historical criticism can never be certain whether historical distance is shortened or stretched. Daoist scholarship traditionally uses historical criticism as the chief method in commentary studies, which take the issue of textual fidelity seriously. Platonic scholarship too has a commentarial tradition. If one compares two thinkers on the base of commentarial traditions, the comparative goal can easily be lost in the forest of historicity.

This does not mean that comparative study needs to be divorced from these methods. The book applies them complementarily. Part 1 involves lengthy textual-historical studies that are devoted to each thinker. By situating Ge Hong in Daoist history and investigating Plato’s relation with his predecessors, these textual-historical studies trace intellectual currents from which their thoughts derived and evolved. The chief purpose is to explicitly work the texts down to irreducible propositions within historical contexts in order to build a comparative platform from which later dialogues may take their departure. Part 2 changes the direction from historical settings to comparative context. By creating a dialogue on the one and the many, the comparison overall argues that Plato’s system of multiple Forms is an ontological problem. And by comparing Plato’s “one over many” Forms with Ge Hong’s “one under many” Dao, the comparison also offers a Daoist solution to the problem of the unity of plural Forms, which Plato has unsuccessfully dealt with in his doctrine of creation.

COMPARATIVE METHOD

Mention of comparison naturally leads to the issue of methodology. There is no single comparative method readily adoptable for this project, but there are general trends. In the Chinese-speaking environment, there is

an increasing interest in intercultural comparison as a part of Chinese modernization.¹⁰ In Western philosophy, some Platonic scholars still maintain the view that there is no true philosophy outside its defined norms and happily leave comparative studies to Sinologists. The book implicitly addresses an aspect of the OM problem in modern society, the unrelatedness of two traditions, by naming the issue of unity and plurality in the world of globalization. In a more specific field, it fills a gap in comparative philosophy, where a dialogue between the religious philosophy of Daoism and Greek philosophy is rare.¹¹

Generally all interpretative methods are designed to reinterpret the classics by building an intellectual bridge over historical distances so that past wisdom can illuminate modern minds. Such a “bridge-building” exercise is easier in a single history than in a comparative study that hopes to build a “double arch bridge” over two intellectual “rivers.” The major hermeneutical difficulty is history. Unless it is through a hypothetical dialogue, two thinkers will not be brought into contact with each other, and unless this happens, the issue of pluralism in history will be left unresolved. This also becomes the role of the interpreter.

Apart from dialogical hermeneutics, there is an underlying question of how to read Daoism as a whole. Currently two main approaches are common in the scholarship that tend to read Daoism from the intellectual “other shore.” Both have methodological problems.

READING DAOISM THROUGH WESTERN EYES

The division of philosophical Daoism (*dao**jia* 道家) and religious Daoism (*dao**jiao* 道教) has separated the continuous history of Daoism (*dao**xue* 道學) into two paradigms.¹² However, the distinction between religion and philosophy is a modern notion, not a historical one. Ge Hong and other writers in the Daoist Canon (*dao**zang* 道藏) regarded themselves as Daoists (*dao**jia* 道家) who carried on the early tradition as creative interpreters. It was only toward the middle of the twentieth century that such a distinction was made between religion and philosophy, and it basically echoes the dichotomy of reason and revelation in the West. In Chinese circles, this borrowed division separates Daoist studies into two camps. On the one hand, scholars with philosophical interests concentrate on the Lao-Zhuang philosophy (*lao**zhuang* *zhexue* 老莊哲學) of the pre-Qin period. On the other hand, scholars with religious interests explore the Daoist movements that began to take shape in the Han period as socioreligious phenomena. Under this categorization, Ge Hong has been labeled as a religious thinker who belonged to a camp opposite to the neo-Daoist philosophies in the Wei-Jin period.¹³ But this assumption is wrong.

The book rejects the arbitrary division by showing that religion and philosophy are interconnected in Ge Hong. The approach follows the recent trend to read Daoism as an integrated whole.¹⁴ It also aims to demonstrate that Ge Hong is not a religious thinker without philosophical insights, but a religious philosopher. His Daoism is not a “religion without philosophy,” but a “philosophy within religion.”¹⁵ The key to rediscovering philosophical insights is to treat Ge Hong as a religious philosopher and to show that he is capable of dialogue with Plato. Dialogical hermeneutics requires historical comparisons to identify continuity and discontinuity between Ge Hong and his predecessors as well as similarity and dissimilarity between Ge Hong and Plato. The vertical historical study and the horizontal comparative study are two interpretative perspectives designed to shed light not only on Ge Hong but also on Plato.

Comparative hermeneutics implicitly critiques another “either philosophy or religion” approach in Sinology. Recent Sinological writings collectively argue that reading Daoism should be freed from Western influences and Daoism treated as a unique religion among the world’s religious traditions. Works of some leading scholars are revealing of the paradigm change toward postmodern pluralism. Kristofer Schipper’s *The Taoist Body* and *Taoist Canon: A Companion to the Daozang*, and Isabelle Robinet’s *Taoism: Growth of a Religion* represent penetrating studies that approach Daoism as a composite religion with considerable internal complexity.¹⁶ Livia Kohn has moved away from the philosophical interests in her early work *Taoist Mystical Philosophy* to the recently edited *Daoist Handbook*, which is basically an encyclopedia on Daoism as a religious phenomenon.¹⁷ Stephen Bokenkamp’s *Early Daoist Scriptures* demonstrates the capacity of modern textual criticism to reconstruct and interpret the primary sources for Daoist studies.¹⁸ John Lagerwey’s *Taoist Ritual in Chinese Society and History* exhibits the liturgical aspect of Daoist worship.¹⁹ Robert Campany’s commentary on Ge Hong’s *Shenxian zhuan* is another attempt to reconstruct social-religious context in its finest details.²⁰ Company’s translation of *shenxian* 神仙 also marks a break from the need to link Daoist immortals with the Jewish-Christian God as exemplified in James Ware’s translation of the *Inner Chapters of Baopuzi* published in the sixties.²¹

Overall the recent trend represents an exodus from the previous tendency to read Daoism mainly through Western eyes—from the intellectual “other shore.” It seeks to read Daoism from within and to engage its complex religious practices on their own terms. The theoretical move, however, is basically a paradigm of negation, most noticeable in postmodernism. Just as postmodernity rejects the modernist impulse to bring plurality under a system of unity, the new religious-historical paradigm cel-

brates the uniqueness of Daoism among the many religions in the world. Whereas the problem is of the one and the many, the new paradigm rests on another assumption that pluralism is opposed to universalism—that no dialogue between Daoism and Western thought is necessary. This book argues otherwise. There does not have to be a choice of either reading Daoism through Western eyes or reading it solely from within Chinese history. Current scholarship in the West basically posits an unnecessary dilemma upon itself—“the many without the one.” However, in the Daoist view Dao is the motherly one humbly sustaining the many. Pluralism essentially is not a rejection of unity, but an affirmation of Dao and its unfolding becoming.

The emerging school of “New Daoism” (*xin daoxue* 新道學) established by Chinese scholars amounts to a call to modernize Daoism through active engagement with the West in a movement that parallels the development of a “New Confucianism” (*xin rujia* 新儒家) a century ago. The fundamental idea behind the movement is the belief that one can truly learn about oneself through relationships with others. Compared with the dialogue between Confucianism and Western thought, and contrary to the growing interest in Buddhism, comparative study with Daoism is rare and unsystematic.

READING DAOISM THROUGH THE EYES OF MATERIALISM AND SCIENCE

The scientific paradigm entails reading Daoism through Western eyes but with a specific interest, namely, the history of science. It has been persuasively argued that among the “triple teachings” in China (Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism) only Daoism has provided the driving force for the development of science and technology in China.²² Reading Daoism through the eyes of modern science is therefore a justified approach.

Although the Marxist claim “religion is the opium of the masses” is no longer unquestioned dogma, Marxist materialism, hand in hand with rational sciences, still lingers over Daoism as an irremovable shadow. The scientific paradigm has brought religion closer to science but further away from philosophy. The failure to create dialogues with Western philosophy goes much deeper than the methods of historical cordiality and scientific objectivity. It has to do with the categorizations that Sinology has adopted from modern sciences. Chemistry and astronomy, it might be supposed, are two areas that have little to do with each other. Alchemy belongs to pre-chemistry—the study of changing matter. Astronomy derives from ancient cosmology—the study of heavenly forms. The alchemical search for longevity belongs to medicine. Needham’s encyclopedic *Science and Civilisa-*

tion in China, which has had a strong impact on later studies, generally reflects this separation by keeping alchemy, astronomy, and life sciences apart in three separate volumes.²³ But in Ge Hong they are one.

If we adopt Needham's categories, then what was historically connected is divided by modern sciences. However, in Ge Hong's writings the alchemical Qi is a unity. Alchemy, astronomy, and medicine converge in Qi because they are different categories of knowledge that study the self-evolving One out of which changes arise, heaven rotates, and life emerges. The ancient attempt to build a grand unifying theory for branches of knowledge is essentially of the "one and many" kind. Monist consciousness has reappeared in the dreams of modern scientific minds. Physics, especially quantum mechanics and astrophysics, has returned to cosmogony. In searching for the primary unity of matter and form, or the so-called God particle, out of which plurality emerged, modern scientists have approached the ancient OM question from new angles. Not long ago inorganic chemistry was far removed from concerns about the origin of the universe. Now biochemistry suggests that the origin of species could be a single life form. The many are the evolutionary progenies of the one. Scientific theories are now much closer to the evolutionary theory of the alchemical Qi.

Undoubtedly, to enter into dialogue with the sciences is an important undertaking necessary to contextualize Daoism within a modern worldview, and the conversation has produced many fruitful works.²⁴ But the fundamental problem is the underlying assumption that science is the norm for empirical truth. Science can easily carry on the pursuit of truth without religion. This assumed "science without religion" has already been under examination in the West, precisely on the issue of whether reason is the universal can opener to unlock the world.²⁵ The immediate disadvantage of the scientific approach is that it compels us to divorce religion from science in Ge Hong, where they are interwoven.

The "science without religion" approach imposes upon Ge Hong some serious blockages, which are philosophical rather than scientific. Some key ideas and practices have been overlooked or mishandled because they do not directly fit scientific categorizations. The Daoist arts (*fangshu* 方術) are labeled as necromancy without seeing any need to look into the person-world synthesis beyond the liturgical appearances. Methods to prolong life (*yangsheng* 養生) are misinterpreted as spirituality in a way that negates any interest in seeing the underlying difference between Western spiritual liberation and Daoist bodily preservation of life. Bodily alchemy (*neidan* 內丹) is said to belong solely to Daoist mysticism but without any active dialogue between two systems of human body: the Daoist body as

an alchemical vessel capable of self-transformation and the Western body defined in terms of physiological and anatomical parts. Instrumental alchemy (*waidan* 外丹) is seen just as the field in which modern chemistry discovers its ancient roots, without realizing that a different philosophy of change is entailed. Most important of all, modern sciences assume an atomist pluralism without any reflection on Daoist monism, in which all things are inwardly related.

This review of the complex scholarship in Daoism comes back to the methodological problem. Many interpretative exercises have consciously and unconsciously imposed upon Daoism perceptions that simply do not belong to the historical context. Why can we not read the West through Daoist eyes? Whoever interprets Zhuangzi will also be interpreted by him. This book takes such an approach by reading Plato through Ge Hong. Apart from using the method of comparing and contrasting, one of the most elementary methods in academic studies, it does not claim to evince a well-established method. Instead of proposing a hypothesis—a common methodology used in science—and then either proving or disproving the validity of it, this project adopts a Daoist principle. It follows the principle of spontaneity. As a general tactic, it treats methodology as a conclusion—not the precondition—of the research.